

**'ANAMNESIS: GHOSTS IN THE MACHINE'**  
**CRITICAL REVIEW BY MEGAN SPENCER**



ANAMNESIS – Synopsis: “A collaboration between video/installation artist Sabina Maselli and renowned musician and composer Erkki Veltheim, Anamnesis uses multi media to explore reminiscence. Sabina and Erkki use film, field recordings, live sound mixing and performance to create an immersive 3 part work where film and sound sculpt rituals and recollections associated with an old hospital.”

This Seedpod was spooky. No doubt about it. We entered a darkened room with not much source light, only enough really to find our chairs, sit down, and wait quietly. There seemed to be ghosts in the room – how many? Looking around it was hard to see who was an audience member, and who was a performer. It was that dark. But an effective way to set up a strange, palpable atmosphere and anticipation for the show.

As it turned out, there were only two performers (see above). A woman dressed in a scarlet dress seats herself at the 'head' of the room, our 'ICU' bunker located beneath the old Castlemaine hospital, our venue and the site for the artists' artistic exploration. (They had also been there for a week, concocting this show that used the space so well).

On a chair, next to a lamp and a DVD projector, she reads. In front of her is a large sheet of gauze onto which the projections begin – as do a series of voices, leading eventually to a chorus/cacophony. The room in which we sit is projected onto a big sheet of 'hospital grade' gauze; stanzas about a woman's difficult experience are read out, firstly, perhaps, by our woman in red, then different stories by other women, who don't sound very happy. Although their voices are in monotone, they all sound trapped in some kind of hellish place. Spewing forth from the speakers situated around the room.

This is how Anamnesis begins. We certainly snap to attention. The images on that gauze sheet are stark, poetic and unsettling. And the human figure behind us, reading, is mirrored by a ghostly version of herself in the projection, which takes in other images, overlaid, from some kind of unearthly realm. It's cardiac 'unrest'.

Next we treated to a strange violin performance; two violins are suspended from the ICU roof off to the side of the main seating area. Between them is metres of fishing wire which acts as both its suspension and a lengthy violin string. Veltheim – dressed in a maestro-esque tux – moves into view, from the shadows. He plays that long string with fingers and bow, making that wire and the instruments wail and scream, processed as the sound was through a series of effects. It gets under our skin.

He moves to the operating table set up and lit in the centre of the room, behind the gauze. More disconcerting projections – this time of grisly x-rays and internal images - more disorienting light flashes, another violin out of context. A dead violin lies on the table. The ‘doctor’ (Veltheim) attempts to re-animate the sick/dead violin – to ‘bring the patient back to life’ – by making it produce some seriously sick noises. It screams, kicks and howls under his fingers, moving across the strings in unnatural ways. Eventually he props it on his shoulder like a baby, breathing life into it further by drawing a bow across its heavily taxed strings. The sound it makes tells us that it’s no longer a violin that’s for sure; but it is alive, somehow.

While the woman in red washes and lurks in the hospital bed behind him, Veltheim then ‘answers’ the first episode with his own stark, pitiable story through the speakers, and projected onto the screen. A man who looks just like him sits in a stark room, seated at a rickety table, swigging wine and tearing at a loaf of bread which he wolfs down. Is he hungry or just trying to make himself sick? Veltheim mirrors that in performance to the side of the room, with the same props.

In the end we go back to where we started with the chair, the woman in red, and a plaintive soundtrack that wanes like the tide after reaching crescendo. The two shadowy figures – who have come and gone throughout the 40-minute piece – now also recede, back into the shadows from whence they came. The room is now... empty. Only our own thoughts and feelings can occupy it.

Alone in the dark we are left to ponder not so much what just happened, but how our senses have reacted to the ‘stimuli’ we were just exposed to. Surround sound, tormented human voices, a screeching instrument, fragments of narrative, specific light sources, disturbing/poetic medical journal-esque image projections... And the space, the vast cavernous underground space it all took place in – you couldn’t escape the effects of it either.

Yes it was like being at a Berlin art happening. Hurrah for that. Seriously – we need more performances as carefully choreographed and deftly constructed as this, in our regional art spaces. For the health of our regional art culture.

It was no use trying to rationally figure out the narrative, or ‘what was going on’ during Anamnesis. Logic doesn’t work in shows like this. “Thanks for the medical memories..” is about as close as you’ll get.

The use of the space was perfect. The performances – as ‘ghosts’, or humans barely there, traces of people – spot on. The images evoked scenes that may have well taken place in reality of the many patients who had been through the various wards and eras of that hospital building. Or their minds, somehow warped/affected by their experiences. It all worked.

My only criticism; I wanted to *feel* more than just my senses reacting sporadically – it might perhaps have been an even more fully-realised ‘happening’, had the emotional

realm of these 'ghosts' been brought more to the fore somehow. Feeling spooked, intrigued, disturbed - it *was* engaging, fun, and kept my interest for the duration. In the end though, I craved further immersion – into the ghostly characters perhaps, however ethereal that Maselli and Veltlheim were exploring. To have been able to 'walk a mile in' these ghosts shoes, more deeply.

To have shed a tear for these characters with which we had just spent the previous 40+ minutes - figuratively lamenting their lives in the shadows, in the speakers, performances and projections - might have taken Anamnesis to a deeper, more profound level.

I was three quarters under water. The emotional side of this show might have immersed me fully under that hard-worked-for water line... Next time perhaps.