

Embracing profusion

Eleanor Brickhill

Embrace: an immodest green is the second in a series of ongoing exchanges between De Quincey Co and Indian artists. It builds on a 2003 residency with collaborator Santanu Bose, choreographer and the director of the Monirath Theatre in Kolkata (Calcutta). The main structural and conceptual source is the *Natyashastra*, an ancient Indian treatise on artistic practice. Seeing this work for the second time, I found it warmer, richer, and the audience participation less formal. The performers became hosts, inviting us into a strange and exquisite culture.

We enter a scape, either city or elsewhere—a profusion of events, things, a chaos of bits and pieces: garishly coloured Buddha lights all in a row, a profusion of small flashing video monitors repeating people and places over and over, a huge pile of earth, a box of disembodied blonde wigs, large bowls and jugs of milk, cushions piled on stairs.

The performers are chopping vegetables and spices, a beautiful array of colour, and we're invited to kneel and talk with them instead of distantly observing. A huge cauldron of dhal is being prepared by Santanu Bose on the stage. There's a sense of great potential, a depth of generosity, of boundless sensation, of a fullness as well as a coldness and strangeness. The sparse text (some of which is selected from the Rig Veda) seems heightened and full of portent-of what we are not certain. At one point Victoria Hunt swings a brazier and the smoke is potent and atmospheric as it begins to cloud the scene. Candle making is a sensual experience, rolling up trouser legs, rolling the cloth over the calf, laying the wick in a dish of oil and at last lighting the flame.

It's a durational performance, but I don't want to leave in case I miss something. In a way, it's a story about Kolkata and the tremendous profusion of life in all its extremes. Not linear, but timeless and cyclical. As Tess de Quincey says, a story of "magnificent discordance...defiant skirmishing...extraordinary acceptance."

Having your feet washed in milk is by invitation. Then there's dancing in long blonde wigs around a pile of earth, a burlesque of Westernised music and movement in an absurd Bollywood culture. One memorable scene sees a dancer reclining amid the dirt, slight impulses twitching through her body, both a travesty of seduction and the real thing.

Video images are fast and flashing: masks, gods, icons, poverty and richness. At one point the performers create a fascinating duet between the seating blocks, of strange marionettes, vile cries, expression taken to an extreme, almost hideous and open-mouthed like a cry, or a great breath, or a gasp of surprise. This is followed by dissolute undressing, and video slo-mo of decrepit, mange-ridden dogs.

Throughout there is a constant bafflement of images, sumptuous fabric, dress, sensuous aroma, all within the same scape of starving dogs and vultures fighting for offal. We leave strangely and quietly with multiple screens showing, as a fugue, a dog riddled with vermin, chewing on its own body.

De Quincey Co, *Embrace: an immodest green*, performers Santanu Bose, Kristina Harrison, Victoria Hunt; video Sam James, sound composition Shannon O'Neill, installation and lighting Richard Manner; Performance Space, Sydney, May 27