

Wright's masterpiece of layered meaning

Jennifer Shennan – Dominion Post – 13 April 2006

WHAT: Black Milk, director/choreographer/writer: Douglas Wright
WHERE: Opera House, last night and tonight
REVIEWED BY: Jennifer Shennan

It is unique in all dance theatre history that a choreographer would produce a "programme essay" in the form of a full-length book and, further, that a publisher would produce that book on the night of the performance, rather than as memoirs 50 years after the event.

Wright whips off his performance costume and is out into the foyer to sign copies of his book after the show. But that's only one of the ways in which the work *Black Milk* and the book *Terra Incognita* make history, and you sense that the 10 stellar dancers, as well as the sellout audience, are fully aware of that.

Wright's powerful, at times incorrigible, imagination provides countless layers of meaning and resonance in this profoundly serious choreography. The pervading theme questions the nature of power, of the past over the future, of dreams over daytime, of adults over children, of soldiers over prisoners, of genders in all combinations, of death over life, of dance critics over choreographers.

Its episodes are by turns heart-rending, horrifying and hilarious. They pulse and throb, stamp and shiver, scream and whisper through the unbroken two-hour performance. We already had a subtitle, "Pain examined without prejudice is metamorphosis", and it's justified.

Brian Carbee is a brilliant Ventriloquist who, with immaculately timed inhuman movement, bullies little Joey to death. Sarah-Jayne Howard is herself, Eve and Lady Godiva mixed together in a flamenco frenzy of great power.

Claire O'Neil steps into and out of a ravishing catherine wheel of fire. Jessica Shipman is a shooting star in the Milky Way. Helaina Keeley is a miracle of held breath that takes a poem into a prayer.

Taiaroa Royal is the anchorman of Aotearoa. Guy Ryan is as strong and beautiful as a tree. Craig Bary is the meteor that hurtles time along faster than the metronome. Alex Leonhartsberger leaps up into the air as a phoenix from ashes.

Designer Michael Pearce's red silk curtains billow and wave up and out and in and around the performers, and the costumes carry all their resonance. David Long's composition is faultless, fabulous. The lighting, as the dancing, is indescribably beautiful.

Suffice to signal a masterpiece. In my opinion, this is Wright's, New Zealand's, and dare I say it, the world's finest choreography. I dare.