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Talk to the Demon by Wim Vandekeybus: darkly comic and dangerously honest

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By Emily Brown, 14 May 2014

Great performance should have the power to move, to enrage, to instil empathy and maybe break hearts. *Talk to the Demon* by Belgian choreographer Wim Vandekeybus for Ultima Vez manages all of these and still has room for amusing and disturbing us all at once. Though a little too long, it is a work of quality and depth, highlighting human cruelty, where no one's actions go unscrutinised.

Reviewed at Brighton Dome, Concert Hall, Brighton on 13 May 2014

PERFORMERS

Ultima Vez



Talk to the Demon

© Victor Frankowski

This physical theatre work focuses on childhood innocence and the effect children have on adults around them. Everyone in this work is held accountable and responsible for what happens on stage, not least the audience who, at the very start, are told the performance involves one child but two have turned up – we are asked to vote on which one we want to perform that night. Embarrassed laughter of disbelief and now guilt ensues, but we vote. And vote overwhelmingly in favour of Luke, the shy boy that mumbles with a Belgian accent, over Martha, the confident ten year old from London. From then on Luke is in control, creating a world where adults are beholden to his wishes and commands.



Talk to the Demon

© Victor Frankowski

According to Vandekeybus, the demon of the title is this child, who makes adults act in ridiculous ways to protect his innocence and avoid his bleak questions that only a child would ask. In a painfully awkward scene, he asks, “do you love me?” over and over to one of the men, who squirms and half-answers until finally telling the truth and saying no. He asks another, “when am I going to die?” Again, the instinct to protect childhood innocence comes first, but truth comes out

Wim Vandekeybus, *Choreography*

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eventually, with the feeling that it would be less painful to just stop avoiding the difficult questions.

Then again, pain is something Vandekeybus doesn't shy away from; throughout his career he has become famous for working with risk and pushing his dancers to their physical limits. This work is no different. One of the early scenes shows the adults as a gang of children, who play slapping games, hurl stones across the stage and finally string one man upside down by his shoelaces. It's an impressive and upsetting sight, one that becomes more uncomfortable and powerful as he is left there for minutes on end, red faced.



Talk to the Demon

© Victor Frankowski

There are so many outstanding moments in this work, with its beautifully strong and exciting performers. Dancer Elena Fokin, who has a quiet, vulnerable persona for the majority of the work, provides a terrifying duet partner for Luke, where she becomes a faceless, overgrown child-demon. She whips round him, hair falling over her face, crawling and shaking in odd, almost comic movements that are deeply unsettling in their strangeness. This nightmare vision reminds us of a child's latent power to destroy and inflict pain that grows more powerful in adulthood. This is picked up at the culmination of the work where the fate of Martha, the rejected child, is played out through childhood cruelty and adult bitterness.



Talk to the Demon

© Victor Frankowski

Talk to the Demon is an impressive work that shows why Vandekeybus is such a celebrated choreographer. The powerful dancing is only half of it; this work is a complete piece of theatre and its use of text and stories helps carry it through its length. If you can last the distance, it is a rich and rewarding experience that just like *Luke*, asks some bleak questions about human nature that deserve to be answered.

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