

In-Habit.

Kitten – by Jenny Kemp

Present: an artistic director, a poet/performer, a visual and installation artist

All regionally based artists.

Following the performance all three artists were perplexed.

They regrouped at the Malthouse Theatre bar where their conversation over one hour took place.

The artistic director kept notes of the conversation.

Artistic Director: well we're all looking a little yes, no, maybe so, so let's talk about what worked for you.

Poet: The sound was great. I really enjoyed that.

Visual Artist: Yes for me too that was the most convincing part of the work – the rest was far too explanatory

P: I'm so glad you said that because for me, those three voices, yes they were just far too explanatory weren't they.

VA: Yes. I'm not really sure why the 3 voices were necessary. It was as if the writer or director didn't trust us to "get" or understand that when we're dealing with grief it has a multi pronged effect.

P: Yes it said too much didn't it? Too much that was too obvious. The whole thing was like that for me.

VA: Yes... and maybe you can tell me about...well I just wasn't sure if I was laughing at the right moment or if it was intended to be really gaggy, and that kind of consciousness of "am I meant to laugh or not" suddenly just...well I wasn't emotionally engaged. We've all lived grief or trauma and even when there are funny moments it's BIG emotionally. The stillness of the first scene was the most emotionally engaging. That stillness said a huge amount without all the carrying on that came afterwards.

P: You know sometimes it gets back to the poem – not the staging poem but "the poem" – the written, the said. And for me that wasn't convincing. It just wasn't a good poem! It just wasn't a good poem. A good poem brings things together and what we're talking about is the fact that there were elements – even soap opera, which of course comes together as a genre – but all these bits just never came together.

VA: That's right. There's no lament. Where was the emotional depth of lament? It just didn't matter to me that she refound her voice. And was it meant to be "the refinding of a stellar career?" or "she needed loss and grief to find a profoundness in her voice?" Who cares! According to the story it was her choice in the first place. For me that profound place of lament was not explored and so it was a work without courage. There was a lot of filler.

P: Yes that cathartic song of grief. If I was singing out of grief I'd be finding the moment of...you know that place that's beyond words and sounds you know that... (poet stands up and does a quick and discrete 5 second demo)

You could take away half the work, rework the rest and you might have something palpable.

VA: And the thing of madness and drugs...I loved the fish and the bear

P: Yes we love the bear

VA: Yes but you know "bi-polar" – it's such a heavy gag and then the grief became drugs and...there was no tension

AD: The problem is when "the dream" or "hallucination/drugs" are illustrated everything and anything is possible. She could have floated out of the bed and amongst the fish and it would have all been part of the tableau. In fact that would have been fun – having her floating around singing. So where anything can happen there are no obstacles and there's no tension. We just sort of enter a "scape" which isn't about dilemma, or wrestling a catastrophe, or place of emotional intensity, or even deliberate non incarnation of personage. For me when the work hit that place, the song and the singing were all illustrations with a complete emotional thinning. It was a demonstration, a kind of staging of a drug induced state that frankly – apart from quirky fish and the bear – after 3 minutes bored me.

VA: Yes! It took away from the grief. Perhaps it was in fact about mental illness. Grief is temporary – it passes – so this thing of suppressed song and then the singing was it all leading to a vision of mental illness? I don't know...

AD: Let's read the program to see what Jenny Kemp has to say about it?

The visual artist reads the program notes out loud and we are all surprised that there's a discourse on Icarus, on rise and fall – aiming too high and pending downfall

Poet: ...well...

Visual Artist:...certainly didn't see any of that

Poet: Icarus...no didn't see any Icarus in there

So how might we sum up our reaction?

P and VA: The actors were a great ensemble, the soundscape was great, we weren't sure what the work was exploring, the poem wasn't good, the staging was too illustrative of a universal emotion and situation that wasn't made to matter.

AD: Thanks. That's great. I'm glad we were able to talk that through. Drink anyone?

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Book of Longing: by Philip Glass based on the poems of Leonard Cohen

Present: an artistic director, an arts manager who knows Cohen's writing well and has in the past assisted sound artists through the Liquid Architecture Festival. Both the AD and manager are regionally based.

