

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

Young Associates - Mixed Bill

Young Associates

Lillian Baylis Studio, Sadler's Wells

9–10 October 2018

Straining vocal chords characterise tonight's four works, each newly commissioned as part of the *Young Associates Mixed Bill*, a Sadler's Wells initiative offering raw talent a platform to launch burgeoning choreographic careers. Admirably, all four choreographers, in their early twenties, are not afraid to use their voices as part of the performance as well as unite in their belief that movement can be used as a vehicle to push forward political ideals beyond dance as a showy perfectionist art form.

Not a problem tonight as techniques vary greatly in terms of strength, while the movement derives from a hotchpotch of dance heritages with roots in ballet, contemporary, contact improvisation, hip hop and even actor training exercises thrown into the mix. Strikingly, apart from the highly exercised vocals, the results are diverse, but do they work?

Wilhelmina Ojanen's, a *quiet hope*, opens the evening in a floating, pleasant muse on the idea of collective power through play. Four dancers line up and stare brazenly into the auditorium—a vision of unity. House lights blaring, the performers are ready and alert. Could the point of this experience be to reverse the gaze—the audience no longer the spectators, but instead the observed? Perhaps, but the result feels awkward and slightly contrived, not to mention a little intimidating—reflected by the surrounding throat clearing and sudden fascination with shoes. If this is the intention, then it works, though I suspect it's likely a ploy to sweep the audience into the performers' world of game playing.

The choreography, on the other hand makes for joyous viewing with some beautifully executed contact improvisation moments *à la* Frantic Assembly—the company behind the movement of *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. Here, Ojanen offers simple connections in the form of pull and push techniques—"a gentle reminder of the individual's power to influence the collective," she says. When four dancers close their eyes and feel their way through waves of movement dependent and trusting that the other dancers will catch them in their darkness, the effect is magnetic—equally for the bodily shapes it creates visually as for the hair-raising anticipation of falling.

The next piece, *Shall we just retire to the lake?*, blasts through pre-conceived notions of what should be on the menu for a night of dance. Ruby Portus offers a hysteria-ridden piece drawing on the cabaret culture of the 1920s; part burlesque, part screwball comedy—but no part dance. This is a natty take on feminist clowning—is there such a thing? The two entertainers skim about dry humping jay clothes, jumping in and out of Punch and Judy red velvet curtains, polishing the auditorium banisters while competitively straining their vocal chords. Energy literally seeps out of the pores of the duo in high-octane physical theatre, but in the line of pantomime more than contemporary dance.

The final two works of the evening punch their weight both in terms of dance technique and narrative engagement. In *The Three Visions*, sitting at her dressing table in the last few moments of her life, a haunted and destroyed woman, Evelyn, is confronted by three visions, each embodying three phases of her life. Choreographer Christopher Thomas trained at the Royal Ballet School and the Rambert School of Ballet and draws on this background in his balletic piece.

The stage is swathed in a naturalistic setting with soft lighting, dressing tables, cocktail glasses and silky dressing gowns. While ballet is at its core, contemporary influences creep into the choreography when bodies mesh and roll across the floor and shrill screams ring out as Evelyn confronts her memories to the haunting melodies of a violinist standing in the corner, played masterfully by Akiko Ishikawa. The multi-layering of complex movement phrases transmitted with impromptu ease and abandon lends the piece its improvisatory quality so while the story is often lost, the movement is heartbreakingly beautiful to watch.

In the final piece, choreographer, Anthony Matsena's *Tsutseka* edges closer towards translating ideas of freedom through movement. Literally translated as "freedom" in South East Africa, *Tsutseka* opens with dancers depicting alternative patterns of movement embodying freedom through hand clapping, singing and free-dancing, followed by movements associated with chain-gangs where dancers become embroiled in hand wringing and angst foot stomping, set to the music of Nina Simone's "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free".

Born in Africa, Matsena started his dance training in hip-hop before studying contemporary dance and this mesh of influences translates effortlessly into a highly energetic, infectious number which pumps out such power and spirit through movement, its over all too quickly—which is something to be said given 20 minutes of foot stomping angst ridden dancers shouting out the word, *free*, in as many octaves as humanly possible.

Reviewer: [Rachel Nouchi](#)