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REVIEW

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*Jasmin Vardimon Company**'Justitia'**May 2009**London, Peacock Theatre**by Emma Stevenson*

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An extravaganza of impressive physicality, a formidable set design and both harrowing and hilarious theatre; Jasmine's dance theatre makes you stand up and listen, and *Justitia* is no exception.

The story revolves around the death of a man who has been killed in self defence, murder or accidentally by his best friend's wife. The various options are played out in front of the audience and as 'jurors', it is us who are left to decide the verdict. Clever use is made of this relationship - just before the interval, the lawyer finishes her speech directly addressing the 'jury', informing us we will break for 20 minutes when we can consider what we have seen.

On a grand revolving stage of three segments, the action takes place largely in a courtroom and a living room. The courtroom makes ingenious use of chairs with legs slotted into holes in the wall, to store when not in use and for bodies to climb, dangle from, seductively dance around and diagonally slot into. The change of atmosphere through the lighting and different rooms is incredibly effective, as the audience is taken to all extremes of the boisterous and slapstick to the quiet and disturbing. Overall, the revolving stage – operated largely by the dancers – gives the impression of a group of people stuck in a world that they are trying to make sense of and constantly being moved through.

From the start, the magically-lit typist sets the scene, demonstrating the power of words to not only tell a story, but like the stenographer, decide someone's fate. *Justitia* is much more aligned to a play with more use of text through Vardimon's close collaboration with scriptwriter Rebecca Lenkewicz. It is often a tricky balance with displayed text and movement and for the most part Jasmine



Vardimon gets it spot on. Only a few times, did my senses feel stretched as I tried to take in both the written word 'typed' on a screen and the lithe and seductive movements, for instance, of the mesmerising Christine Gouzelis.

The same applies to the theatrical element of the piece. More often than not, the movement phrases and acting worked incredibly well together, though at times there was a sense that there was too much going on unnecessarily. The combination worked best for me when the movement literally spoke a response. For instance, in one of the group therapy sessions where the characters are working through their guilt, the therapist asks, 'So, who would like to go first?'- the whole group leaps as one onto the floor like fish trying to escape a net, triggering an empathetic uproar of laughter. For dancers, many not trained in theatre, their acting was strong and convincing, particularly Mafalda Deville, who plays the headstrong lawyer and group therapy client and Paul Blackman, the victim and therapist who echoed Tom Cruise's character in *Magnolia*. YunKrung Song who played the challenging role of the accused was also arresting, and did not hold back with her at times violent and overtly sexual character.



Mafalda Deville and Christine Gouzelis in *Justitia*
© Dave Morgan



Amidst these other art forms, the energetic dance phrases were impressive, with an emphasis on the angular, knee work on the floor and acrobatic leaps. Playing on video technologies of freeze frame, rewind and slow motion, there are several extremely physical scenes bordering on acrobatics and martial arts. In a highly effective one, the two main players are engaged in a 'Crouching, Tiger'-like fight, with other performers in backstage-black carrying them through the air and allowing them to enact super-human manoeuvres. Clever and tightly executed, the audience was wrapped and in hysterics, applauding the scene once over.

Atmospherically and entertainment-wise, *Justitia* is a huge success. Emotionally though I did feel somewhat empty by the end, and wondered whether the attempts to involve the audience emotionally had been too forced and overstated. In the programme Jasmine refers to 'feeling disappointed that it is seemingly easier for

literature or film to emotionally involve people than dance or theatre". *Justitia* left me reflecting on this subjective statement as there are several dance pieces that have stirred me deeply. Whilst watching dance may be a different emotional experience from that experienced with a narrative film, personally this is what makes it unique and valuable, and definitely no less satisfying.

Nevertheless, the spectacular set design, acting and discipline of the dancers was a complete joy to watch. Our position as jurors allowed the audience insight into the messiness of perceptions and how fragile the truth can be. Instead of arriving at a clear verdict, I left feeling that any one of the realities presented could be true, and perhaps it is this non-judgmental nature of Vardimon's work that makes it so powerful.

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