

Messy Narratives of Childhood

The Psychologist, 5 March 2020, Isobel Todd

Much questionable cleaning up goes on during the latest psychologically punishing piece from Vincent Dance Theatre, which focuses this time on young people and the care system. At various points, the dancers bring on brooms, and sweep away at the piles of paperwork that keep collecting on the stage. Sponges and a wet rag are used to erase marks from a chalkboard backdrop, the sponge snaking its way through a child's rudimentary timeline, the wet rag whipping violently at a line drawing of 'home'. All the while, a doll baby – the eerily still centre of the frenetic performance – lies discarded on the floor.

Informed by real-life testimony, this intergenerational dance-theatre piece is the latest in a series, from the socially engaged Brighton company, about the impact of the adult world on young lives. The last, *The Art of Attachment* [which I [reviewed for The Psychologist in 2018](#)], was a collaboration with women in recovery from substance misuse, some of whom had been separated from their children. In *Loco Parentis* wants to shift the focus on to the stories of the children themselves. An 11-year-old girl and a 13-year-old boy dance alongside adult performers Robert Clark, Aurora Lubos and Janusz Orlik.

In fact, many of the real voices we hear (on interview tapes that artistic director Charlotte Vincent was editing right up to this preview performance) are those of adults: clinicians, social workers, foster carers and adopters. You suspect Vincent's deep attachment to her ongoing research material plays some part in this, and the piece feels overlong and less structurally coherent than its predecessor.

But this strong adult presence and inconsistently sustained child voice also makes sense thematically. Early developmental trauma disrupts continuity of being. Disorganised attachment manifests in fragmented narrative. For many of these children, their story is precisely that they have no coherent story to tell. This is expressed in the questions the young girl repeats into a microphone, the stilted attempts of two caseworkers to tell why she is 'here' and no longer 'there', and the child interviewee who explains – apparently

unaware of the awful irony – that there are elements of his own early history that are not yet ‘age appropriate’ for him to hear.

A painful ambiguity is whether the adults are helping or hindering. Are they aiding the children in rebuilding their narratives or further impinging? Clearing up the mess, or messing them up more? This comes through in the post-show Q&A, as Vincent explains the direction of some current research towards supporting birth mothers to keep their children despite the risks, in order to avoid the child, ‘spending a lifetime trying to heal the primary wound’. There is a disconcerting slipperiness, too, to the way in which the performers shift between roles and age states. Adults come and go, come and go, while the man putting the boy through a series of violent lifts in one sequence is himself childlike and vulnerable in the next.

In *Loco Parentis* doesn’t forget that abuse is often cyclical. The boy who has been engaged in this violent duet later greets empty space with his fists aloft. Lubos’ brilliant early solo captures the cruel predicament of the birth mother, maternal instinct battling with her own trauma history in every twitching muscle. Nor does the piece entirely foreclose hope: at one point the girl retrieves the baby doll from the floor and tenderly begins to clean it.

But I am left with mixed feelings about the climactic scene, depicting the point of no return in the children’s journey in to care. We see an exuberant family gathering descend into alcohol and cocaine-fuelled violence in gratuitous slow motion. The baby lies forgotten as dance music pounds, bottles smash, powder flies, and grimaces of anger or hysterical abandon twist into expressions of horror.

For me, it’s a moment when the virtuosity of the choreography and the dancers has an uncomfortable distancing effect. It feels stagey and a little judgey. But in the post-show discussion, a caseworker praises the verisimilitude of the scene: ‘We hear these stories’, she says. For her, the slick slow motion perfectly captures the experiences of birth families she has sat with in case conferences – the effect of seeing, ‘a piece of your life written up in notes and exchanged in emails...’

I wonder, though, why the company chose not to include a counterpoint – to put to movement, for instance, the moving testimony of the adoptive parent who describes, in such dance-like terms, how she responds to her new daughter’s rigid triggered states by ‘becom[ing] like water...’

‘I just keep going’, concludes her voice. What *In Loco Parentis* certainly conveys, with its arduous carousel of disordered and disrupted interactions, is the visceral emotional labour involved in surviving – and creating – home.

Isobel Todd is a Psychodynamic Counsellor and arts journalist based in Brighton.