

## **A poem of love, cruelty and death**

Jill Sykes – Sydney Morning Herald, Weekend Edition – July 22-23, 2006

Douglas Wright is a poet of dance. The twists and turns of his choreography for *Black Milk* reflect themes from distressing to delightful, gripping the viewer in a blend of tragedy and dark humour, full of surprises. The dance is often lyrical to look at, but always nightmarish to think about.

Ironically, the most engaging character is the ventriloquist's doll. A voice-over conversation with his operator (Brian Carbee) reveals a sweetly simple mind that is destined to be the prey of a child molester in a searing sequence that is heard but not seen – except by the voyeur. The audience becomes party to it.

This is the core of nearly two hours of vignettes that work through the mighty topics of love, cruelty and death. They explore the effect of memory, the power of sex, and the horror of torture in sickeningly familiar Abu Ghraib imagery. Contradictorily, the fear of mortality is examined in ways that also suggest a welcome celebration of death as the ultimate release.

Grim as this may sound, it is exhilarating to look at. Wright has a strong company, led by the gloriously big-boned Sarah-Jayne Howard, whose opening sequence – dressed in nothing but a long wig and red shoes, vicious scissors in hand – sets the mood.

She and her colleagues drive through the space in fast, buoyant phrases that end in Wright's characteristic rolling dives. His playfulness with body shapes is inventive and a delight. He teases the audience with smiling ideas in movement that can turn sour when you look beyond the obvious. A robust ensemble of jumps and lines of blown-leaf rolls deservedly gets a reprise.

Partnerships are more conceptual than tactile. A neat duet for two women is wittily taken apart in conversation by the ventriloquist and his doll. Early on, a female trio is exquisitely shaped and paced – through it drips with imagined blood. Craig Bary has a beautiful solo – so light that he barely seems to touch the group – and later a sexy duet with Alex Leonhartsberger.

Restrained but evocative costume and set designs by Michael Pearce are cleverly lit by Robrecht Ghesquiere. The music – part Gyorgy Ligeti, part David Long – is alternately a persuasive counterpoint and companion to the action. It is a combination you won't forget.