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REVIEW

ballet.*magazine**Ea Sola**'The White Body'**February 2009**Hong Kong, Lyric Theatre**by Natasha Rogai*

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*A version of this review previously appeared in the South China Morning Post.*

Ea Sola's *The White Body* is a new 80 minute work jointly commissioned by the HK Arts Festival and bodies in France, Holland and New Zealand.

A Vietnamese choreographer based in France, Sola is known for her avant garde work including pieces examining the Vietnam War. This time she has chosen as theme Etienne de la Boétie's 1549 philosophical text *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*. De la Boétie's argument is that tyranny exists only because human beings allow themselves to be oppressed – if they refuse to do the tyrant's bidding through

non-violent resistance, his power will end. Written when the author was a 19 year old law student, the treatise is well argued if somewhat naive and remains startlingly modern.

According to the programme notes, Sola wanted to show that these ideas are relevant today to all countries and cultures. The problem is that philosophical concepts cannot be expressed effectively through movement – this is something that really does need words. Sola has kept the words - two people at the side of the stage take turns to recite the original French text with English and Chinese surtitles projected above. (Curiously, chunks of the French were missing from the English version and presumably the Chinese as well.)

On the stage itself three dancers (two male, one female) move around behind a semi-transparent plastic curtain which largely obscures what they are doing. Occasionally they move in front of the curtain, usually to perform what appears to be a violent epileptic fit, possibly caused by the hideously loud and oppressive electronic music which accompanies these passages. (This is the sort of music you probably need to have consumed Ecstasy to enjoy.) At one point the female



dancer stands still, applies lipstick and smiles blankly at the audience. Then the two male dancers appear and hold up a packet of cigarettes and a can of coca-cola in a heavily significant manner. Presumably these are all symbols of “voluntary servitude” in a capitalist world.

By this time I was longing to liberate myself from the voluntary servitude of watching the performance but being there to review, had to stay until the end.

And what happens at the end? The plastic curtain is removed and a section of the text is projected on the back of the stage in a succession of different languages. Finally, in what was obviously intended as a crushingly profound climax a naked white plastic dummy is placed on a trolley and wheeled solemnly across the stage by one of the dancers while the other two stand on the trolley staring fixedly at the audience.

Experimentalism is vital for the arts – and it is good to see international arts festivals support it. However, while experimental work doesn’t have to be pretty, polished or easy to watch, it does need real ideas and inventiveness. Unfortunately this piece is bereft of anything resembling dance or choreography and does nothing to illustrate or illuminate de la Boétie’s thoughts. It might be more bearable if Sola and her team didn’t take themselves so seriously – there is not a shred of humour - and expect the audience to do so too. As far as I’m concerned *The White Body* is a case where, like the white dummy, the Emperor has no clothes on.

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