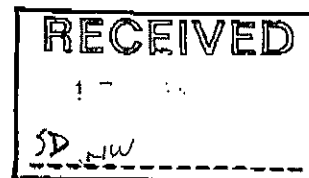


Jme.

PERFORMANCE

NERVE

Carol Brown with Stewart Dodd
Jerwood Choreography Awards
Reviewed by Jeremy Wood

On my way to the performance a phrase came into my head, like one of those irritating snatches of song you pick up from someone else's radio and that follows you for the rest of the day - Talking about music is like dancing about architecture. It is a phrase that sums up the age old mistrust between artistic disciplines and between interpretation and experience. We have become sceptical of the claims of the Gesamtkunstwerk - that Wagnerian vision of a totalising integration of the arts - and prefer to pay ironic tribute to its bastard sibling the spectacle, which has bequeathed its legacy to TV and the Musical.

How to navigate in this dangerous territory without falling into overblown claims or parody? Nerve has developed as a collaborative dialogue between choreographer Carol Brown and architect Stewart Dodd. Starting with the notion of compression, they have developed choreography and a spatial device that uses an economy of means to explore the tense relationship of body to space in an urban environment.

An asphalt road that diagonally spans the space has been compressed into an undulating surface that problematises the traditional assumption of a flat ground on which to perform, and this is mirrored by a mesh canopy which circumscribes the upper reaches of the body. This architectural matrix encapsulates the dynamic of a restrictive urban environment in whose narrow confines the performer must renegotiate the scope of potential movements and body relationships.

In a tightly scripted performance of 30 minutes Carol Brown has chosen to partner herself with a classically trained male dancer thus simultaneously reclaiming the problematic gendered narratives of ballet and staging a confrontation between the classical and the contemporary. The performance opens with a startling and memorable passage as she moves the dead weight of his corpse along the road surface with the intensity of a forensic examination. The performance then develops a dense series of encounters punctuated with accidents, with fragments of the courtship rituals of dance, of fitness culture... as if the body is constantly seeking to escape the pressures of the city by keeping on the move. The performers travel along the road constantly interrupted and disconcerted by its uneven surface trying to find points of mutual equilibrium.

The surface is punctuated by up-lit slits implying an illusion of depth beneath the road as if this were one of many such layers on which identical performances were taking place. These fissures are simultaneously down-lit so that the performers bodies are trapped and traversed by these shafts of light. The theme of compression is further activated by the sound-score where location recordings from various urban sites have been blended and manipulated into a wall of sound. Taken together these elements form the template for a performance installation that has been designed to travel and adapt itself to other sites and perhaps, other cities.

It is important that the performance does travel and that the template is tested and renegotiated by being confronted with more challenging spaces than the well appointed studios of the Jerwood Foundation. Here the problematic of staging this type of work, of which audience it addresses, of which critical framework it references, begin to become significant - by touching only the surface of a medium or discursive framework the Gesamtkunstwerk may be in danger of remaining an empty and inarticulate container.

A friend researched the quote on the net for me and found it was attributed to amongst others - Laurie Anderson, Steve Martin, Frank Zappa, William Burroughs, Elvis Costello, Charlie Mingus, Thelonius Monk, Miles Davis, John Cage and W.G. Snuffy Walden... Laurie Anderson's reply? How about a square dance?

J.J.Wood