

REVIEWS

REVIEW: FLESH & BONE (SYDNEY ART QUARTET WITH KAGE)

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by Jaqi Pascoe on October 20, 2017

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★★★★½ A stunning, dreamlike exploration of gender combining dance, music and pasta.

The Yellow House, Sydney

October 19, 2017

KAGE Physical Theatre – powerhouse creative couple Kate Denborough and Gerard Van Dyck – celebrates its 20th anniversary this year with a season of their 2013 work *Flesh and Bone*, in an intimate venue with music performed live by the Sydney Art Quartet.

The Yellow House, once a legendary counter-culture arts hub, is now a very proper white cube gallery, the deep colours of the entrance the merest nod to its psychedelic past. The clientele, too, has moved up market, and a well-heeled and elegant crowd settle in a few rows of temporary seating for this salon performance.



Gerard Van Dyck and Kate Denborough of KAGE. Photograph © Lachlan Woods

Before us to one side stands a table with a white cloth, strewn with plates, champagne glasses, lemons and napkins. Sheet music is scattered across the floor. On the other side of the performance area, a dinghy sits beached against a pile of rocks, draped with lifejackets, more music, and assorted paraphernalia.

Denborough and Van Dyck enter, dressed in black, each carrying a musician fireman-style. The musicians are inanimate, somnolent, dressed by Prada in formal black, but barefoot. Denborough and Van Dyck lower them gently onto the chairs, bring their instruments, set them up ready to play. Are they dolls, friends, musical symbols? Cellist and artistic director James Beck revives and strikes the first note.

The Sydney Art Quartet's seamless and sensitive playing makes glorious work of the soundtrack of short pieces by Philip Glass, Michael Nyman, Elena Kats-Chernin, Astor Piazzolla and others. But the focus of the performance is irresistibly the complex, lyrical, at times visceral interaction between the members of KAGE.

The longevity of the Denborough-Van Dyck partnership is testament to their skills, and the depth and ease of their rapport underpins this powerful work. Denborough is the clear leader in the pair, and from their first entrance I am struck by her charisma: it's not just her dancer's carriage, or the short, peaked, peroxide-blond hair, high cheekbones and luminous Annie Lennox gaze; it's the faint air of fatigue risen above, of suffering reworked into something elevated and inspiring, sustaining.

She leaves the stage and re-enters with four enormous black helium balloons. Anchoring them to the table for the moment, Van Dyck opens a bottle of champagne. They toast each other, and since there is nothing on the table to eat but lemons, they eat lemons. In the close quarters of this space, we can taste the challenge of it ourselves. What ensues in the next hour is both a contest and an avowal of love: a search for more intimacy, and more – a demonstration of difference and similarity, interdependence and independence, knowledge and mystery.

At one point, audience members mutter about Denborough's physical strength as she manhandles the apparently unconscious Van Dyck around the stage and into the boat. Panting audibly, she removes her negligee, straps on a lifejacket. Van Dyck is still unresponsive. Somehow she gets him out of his shirt and pants and into a lifejacket. When he wakes they are nestled together in the boat.

She hands him a book, then another, her beautiful, strong, expressive face lit with some unspoken thought. She covers his eyes with his hand, whispers in his ear. He does the same to her; she suppresses a laugh; they seem to have come to an agreement. They rig a clothesline, hang their clothes. She hands him a sheet of music and he cuts out a pair of paper dolls, which pleases her. Suddenly she gets out of the boat and goes over to the musicians. He follows, stands watching her, waiting for whatever she might do, accepting.

She brings the balloons and they dance with them tied to their limbs, two each. Their movement style is founded in contact improvisation, leaning and falling and catching, entwining and entangling. The balloons float above them like doubts, like worries; they ignore them. Eventually the couple sink to the floor, and without warning Van Dyck bursts the first balloon, then the rest. The last one is filled with rose petals that shower them in momentary romance.

But their partnership is grounded in something much more real. They strip off their black shorts and shirts; Van Dyck now in white underwear, Denborough in a white singlet and red pants. Denborough brings bread and wine to the musicians; Van Dyck opens a large can of crushed tomatoes. She steps on his back to reach a roll of photographer's paper, pulls it down to make a backdrop. There is a moment of tension: she is irritable; he is frustrated. He picks up the can of tomatoes and throws the entire contents over her, then takes her hand. The room fills with the smell of canned tomatoes, but we're all thinking of menstrual blood. Now Van Dyck is the strong one. They tire themselves out, entreating, supporting, wrestling with each other.

But when life gives you a mess of tomatoes, make pasta. Van Dyck pulls out a little pasta machine, bolts it onto the side of the boat and, unbelievably, produces a lump of dough which they proceed to push through the wrangle until they have raw spaghetti. Denborough has retrieved plates, wine and bread from the musicians' table, and – much to the comic horror of the audience – salvaged the slop of tomatoes from the paper floor. Somehow it all goes onto the plates in a more or less recognisable form, and they serve the musicians and themselves. The cellist bravely eats a forkful; the quartet drink their wine. Denborough and Van Dyck sit in the boat and eat, drinking from the bottle. He puts a foil blanket round her shoulders and opens an umbrella. They put the inedible pasta aside and munch, companionably, on a little more bread and wine. A resolution of sorts has been reached, and finally we are allowed to applaud.