

Work in process

Crystal Pite and Jonathon Young / *Betroffenheit*

The individual at the centre of *Betroffenheit* is at the mercy of his own tortured and torturing mind. His psyche, ripped apart by trauma, takes the distinct forms of five dancers who tease, cavort and bully. This highly theatrical conceit comes from the collaboration of two accomplished Vancouverites: Crystal Pite, artistic director of Kidd Pivot and winner of the 2015 Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement in Dance, and Jonathon Young, artistic director of Electric Company Theatre.

The work, directed and choreographed by Pite and written by Young, was presented in process on July 16 at the Banff Centre's Eric Harvie Theatre (where it has had three development residencies with full access to the stage).

Working high up in Alberta's Rocky Mountains has its challenges. "After three weeks here, I've just acclimatized now!" dancer Jermaine Spivey told me a couple of days before the Banff show. Given the rigorous onstage workout he gets from the choreography, it's a good thing he had time to get used to the altitude: over the two-hour evening, with one intermission, he needs all the breath he can get.

We had lunch in a corner table at the Banff Centre's dining room, overlooking mountaintops and clouds, along with Young, who plays the traumatized man. His is the only voice heard onstage, both live and recorded (when it becomes the voice of the dancers). Young, a very physical actor who knows how to express story and character through his body in a deep way, also dances alongside the five Kidd Pivot company members.

Young explained that his character was first at the scene of an unspecified accident, arriving too late to save the victims. The theatrical situation is abstracted from a real-life trauma — the death of Young's daughter in a fire — something he clearly struggles to come to terms with but doesn't want to exploit. "This isn't memoir," he stated.

Indeed it isn't. *Betroffenheit* (a German word meaning shock or bewilderment) is half-nightmare, half-cartoon, a disturbing portrayal of a mind in crisis. There are some fantastically entertaining tap dancers (led by David Raymond) and a salsa couple (Bryan Arias and Cindy Salgado), who are also part of the ensemble that alternately saves and endangers the man.

Tiffany Tregarthen's white-faced chorus girl is a weirdly delightful concoction in a child's coned-shaped party hat, and glittering bra and panties. In a duet with Young, she won't let go, her long arms and legs twisting like pretzels in her determination to keep hold of him, her insistent partnering taking them onto the ground as she rides this flustered, barely coping man like a rollercoaster.

Young holds his own with the top-notch dancers, even when partnered by the virtuosic Spivey. Moving with flow and precision, sharp one moment, putty the next, Spivey fulfills Pite's famously tumultuous choreography, his body erupting in scenes of pain and anger. He's worked with Pite since 2008 and, Spivey said, he remembers the days when she was still dancing, memories that continue to inspire his understanding of her choreography. In *Betroffenheit*, he's certainly nailed it, and is transcendent in the closing solo. Amid the turmoil and imbalance of what seems endless physical crisis control, Spivey spins smoothly around — and that he is in control, that he isn't struggling, comes as a moment of grace. He does it again — going round

and round like the world has suddenly changed its gravitational pull — and I'm guessing many in the audience wanted, like me, to see him stay there, spinning, even as the curtain falls heavily down.

This is a difficult piece, both technically in the many special staging effects and also in the subject matter, which dwells on struggle and failure, and the way that memory can become a prison, and its own unforgiving, unreasonable jailer. There were likely tweaks before the July 23 premiere in Toronto on the cultural roster of the Pan Am Games, so I'll refrain from summing up my experience of the in-process *Betroffenheit*, except to say I was kind of shattered. The day after the official unveiling, Martha Schabas described the work as "rare and staggering" in the *Globe and Mail*, noting: "I can't remember the last time I heard so much audience-sobbing at a curtain call."

To end, here's another moment of grace, a sweet, dreamy scenario when Young is held aloft by the ensemble, who have become his puppet-masters. He gives himself over to their manipulations as they raise one of his legs and both his arms, letting them take his body into the hopeful shape of his layman's arabesque, into its openness and freedom.

— KAIJA PEPPER

Betroffenheit tours in Canada and the United States, and to London, England, starting in February 2016 at Ottawa's National Arts Centre. Check out tour dates at kiddpivot.org.

Banff Centre Creation Residency

