

**'THE DARK ROOM / THE LIGHT BOX'
CRITICAL RESPONSE BY MEGAN SPENCER**



As the title might suggest, this Seedpod was divided into two distinct halves; the former was formal, immersive, dreamlike and carried out in the near-dark of Punctum's ICU underground performance/installation space.

The latter took place after the performance in Punctum's 'White Space'. Although defined as an 'installation' by the artists, it was more informal, and a bit of a participatory 'think tank' or feedback session, whereby the principal three artists asked us to answer a series of questions (in notebooks provided), have a cup of tea, and have a quiet chat about what we'd just witnessed/experienced next door.

the dark room

An immersive experience it was, courtesy of low lighting, with the space sonically awash in cyclical drones, and punctuated by slow-moving, shadowy figures who danced between the light and the dark.

Lighting designer Stephen Henderson pushed our eyes to the extent of their visibility spectrum. We were silently invited to follow - and distinguish - the movement in the room of the two performers, John Willis and Carmen Maddison, all within strategically-placed, extremely-low lighting, controlled from the desk in the corner, by sound artist Justin Bull.

The light sources manifested as lanterns on the floor, a moving torch waved over a performer as she scaled a fence, and dim, and orange spheres seeping into the floor like puddles of light, with the figures moving through or around them. (It was almost as if the light seeped *upwards* onto the surface concrete from some kind of source below, like water flooding upwards from a torrential underground river.)

Towards the end of the performance, it was as if John's body was glued by the thin veil of light that followed him, as he rolled his way cross a concrete car park wall. Hooded, be-skirted and druid-like, he became a shadow, almost velcroed to the wall, in spite of his struggle to break free of it. Such was the use of the light in this instance, it was as if the light held him to the bricks.

Then there were the fluros, which flickered on irregularly, to reveal our performers, this time in full view. Firstly Carmen, sat at a desk, suggesting she might be blind and reading a Braille book with her fingers. Later John stood atop this desk, silently and mutely addressing an imaginary flock. Carmen - were you reading or looking

while you read the Braille? John - were you listening or looking while you looked out from your pulpit? I enjoyed silently asking them these questions as I watched.

They then appeared conjoined, again in that ugly white fluro light, looking back out at us, searching again for the thing that eluded them. "What for?" we asked ourselves? Hadn't they found the light that they had been searching for in 'the dark room'? But now it was as if, dissatisfied, John & Carmen yearned to escape back into the dark, so they could begin their search all over again.

As far as the ear could handle, Justin Bull's electronically generated drones, natural atmos's and metallic sounds emanated from his corner set up of laptops and mixers; he played/mixed the soundtrack live from his laptop, mixing natural sounds (such as waves and metal objects) with 'artificial' drones and atmospheres, synced to the 'dancers' and their movements around the space.

His constantly morphing soundtrack floated around our ears, courtesy of the paired stereo speakers ("sham surround" as he later described it). While the emergence and disappearance of the light within the space was certainly linked to the performers and their movements (it seemed as if they were ever-searching for the light, *the elusive light!*), the soundtrack too called to them, aiding and abetting their quest to be somewhere in between light and dark. "Lead us into the light". The soundtrack often led them into darkness.

Only once did the performers vocalise, all three, at the very end, chanting in the half light, "I don't know how big I am".

So, as the artists would have it, 'the dark room' performance presented a unique realm for observers to inhabit, a space that was not only 'in between' luminosity and darkness, but also: movement and stillness, thinking and feeling, the physical and non-physical (ie space), body and mind, silence and sound, visible and invisible, and the natural and the artificial - that 'grey area' of 'the in between', that which cannot be named because as soon as you do, it becomes something else.

With clearly a lot of focus, planning, and carefully considered design and choreography, the artists certainly achieved their objective (to create and explore the notion of the 'in between'), and gave us an interesting, palpable experience which was at once immersive and - as it turns out! - interactive.

Unwittingly, we, the audience, sat in the paths of the actors as they walked backwards from the first light source, as the piece opened. Slowly and silently, those of us 'in the way' removed ourselves (and our chairs), one by one from the potential collision course. It was as if we too had been choreographed into the piece. I later found out that the artists - having only rehearsed by themselves in the space, and unaware that we would perhaps position our chairs in the performers' way as they moved around - did not anticipate this might happen! A happy accident it seems! My impression was that they *had*, and were factoring us all into the work.

At one point, Carmen knelt alongside one of the seated audience members, who was

still unwittingly 'in the way', as if she would rest her head on the woman's lap, as an interactive part of the show. Proximity at last! That would have made for a lovely/extraordinary moment. Perhaps this is one element the performers might consider, in developing the piece, and evolving their investigations further? To actively make us participants in the performance? It might add another poetic layer...

To finish, John headed out the door silently beckoning us all to follow. It was a poetic moment – a sweet end to a graceful performance – and we all implicitly understood that we needed to leave the space. What might have made it a little more seamless was if someone had been waiting outside to guide us to the next 'destination', as there was a little confusion around what to do next and where to go, for those unfamiliar with the complex. That as a finish to the performance, rather than John having to 'break character' and speak – to tell us about 'the white room' "installation" and the directions to get there..!

the light box

Social, fun, organic, with plenty of talk and lots of light; this was the polar opposite of 'the dark room', a fitting counterpoint to what had come before. The intensity of the performance piece was balanced by the creation of a casual, social space, to which we – as we eventually discovered – were invited to contribute ideas and further thoughts about 'the dark room'.

The only feedback I might offer here is for someone – perhaps other than the performers, clearly exhausted by their highly focused performances! - to have formally greeted everyone, and let them know in no uncertain terms, what was being asked of them in this 'installation' space, as the second part of this artistic investigation, if that's indeed what it was intended to have been. For me, it was a little unclear.

Even though John had - as we were exiting the ICU - called oncoming 'the white room' another 'installation', I wasn't so sure of its purpose, as I had been formerly, of 'the dark room'.

It's not a 'deal breaker' by any means; but for a future show in a more formal performance setting, perhaps finishing Part II with a little more consolidation or direction, might be worth considering.

