

Motherland, The Point Eastleigh

Writing About Dance, 11 October 2012, Nicholas Minns

Life is a messy business, starting, as Charlotte Vincent does in *Motherland*, with periods. Aurora Lubos, elegantly dressed in black evening wear and high heels walks on to the bare, white stage with a bottle of red wine. She unscrews the top and slops it against the pristine backdrop at seat level: a dripping red splash. She puts down the bottle, hitches up her tight skirt and slides her back down the wall until she is sitting over the red stain. She remains there for a moment looking at us, challenging us to accept what she is representing. Soon after, an exhausted Andrea Catania walks in and collapses on the floor, like a bag from which the wind has been suddenly removed. Patrycja Kujawska walks across the back playing an elegy on her violin for the two women. It is a sequence that repeats throughout *Motherland*, Vincent's examination of 'the complex internal and external relationships that women have with their bodies, with their sense of self and with men.' The latter are represented a few seconds later by a carefree Greig Cooke who walks on with his bottle of wine, smiles at us as he unscrews the top and takes a swig before continuing on his way.

I heard a little of Vincent's pre-performance presentation in the theatre lobby by four young women reading and declaiming their hopes and determinations for their future growth. One of them mentioned a desire to be equal to men, to be respected in society for who she is. It reminded me of a quote attributed to Marilyn Monroe: women who seek to be equal to men lack ambition. In other words, if men and their example are simultaneously a benchmark of success and a target of criticism, being equal to men carries within it a paradox. In *Motherland*, however, Vincent has no truck with this paradox, destroying it in one blow by altering the creation myth: once Eve is with child, Adam is transformed into the serpent. In a form that is somewhere between a modern-day morality play and a cabaret, *Motherland*, written by Vincent and her co-writer Liz Aggiss, with the collaboration of dramaturg, Ruth Ben-Tovin, sees the sexual revolution from an unashamedly female point of view, and for men it is a wakeup call.

Vincent states in the program that Motherland is driven by sex, birth and death, though death takes up very little space compared to sex and birth. A principal leitmotif in the work is the association of female fertility with that of the land. The two are embodied by Lubos with a bellyful of earth hitched high up in her skirt that she empties on to the floor at intervals throughout the work: more mess. This earth becomes the land that Andrea Catania is toiling to nurture, like countless women around the world. At one point the entire cast joins in a ritual fertility dance to the accompaniment of Scott Smith on guitar singing Ready for Green. As Smith sings of 'sowing the seeds of joy' Cooke is screwing Catania on the ground. Making love might be stretching the imagination too far: the fertility cycle is in progress, but Catania is soon abandoned by Cooke, crawling off unnoticed to a corner of the stage next to a blackboard on which Cooke had written MOTHER in big letters. Vincent is not sparing on the irony.

Another, more urban illustration of the fertility cycle shows Lubos and Janusz Orlik arriving for a picnic, with a hamper and the Sunday paper. They relax on the grass, but instead of reading, Orlik takes prodigious amounts of cotton wool from the hamper and stuffs it under Lubos's dress to a high-decibel distress signal played by Alexandru Catona on a gong. Lubos screams in pain. Kujawska appears holding up a speaker through which we hear applause. Orlik stuffs more cotton wool into Lubos's expanding dress. She screams again and there is more applause, after which everybody takes a bow. Orlik's newspaper is now stained with blood. Lubos pushes away both Orlik and Catona (more canned applause) and she takes a solo bow. She kisses Orlik and runs off. The applause continues.

Although men are an integral part of the fertility cycle, their social role comes in for particular censure in Motherland. Consider the depiction of carefree Cooke when he pulls down his zip and knowingly extracts his...banana. He peels it and eats it with gusto: no need to look up Freud's interpretation. Retribution comes to Robert Clark when he opens his wooden box and pees into it; he carelessly closes the lid on his dick and screams in agony. Pulling out a blackened banana from his flies he begins to eat it, but loses his appetite.

Elsewhere, men are depicted as sleazy purveyors of sexual innuendo in the Manhood Music sequence, and generally as congenital misogynists who take advantage of women for their

own pleasure and gratification. Only the men dance in Motherland; the women don't have time. Cooke dances as if he is the master of his destiny, a charismatic charm offensive with his elaborate reverence and sleight of hand. After planting her in the earth he says excitedly to Catania: 'I'm in control. I'm here for you right now' after which he immediately abandons her. Only Clark is allowed any signs of compassion towards women. His duet with Lubos has a tenderness that is perhaps the one concession that men can behave with respect towards women. Not even this, however, can save the three men later from crawling like serpents through the earth on their way to hell.

Men playing women get more sympathetic treatment, as Orlik performs a drag routine that has Janowska applauding again. (When she attempts the same routine a little later, she ironically raises no laughter and no applause). Two men who play a rather privileged if tainted role in Motherland are Catona and Smith, the two-man band of troubadours, clowns and accomplished instrumentalists that adds both a lyrical and poignant element to the tableaux, making Vincent's uncompromising stance more palatable. What lends this polemic of the sexes an air of authority, however, is the introduction of two key characters: 12-year-old Leah Yeger, through whose eyes the world of men and women is filtered and absorbed, and 75-year-old Benita Oakley, whose accumulated experience provides a sense of perspective and dignity.

Yeger is the one who arrives at critical moments in Motherland to question her colleagues, and thus forces them (and us) to examine what they are doing and why. It is her simplicity and lack of antagonism to either sex that brings people together. She tames Clark, who protects her and it is she who signals a truce to the (hilarious) slow-motion battle of the sexes (in which Catona excels as a victim of the invincible Kujawska), and rallies everyone together for a rousingly beautiful rendition of Woodie Guthrie's children's song, Why Oh Why.

Oakley's contribution is based on her own experience. She begins her story lying on her side on the earth, with her head propped on a brown velvet pillow. Smith gives her a microphone and then accompanies her story on guitar with Catona on harmonica. She talks of her first pregnancy in 1956 and the difficulties she faced being unmarried. Lubos is making baby

gurglings into the microphone on the other side of the stage. As the baby girl is born prematurely, she is taken away from her mother until she becomes stronger; Oakley cannot stay with her. She sleeps in the open but visits her baby regularly to give milk, until she can take back her baby with her. Oakley is dignified and calm, and every word has the unadorned simplicity of truth. After she finishes her story, she crawls back with slow deliberation to stuff the cushion back in its box, and carries it off like a memory. The second part of her story occurs a little later. She outlines her mouth with imaginary lipstick, pulls out her long silver hair, remembering how beautiful she was (without realizing how beautiful she is), feeling her figure and stomach. She relates the births of her next two children, in 1957 and exactly twenty years later. Both daughters are in the audience.

The function of a morality play is not to preach as much as to encourage or actively promote reflection on our present condition. There is much to be done, and many pitfalls still to negotiate, like the relation between wanting to be attractive and becoming an object of attraction and confounding a product with its advertising values. As Yeger says at one point, 'It's not about the look; I'm a person.' The presence of Yeger prompts a reflection on the future and Oakley's story shows that what she has experienced has been happening for longer than we care to remember. The piece ends as it begins, with its gutsy cast of characters parading on to the stage, with the men looking a little the worse for wear. Have we learned anything from what we have seen? The ultimate success of *Motherland* depends on it.