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REVIEW

ballet.*magazine**Tanja Liedtke**'Twelfth Floor'**March 2009**London, Queen Elizabeth Hall**by Graham Watts*

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I knew little of Tanja Liedtke when I saw her coruscating performance in DV8's *'Just for Show'* at the National Theatre in November 2005, but it was immediately clear that here was a woman with an overflowing bag of talents. By then, her ideas for *'Twelfth Floor'* had already been scoped, a year earlier, in the first of two five-week workshops at the Australian Choreographic Centre; after *'Just for Show'*, Liedtke returned to Canberra for the second part of her ACC Fellowship to finish her first full-length independent work. Just a few months later, it won her the Australian Dance Award for Outstanding Achievement in Choreography. The wretchedness of her accidental death in August 2007 not only cut horribly short the prospect of a wonderful life, but also robbed us all of a whole shopping mall full of creative goods.

What is left adds up to a repertory of little in quantity but great significance in content, lovingly co-ordinated by her Partner, Solon Ulbrich, who

– with great support from the Dance Touring Partnership - has realised their joint passion of presenting *'Twelfth Floor'* here in the UK, their other adopted home. In this endeavour, Sol has been joined by three of the dancers who started out on the journey at those first sessions in Canberra, almost 5 years ago; and another (Joshua Tyler) stayed on as a dramaturgical advisor. This UK tour brings back together all the team whose collaboration finished the work to such acclaim in 2006.

It is fascinating dance theatre of immense power, mixing light and dark in quick-fire turns; compelling, funny, intense, peculiar and harrowing, all in the same breath. At



the end of the week that Flemming Flindt passed away, I couldn't help but see some artistic similarities with *'The Lesson'*, particularly in the nurturing of insanity within an institutionally confined space and the shocking explosion of sexual violence that ensues, leaving a room littered with disturbed furniture and other detritus, and – most of all – ending with a feeling that it may all be about to begin again.

There is a lot of deconstruction technique in Liedtke's concept, not least that the work has begun when the audience files in. Three men inhabit this confined space and although the room seems familiar with its green walls and single door, it remains unclear just what the institution might be. Two of them engage in some bored combative games whilst a third mysterious figure with a walking cane sticks mainly to the shadows, scribbling in chalk on the walls. As soon as the audience is settled there is a stark change of pace as improvisation is quickly replaced by a strongly choreographed duet for the two competing men. They – Anton (no surname given) and Paul White - are the carriers of the first part of the work, impressive in their very different physicality; Anton is short and powerfully-built, but seems contradictorily nerdy in heavy black-framed spectacles; Paul – who clearly came to this project after having worked with Liedtke on *'Just for Show'* – is tall and remarkably athletic, although again this is contradicted by the fag-end glued to his lips in the opening sequences. The smaller man seems constantly to want to challenge his bigger room-mate and a lot of the work's humour comes from the physical contrast between them. The third male occupant of the room from the outset is Julian Crotti, an actor who had never danced before joining the cast for this work. The testimonial for Liedtke's talent in spotting just the right mix for her cast is in the decision to recruit Crotti; undancerly in his physical size, he has a remarkable ability to move with grace and meaning and his duet with Kristina Chan, where he continually traces the outline of her body in chalk as they move in harmony around the stage, is the emotional heart of the work.



Kristina Chan in Tanja Liedtke's *Twelfth Floor*
© Chris Herzfeld

Chan and Amelia McQueen are the two women thrust into the macho world of the 'Twelfth Floor'. Although there is no specific narrative, it seems that Chan is a new inmate and McQueen a strangely-uniformed figure of authority. This imagery is enhanced by the routinely regimented, disciplined (almost balletic) steps that she engages to enter and leave the room. Her presence also reduces the inmates to a homogenous trembling, jellified group, hovering in the corner of the room. Chan quickly becomes the central figure; in my mind, a symbol of the freedom of human spirit within such repressed circumstances, as evidenced by her choice of the most unlikely inmate (Crotti) for her intimate liaison.

Although there is no plot, as such, there is an artistic dénouement, which I won't spoil further, other than to say that I strongly recommend that you don't take your eyes away from this hour-long work because you are bound to miss something of significance.

There is nothing that can be written that could ever compensate for a life ended so early, with so very much more to give, but 'Twelfth Floor' (together with 'construct' and other earlier, shorter works) will clearly live on to remind us of what a phenomenal talent this young woman was; and that, I suppose, is more than most of us will ever have.



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