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Dunedin Fringe 2016

DARK MATTER

Light, AV and space design by Martyn Roberts
Original Sound design Jeremy Mayall (with Martyn Roberts)

at Allen Hall Theatre, University of Otago, Dunedin

From 3 Mar 2016 to 7 Mar 2016

Reviewed by Hannah Molloy, 5 Mar 2016

About 30 people are seated neatly in the tiny Allen Hall theatre on the University of Otago campus. I arrive with no real idea of what to expect – a friend has told me he'd enjoyed it the night before and "there were a few surprises," but coming into the twilight from a bright summer evening via some very steep winding stairs is an apt precursor to this performance. Once we are seated, light, AV and space designer Martyn Roberts ambles across the front of the stage, commenting, "Oh look, I'm turning my phone off..." His sideways, slightly self-deprecating smile at the audience hints at a sense of partnership in the upcoming experience.

The lights fade, and by fade I mean the space drops into utter black darkness with no visual relief. The audience falls instantly silent, a hush which is sustained through the first three of the seven "visual haiku" before relapsing into a small hum of pleased chatter as the lights come up between each piece to reset our night blindness.

Born and bred to the city, I'm not used to that complete absence of light and find myself explaining to the rising panic in my chest that everything will be fine and just calm down and it won't be forever. I become fascinated by the way my eyes seek any atom of light anywhere and the shapes that appear – I remember an acquaintance telling me years ago that one of the clever things about art is the natural desire for humans to make sense out of chaos and to seek familiar shapes in abstract forms. I think I scoffed at the time but I understand it better now.

Most of the haiku are dreamlike, in that so little light illuminates the bodies of the dancers (Katherine Kennedy and Megan Wilson), it feels as if I am grasping at what I am seeing, trying to catch it before it disappears when I awake. The dancers are wraithlike and there, then not there. Sometimes it seems like they are both on stage but it may have just be the haze. Sometimes they move like a sepia-toned mirror image, and sometimes are just present and then not.

Ranging from staccato scanner chatter to the gentle patter of a rainfall turning to a hailstorm, from atmospheric musings to silence, the soundscape (original sound design by Jeremy Mayall) increases to a crescendo at the third haiku and eases with rolling tides of aural connection to the light and gentle movement.

I find delight in other people's cleverness and skill, in their imagination and curiosity about how far they can stretch something – a theory, a limb, a shaft of light. Watching a dissipated shaft of light as particles sprinkling down from the roof to form into a crisp sharp line is fascinating. Watching the fullness and three-dimensionality of haze caught in a wedge of light is hypnotic – I almost couldn't believe that it is insubstantial and not a sheet of billowing rippling satin. Perhaps it is.

Dark Matter is on again on Monday 7th March at 7pm and I think you should see it. This is a mesmerising piece of art and one that I feel privileged to have seen and review.



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