

International

Betroffenheit

Kidd Pivot and Electric Company Theatre, St Lawrence Centre for the Arts, Toronto – July 23, 2015

TURNING PERSONAL HISTORY INTO art is risky business. It is to the great credit of actor/playwright Jonathon Young and choreographer Crystal Pite that in making *Betroffenheit*, an imaginative dance-theatre hybrid with post-traumatic stress disorder and substance addiction as its major themes, they have vaulted the personal to deliver an intense, utterly compelling work of universal resonance.

Young is a co-founder/artistic director of Vancouver's much acclaimed Electric Company Theatre. On July 23, 2009, Young and company co-founder Kim Collier's 14-year-old daughter – Azra, their only child – along with two of her young cousins, died in an early morning fire at a family recreational property in British Columbia. Azra's parents were in the main cottage, the children in a cabin nearby. Young made a rescue attempt but the blaze was already too intense.

As Young has explained, coming to terms with such an emotionally shattering event caused him to ponder the impact of trauma on the human psyche and the coping/avoidance strategies to which sufferers resort. Ultimately, about two years ago, Young felt impelled to explore the subject in what he initially thought would be a one-man-show and asked another Vancouverite, Crystal Pite, founder and choreographer of her own Kidd Pivot company and 2015 Olivier Award winner

for outstanding achievement in dance, to direct it.

Pite had worked with Electric Company as a choreographer on two earlier projects and greatly admired Young's innovative and often physically enhanced approach to theatre. Pite, however, was planning a new work of her own and declined Young's invitation. Regardless, they met to talk about it and quickly decided to join forces in a full collaboration.

At its core, *Betroffenheit* – developed and given an advance showing at Alberta's Banff Centre – is very much Young's story, a remarkable laying bare of his own soul, but as choreographer and director Pite has enabled him to avoid all hint of self-indulgence and, through the alchemy of theatre, make a powerful work of art.

Betroffenheit is a German word encapsulating a sense of being stopped dead in one's tracks and utterly disoriented. It's the condition in which we first discover Young's character,

Below: A scene from Kidd Pivot and Electric Company Theatre's *Betroffenheit*.



slumped in the dimly-lit corner of a barren industrial room. Initially we don't notice him. In an unsettling prologue, piles of thick electrical cables uncoil and slither across the stage and up the wall like malevolent serpents. Lights flash. Urgent voices are heard. Some unspecified event, terrible and devastating, has occurred. The man saw it all. He was a "first responder." Eventually he jumps up, desperately flips switches and pulls plugs from a massive circuit board and a temporary peace reigns.

The room is a surreal metaphor for the way Young's character has boxed-up his wounded spirit. The voices, mostly Young's recorded in various accents and timbres, loop and repeat, bellow and whisper with an almost choreographed sense of rhythm and dynamics that emphasise the man's perilous attempts at self-containment. These inner voices vainly strive to rationalise the choices he has made to protect himself from further harm, including, with considerable ambivalence, substance abuse.

In a brilliant flight of imagination, the man's addiction takes visible form in a sinister troupe of

burlesque artists – five Kidd Pivot dancers costumed by Nancy Bryant – who variously hover on the periphery, or, assuming a central role, manipulate Young's character in acts of violent seduction until he spirals downward into their dark world. The riveting Jermaine Spivey, all rubbery limbs, whip-lash isolations, aching expressive visceral contortions and crumpling falls, functions as the man's alter-ego, or perhaps more properly in Freudian terms as his alter-id.

At the age of 42, Young, while not a fully trained dancer, remains an agile and convincing mover. Pite integrates him totally into the physical action. Her choreography embraces a broad range of styles with additional specialised contributions from dancers Bryan Arias and Cindy Salgado (salsa) and David Redmond (tap). Along with Tiffany Tregarthen, all Pite's dancers are superb. Sometimes they lip-sync the recurring voices, their gestures enlarging and punctuating the words to vivify the man's inner conflict.

The shorter, post-intermission section of the two-hour performance is almost entirely dance and offers at least a glimmer of hope. In a stunning coup de théâtre, the claustrophobic room – Jay Gower Taylor is the designer and Tom Visser his lighting collaborator – dissolves before our eyes. Jermaine Spivey, now representing the man, performs a final solo. Weighed down by the psychic scar he now knows he can never fully erase, he nevertheless lopes painfully into the darkness. He is finally out of the box and moving on.

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