

Kidd Pivot and Electric Company Theatre
Betroffenheit
Zellerbach Hall, Berkeley CA
March 10, 2017

The ultimate in emotional gymnastics – watching a dance/theatre production about a man who has suffered an unimaginable tragedy and while having utter compassion for him, at the same time having one's own past trauma triggered. Coping with those two sets of feelings simultaneously is more than a challenge. Welcome to *Betroffenheit*, a joint production between Canadians Crystal Pite, director of Kidd Pivot, and Jonathon Young of the Electric Company Theatre. The German word means “shock” or “bewilderment”, or even “impact”, in other words, a perfect title.

I deliberately avoid reading the program notes because I want to have an unmediated experience; I need to see if the story or ideas are conveyed to the audience by their own merits and not through a printed synopsis. In the case of *Betroffenheit*, I am not sure I could have watched it at all if I had known that writer Young's contribution was autobiographical. I was all the more astonished to discover afterward that this piece really was personal and that Young, also a performer, had found the courage to tell part of his tragic story to an audience.

If I had not just seen Batsheva Dance Company in *Last Work*, I might have said that *Betroffenheit* is the best production I'll likely see all year. The odd thing is that despite being radically different from each other, these two works delve deeply into hearts and minds. What unfolds on stage is the journey of a man (played by Young) beginning with the trauma of an overwhelming loss where he was powerless to intervene. His grief, resulting in a breakdown and addiction, leads him to retreat into a surreal or psychedelic world. The second part is a more abstract realm where the previous unrelenting horrors no longer plague him, but have become distanced enough that acceptance seems possible.

There are many artistic strengths in this production beginning with the fine balance between the Young's writing and Pite's choreography, which never overshadow each other. The words are more suggestive than explicit, feeding the imagination, rather than dictating specifics, while the dancing brings the richness of a variety of forms – modern, tap, salsa, popular or cabaret dance, and even puppetry.

Jay Gower Taylor's ingenious scenic design moves smoothly from an industrial grimness to an spacious neutrality where a moving painted drop of the original set crumples and falls away. The fanciful costumes by Nancy Bryant allow for the small cast of six to seem like a big company as they appear and reappear in a constantly changing array of dress.

The dancers – Bryan Arias and Cindy Salgado (who both contributed the salsa choreography), David Raymond (the tap), Jermaine Spivey, Tiffany Tregarthen – are absolutely convincing in the gamut of roles and styles, embracing both humor and intense emotion when the narrative demands.

In the second half, the shift to one consistent style of dance reinforces the calm after the storm. Pite has created seamless phrases of complex movement that speak in her own voice, not a parroting of some generic contemporary dance that is far too ubiquitous these days. While the first half could use a little editing to reduce repetitions of the material, the

second part leaves me feeling completely satisfied having traveled from one world to another, even without a definite resolution. It's just like life; we move forward, meet challenges and do the best we can under the circumstances.

If you have the chance to see *Betroffenheit*, jump at it; you don't often have the opportunity to see work of this depth and complexity, and at such a high level of artistry on every level.