

TOTAL THEATRE:

SPILL Double Bill: Kings of England *In Eldersfield* – Chapter 1: *Elegy for Paul Dirac* Sylvia Rimat *I guess if the stage exploded...* The Pit, Barbican | SPILL 22 April 2011

What does it mean for time to pass? This is a question that *In Eldersfield*, a short piece that feels surprisingly long, seeks to explore. The results are sometimes entertaining, but more often they are undisguised experiments that test our endurance and understanding.

Simon Bowes, the founder of the company (along with his father Peter) starts the show with a toast – for which wine is handily provided – to Dead Dogs, Dead Children, Dead Lovers, Dead Heroes, and how good it is to be alive. The subject matter is complex and seemingly profound, and is expressed in a poetry so mesmerising that, although we may not grasp its finer points, we gain a sense of stillness and of spaciousness that is curiously transfixing. This is the greatest strength of the piece; although Bowes is sometimes a little too softly spoken, his words are paradoxically soporific and compelling. What he says feels as though it needs to be studied in order to be understood – and fortunately audience members are provided with books containing transcriptions of the performance once it has finished, to serve as an aide mémoire and a stimulus for further thought.

Paul Dirac, a brilliant but introverted man, was once asked where he was going on his holidays. His reply took twenty minutes to come. A fact that is mentioned in passing early on the show, when the cast sit down with Dirac in the middle, and the rest of them wearing the names of famous scientific thinkers round their necks, we greet what ensues with only mild surprise when the question is asked. To perform twenty minutes of complete silence is some feat – and one which many of the audience members felt was too great a task. With nothing taking place on stage, the centre of attention became the actions of the audience, and the difficulties we are faced with when presented with the task of feeling the passing of time.

A meditation of the ideas of Dirac, rather than a purely biographical representation, we come away with a sense of what his life might

have been like, rather than any particular details of his existence. John Pinder, who plays Dirac, bears a striking resemblance to the man himself, and adds an extra layer of authenticity to the performance. *In Eldersfield* is by no means a completely enjoyable performance. Indeed, it would not be unreasonable for the audience members to feel abused by what they have seen, forced unwillingly to be guinea pigs in an odd and perhaps unnecessary experiment. Although much is taken for granted, this quietly confident company have no problems getting people talking.

Writing about *I guess if the stage exploded* is something of an intentional memory test. Rimat does her best to ensure that no audience member will leave the performance without having what they have watched firmly engrained in their memory – or, to be more precise, their hippocampus.

We are required to perform several tasks which heighten our involvement with the show above what is normally demanded of an audience. We are introduced to various members of the audience, and invited to throw a piece of scrunched up paper containing our name and details of how we would like to be remembered onto the stage. The progression of the show becomes personal and, as Rimat invites us to picture her, wearing a lampshade as a skirt, in a particular place in our own home, her logic becomes quite transparent.

Interspersed with recorded excerpts of a conversation between Rimat and a memory expert, the performance also involves Rimat crossing the stage with talcum powder on her feet – a visual representation of how one might retrace one's steps. The props and styling of the piece are eclectic – a brown leather armchair, some quite random video link-ups, and a live owl. The ethics of bringing a live animal on stage aside, there is such a strange menagerie of ideas brought into play in this show that it would be hard to forget.

It's an interesting idea, and Rimat does well at what she seems to have set out to do. It's hard not to help feeling, however, that we are being asked to remember an act of remembering, rather than something which is inherently worth recalling.

Helena Rampley, Total Theatre

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