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Configurations / Strange Blooms - Shobana Jeyasingh Dance 25th Anniversary

Concept, choreography and direction by Shobana Jeyasingh

Shobana Jeyasingh Dance

Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank Centre

3–4 December 2013

From strong roots come two half-hour pieces separated not only by a twenty-minute interval but also by twenty-five years.

I prefer the first, 1988's *Configurations*, my sound designer companion the second, this year's *Strange Blooms*. Could be an age thing. But what can't be faulted is the ambition of their creator, Shobana Jeyasingh, nor the dancers' grace, speed, and vigour.

Marrying the geometric rhythmic patterns and percussive footwork of Bharat Natyam's classical Indian dance with Michael Nyman's *String Quartet No. 2*, played live on stage by the Benyounes Quartet, *Configurations* is as fresh today as when it was grafted / crafted.

Four dancers, three male, one female (Rathimalar Govindarajoo), share the four string players' timelines in six distinct sections. Complex yet easy on the eye and the ear, Nyman's music is scored on the stage floor by quicksilver moves from heads, eyes, lotus flower hands, through the body to the feet.

Phenomenal co-ordination, of necessity, comes into play in the musical and kinetic configurations, from the four Malaysian dancers, their differing shapes harmonizing in patterns of astonishing velocity, dexterity, precision, energy, and grace.

And different centres of gravity—the small powerhouse Rathimalar Govindarajoo close to the ground; Sooraj Subramaniam's elongated arms and height lifting him towards the sky—which Jeyasingh uses to advantage.

Whilst Lucy Carter's stepping stone lighting guides their way, dervishes and temple dancers in red kilts whirl on and off, silent Buddha statues watch, and then all simply walk to the music as it dies away.

The decision to have the new work follow the old makes sense, allowing us to see the echoes and reflections of the first in the last. The choreographer's signature endures.

For nine dancers—in purple lace-trimmed, flesh-coloured sportswear—*Strange Blooms* is ostensibly about plants, but could just as well be about bodies, their cellular breakdown, their force and power, sturdy growths not delicate flowers.

A compelling cerebral composition and collaboration: Gabriel Prokofiev's deconstruction of Couperin's *Chaconne la Complainante*, a seventeenth century harpsichord piece, is what excited my companion, the hyperactive choreography trailing in its wake.

Manipulating a sample of Couperin's music in granular synthesis, what I'm told is a randomizing of the grains of music (I hear lots of reverb, distortion and dithering), Gabriel Prokofiev produces tremolo, panning and spatial effects.

Backwards and forwards, time is stretched, pitch is changed dramatically—impossible to tell Jane Chapman is playing a harpsichord till near the end—a clinical digital playground is explored, science and art, aural and visual vector graphics.

Scribbling with music is what it seems to me, scribbling with movement, and scribbling with animation, white on black, an intriguing combination of all three. Jan Urbanowski's video design is captivating. And Guy Hoare's purple on red lighting places us in a magical night garden.

Writhing figures emerge. Portentous music sounds. Martial moves, high kicks, squats, rubber bodies, fidgety, febrile, agitated. Ordered disorder. Dividing exploding cells (planetary constellations and a 'David Mach' head), petals and stamen on the screen.

3D images burst from the screen, as dancers, in group gymnastics and individual prowess (Avatâra Ayuso is outstanding), dance fit to burst on the stage, pterodactyls in flight, single warriors, and a battalion.

Analogy and deconstruction, Baroque and the digital age, the classical Asian grace of the early *Configurations* and Jeyasingh's steadfast intelligence inform these *Strange Blooms*.

A compact double bill (out of the fifty-five works Jeyasingh has created over a quarter of a century) with lots of punch: 'complex cultural dialogues that define urban life in the 21st century' (Shobana Jeyasingh). Here's to the next quarter century.

Reviewer: [Vera Liber](#)