

# THE AGE

Saturday, December 5, 2009

## Slow-mo theatre proves riveting

THEATRE

### EMBRACE: GUILT FRAME

La Mama, Carlton Courthouse

December 3-13

**Martin Bell** Reviewer

WATCHING grass grow is a phrase typically used to deride a particular activity as too tedious to endure. It is an image that came to mind while watching *Embrace: Guilt Frame*, which invites the audience to stare for 40 minutes at two performers' faces as they silently express a range of emotions, moving with infinitesimal transformations from one state to another.

It is glacial in its momentum – yet when one considers the miracle of nature that grass does indeed grow in all its verdant glory, the analogy takes on a deeper resonance.

For in its powerful exploration of the mystery and motivation of our moods and emotions, this performance is as riveting as any action movie, and a lot more satisfying.

Created by Tess De Quincey and Peter Snow, *Embrace: Guilt Frame* draws on the eight emotional states listed in *The Natyashastra*, an ancient Indian treatise on performing arts practice, these being: Love, Anger, Joy, Sorrow, Awe, Disgust, Heroism and Serenity.

Within the borders of a gilt frame, roughly 1.5 metres by one metre, the two performers go on an emotional journey for 40 minutes.

Although they never directly engage with each other, the two seem paradoxically connected, and the audience inevitably construct their own narratives to explain the various tableaux that are generated.

It requires exceptional discipline and control as they move their bodies at the rate of about one millimetre a second. Chins, teeth, eyes, eyebrow, all take on significance at given moments.

The tension is palpable, and when a hand or limb randomly cuts into the space with sudden movement, the sense of release is almost overwhelming.

The performers are supported by a sensitive lighting design by Travis Hodgson, which conjures up any number of painterly gestures and palettes, from Caravaggio's gorgeous hues, to Bacon's fleshy sensuality, to Rembrandt's haunting black spaces of the soul.

Michael Toisuta's clever score of massed metronomes (an homage to Gyorgi Ligeti) count out the seconds in percussive inexorability, a great foil to the otherwise amorphous sense of time being played out by the performers.

After it is all over, De Quincey and Snow come out from behind their screen to share the experience with the audience, and discuss interpretations. It is a generous gesture, and makes the experience all the more rewarding.