

Malevolence

Francesca Horsley – New Zealand Listener – April 15, 2006

Black Milk is produced by spiders. It induces cobwebs in the mind, a numbing of the mouth, death. Well, this is what a wooden puppet says after being kissed and inappropriately touched by his ventriloquist master.

Douglas Wright's *Black Milk*, a perilous journey in which innocence dies, poses the existential question – what becomes of this loss? Wright framed the consequences, but provided no tidy answer. Human nature in all of its selfish ambiguity prevailed. Malevolence in its various guises asserted power, with the yearning for joy and life pitted against it. It preyed on the body; the young violated by desire, adults degraded for sadism, others exposed or headless, dizzied by circling mirrors.

Its first appearance had dancer Sarah-Jayne Howard whirling. Her red shoes sharp with staccato beats, she snapped at the air with scissors, long hair partially covering her naked body.

The innocent was the blue-eyed puppet "Dummy", seated on his ventriloquist's knee, endearing in a sailor suit. In a voice-over, Wright was his omnipresent, genial, yet occasionally sinister, master. Initially nervous, the puppet (also Wright's voice) became bolder as he sought human identity. This complex relationship encompassed the piece.

Dance episodes connected their narrative; at times a Greek chorus – physically commenting on the action, then in counterpoint or a tangent with their own storyline. The dancing was stunning and intelligent, realising Wright's invention and passion.

Often a sisterhood, Howard, Helaina Keeley and Claire O'Neil displayed sensitivity and daring partnering, while Jessica Shipman was more aloof, a finely chiselled temptress. Craig Bary and Alex Leonhartsberger were versatile and forceful, combining gymnastic and lyrical energy. Taiaroa Royal carried graceful fatherly strength.

Wright's humour was playful and subversive, using the dancers' bodies and narrative. His language and dance seduced the audience into poetic reverie, then shocked them into disturbing nightmare. Brian Carbee's mime as ventriloquist was outstanding; and music by György Ligeti, Idil Biret and an original score by David Long seamlessly connected the piece.

This was a consummate work of art – powerful, humorous and heartbreaking. It tunneled into our subconscious, seeking connecting points, surfacing with cohesive symmetry.

Wright has a porous membrane, soaking and storing up memories and hurts, not always his own. He is compelled to tell his truth, no matter the consequence, ripping back the covers to present what we would rather leave

unseen. Although disquieting, Black Milk is representational, never pornographic, guided by a careful integrity.

**BLACK MILK, Douglas Wright Dance; Civic Theatre, Invercargill.
Touring nationally under April 13.**