

Searing images of darkness

Deborah Jones – The Australian – 24 July 2006

FOR the past few years Douglas Wright has concentrated on writing, to much acclaim in his native New Zealand. His return to the stage with a serious, difficult and provocative dance-theatre work is a matter for great celebration, although the timid may not agree. *Black Milk* is definitely rated R: it contains violence, coarse language and high-level sexual references. It is, in short, a work for our times.

Wright's underlying theme is death. It's not so much the extinction of life -- the impulse to survive is exceptionally tenacious -- as the killing of hope and, in particular, trust and humanity. Wright is subtle enough to know that the fabric of life is woven from threads of more than one colour, so *Black Milk* is leavened with scenes of tenderness and humour. Nevertheless, darkness is ever-present and confronting.

Black Milk, clocking in at nearly two hours without interval, unfolds at speed and with dizzying scope.

Naked flamenco, a re-enactment of the Abu Ghraib humiliations, agitprop sloganeering and a deeply disturbing ventriloquist's dummy -- the philosopher-naif of the piece -- sit alongside potent contemporary dance that sweeps the brilliant performers across the stage as if there were no time to waste.

For the most part *Black Milk* is held together by the strength of Wright's convictions and the bravura of his searing image-making. The overt political material seems to come from another dimension in the context of such a personal piece, but I expect Wright couldn't care less about such a quibble. The cheeky discussion about the purpose of dance and critics' responses to it would suggest so.