Following the performance the arts manager said: "I'm not sure I'm going to say many nice things about that." The AD suggested they get a drink at the Festival Club around the corner and talk because the conversation didn't have to be "nice". The conversation wove through other conversations for over one and a half hours.

The artistic director kept notes of the conversation.

AD: Are you needing a cigarette because you have this sinking feeling like I have that Glass and Cohen just went to Broadway?

AM: Oh my god what was that? The five cycles...and so?! I just didn't hear the voices. It was...well Cohen came out as king didn't he?! Glass hit it with the soloists but working with Cohen's words...well he just lost it didn't he?!

He's just churning out the same old na na ni na na na, na na ni na na na, chunk, chunk, chunk. It's like he's stuck in Koyaanisquatsi land na na ni na na na.

There was none of the violence, or eroticism or spiritual...no collision. That thing of collision just wasn't there. Glass just flattened it. What about the staging, what did you think about that?

AD: Well for me it was all over the shop. And I just became increasingly mad at all the Broadway flourishes – that thing, that thing I'll just call the Sondheim singing technique that shoves everything up into the nasal resonators so what you sing is a kind of "talk" or "speak" at the same time. I hate what Sondheim has done to singing. He's taken the music and poetic out of the sung voice and whacks in its place "just tell the goddam story" stuff.

So for me that's what they did to Cohen. Unbelievable. And then that combined with the fat vibrato of one of the singers...And all those Broadway flourishes of gesture what were they doing there? And do

you know what – about a third of the way through the work I had a terrible thought. And what you've just said perhaps confirms it.

AM: Go on say it

AD: It's got to do with the staging. I was so mad with the Broadway form of the singing that I started trying to figure out what metaphor might have propelled the design and then it hit me. That backlit wall – you know – with the montage of Cohen's ironic self portraits and dodgy nudes – and it had those black horizontals and verticals and then the central "panel" of changing images. I suddenly thought "Oh no don't tell me. It's stained Glass!".

AM: You are outrageous!

AD: It was Cohen as king of the words and Glass not coping with the implications – that collision you're talking about that he avoided time and time again and then that saccharine singing over the top. It was a terrible thing to think because I couldn't get it out of my head and nothing they did on stage, apart from the violin and the oboe solos, allowed me to forget it. Do you think it was all meant to be incredibly ironic?

AM: Well you know I didn't engage with the work until The Nights of Santiago and irony, you know, we're not stupid, we get it. And with Cohen there's always a bit of irony but he puts it into the words all those ballads, and love poems, and limericks, and autobiographical bits and spiritual meditations there's a bit of irony tucked into some of them but then anyway it was all squashed by the Glass repetition so it wasn't ironically worked – you know it was turned into a sort of blah blah.

AD: Let's look at what the stage director has to say and about the design and what Cohen's indications were.

We read the program together:

AM: Well that just tells us what bits or elements she put into it not how she attempted to bring them together apart from you know "minimalist staging".

Oh ok she's a choreographer. So maybe she was just looking at the movement stuff. But even that was over the top wasn't it – all that walking around.

AD: Yes and then there was that moment of "poised seating" by the two female voices. About the delivery for the Book of Longing Cohen says "just say the words". What a shame they didn't listen to that.

AM: And the costumes represent normal clothes that the performers would have chosen for themselves.

AD: That's not very flattering. That's not minimalism it's realism. And Broadway Sondheim voice work isn't minimalist "just saying the words", it's a style, and that huge rear lit back wall of Cohen's sketches... Maybe it's all sort of stuck in a nostalgia? Or perhaps it's everyone being very precious and nice to each other and no one daring to tread on the others' toes and say "excuse me but I think it would be really pleasant if we could turn down the vibrato a bit there and that Los Vegas exit there and Mr Glass would you mind remaining seated at your piano please and whilst we're at it let's all just wear muted grey scale clothing – in fact let's just say the words so that we can hear how they collide and weave with Mr Glass's composition."

AM: Oh god – that's it in a nutshell. You've nailed it. I want to see it like that.

And with Leonard Cohen on stage just saying his words.
Let's have a drink?

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