

REVIEW: VINCENT DANCE THEATRE – VIRGIN TERRITORY – THE PLACE

London Dance, 7 November 2016, Josephine Leask

While there's a fair amount of literature about digital media's extensive contribution to the over-sexualisation of our culture, (feminists Susie Orbach, Natasha Walters, Ariel Levy) not many choreographers have tackled the issue of what's happening to young girls and boys as a result. In *Virgin Territory*, Charlotte Vincent, a refreshing feminist voice in dance today, creates a sequel to her show *Motherland* (2013) in which a young girl observed the gender politics of adults. With more of a focus on girls, *Virgin Territory* is a hard hitting feminist protest informed by case studies and Vincent's engagement with young people about what our society is doing to its teenagers.

As a prelude to *Virgin Territory*, there's an installation in the bar area at the Place. Created and teamed by members of the company, it displays through visual media and recorded interviews the response of teenage girls to topics such as sexting, celebrities that make them uncomfortable, what constructs female identity and reactions to porn. As some of the content in *Virgin Territory* is uncomfortable, the installation provides audience members with a quiet refuge to ponder these difficult themes or chat. One can design a protest T-shirt, construct an identity using miniature Russian Dolls or simply write one's thoughts

Once in the theatre, we are seated intimately on all four sides of the stage which is covered in fake grass. As adult performer Janusz Orlik points out, there is no escape. Welcome to the world of visual culture where the all seeing eye of digital technology captures every personal detail of our lives and makes it public.

What is remarkable about Vincent's choreography is that themes are communicated through highly effective physical and visual metaphors. With considered dramaturgy, staging and repetition they sink into our psyches leaving us gently reeling. There's the metaphor of dogs as predators and how they behave with each other in the park; the dancers realistically

imitate canine flight or fight behaviour. There's the simpering stereotypical sex-doll, performed initially by Antonia Grove then later by her young child clones, dancers Maia Faulkner, Millie Smith-Hashim and Elysia Natale. Slowly they pose and pout in robotic fashion across the grass, symbols to feed both the male gaze and the paedophile's lust. We are confronted with the gyrations of grotesque male and female porn stars who have balloons bulging out of their clothing exaggerating bums, tits and genitals, or the subtler porn stars, Grove and Orlik in demure medieval costumes, whose saucy duet reveals comical sex acts set to quaint English folk music. All performers, young or adult are so convincing that it's terrifying.

Juxtaposed with the territory of porn and hypersexualisation are scenes of family fun, fighting and healthiness – a village fair, sports day, outbursts of manic dancing, displays of martial art, all of which empowers young female bodies. In the textured physicality of the show, Vincent also points out how the language of cybersex and pornography is low energy, lethargic and creepy. Through frequent high energy collisions between adults and children as they run across the space, Vincent suggests normal, healthy interactions between children and adults who inhabit a real planet as opposed to a virtual one. Such scenes remind us what our children's lives should be about.

Another interesting metaphor is the one of the dark brown soil, which the performers spread over the grass at the end of the show, symbolising organic nature and stability. This poignantly contrasts with the synthetic, sugary pink colours of the sex industry and artificial glow of screens.

Although parents feature in *Virgin Territory*, perspectives are enacted mainly from children's point of view: the young boy, Nathan de Silva watches on as his dad and his mate humiliate a young tarty looking woman, abusing her then leaving her fragmented and crumpled. Two girls, reversing roles with their mothers whisper to each other across the stage about how they need their parents to set them a good example, establish boundaries, and communicate and protect them.

Recorded voices of rape victims and girls talking about their hollow, numbed experiences of sex or describing what boys want or how quickly they are labelled as sluts, portray an alarming culture of blaming, shaming and confusion. Key words and phrases from these interviews are played repetitively on loops so that offensive comments bore into our heads like a migraine.

The show portrays the endless abuse of women and young girls by men, with often confusions about sex and relationships on both sides: Robert Clark and Valerie Ebuwa's initially erotic duet in which he takes advantage of her, a drunk and giddy woman, turns sour when he rejects her, leaving her shamed and discarded. A young girl who has exposed herself too much online suddenly realises the consequences of her screen activity, and terrified, talks to her faceless adult cyber stalker in the dark loneliness of her bedroom.

With a sensational cast of performers who combine technical skill with brilliant body language and emotional depth, Vincent delivers forceful messages through her poetic and political dance theatre. This is a must for every teenage girl and boy.