

SHUT DOWN review by Verbal Remedy

Verbal Remedy, 9 March 2019, Kelly Jenkins

Shut Down is an interdisciplinary piece which combines dance, spoken word, rap and real-life testimony. The aim of the piece is to answer the question “What is it like to live as a man today?”

The all-male cast consists of four professional dancers and two younger dancers in the attempt to paint a broad spectrum of modern-day masculinity. Shut Down also showcases the work of 16-year-old spoken word artist Eben’Flo and tracks created by other AudioActive members alongside composer Jules Maxwell. (AudioActive is a registered charity which uses music as a tool for social change, education and personal development).

“It’s dance with meaning”

The Vincent Dance Theatre Company was founded in 1994 by Charlotte Vincent, who has a strong reputation in the dance community for creating performances which challenge conventional conceptions of gender. Regarding Shutdown, Vincent describes how: ‘It’s dance with meaning, to try and provoke a response and to really look at our society through metaphorical means.’

In the pre-show talk, Dance City’s Artistic Director Anthony Baker and Charlotte Vincent (calling in via Skype from Brighton) talked to the audience about what they were about to see and how the show came to be. Vincent describes how she doesn’t like to think of herself as a choreographer, and refers to the performance as a collaboration effort between her and the performers.

Shut Down follows Vincent’s previous touring piece/ film installation “Virgin Territory” which Vincent describes as being the “sister” piece to Shut Down. Virgin Territory explores the hyper sexualisation of women and girls in media whereas Shut Down is the flip side of this, focusing on the role of men in society.

During the talk, Vincent showed concern that the dichotomy of the pieces doesn't truly reflect today's society. She says that depicting the transgender experience is something that she has found challenging as a "90's feminist". However, upon viewing the piece, there was a clear acknowledgment of men who don't identify fully as men. The show features one cast member dressing as a woman, in lingerie and heels and then a pink glittering ball gown.

The spoken word emphasises the importance about embracing "other" people who have a "wider spectrum of wardrobe and experience". So even though Vincent embraces her lack of knowledge and ability to represent the trans experience, the show does a good job of portraying the other options, including non-binary.

Challenging gender politics

One of the main talking points was the idea of an all-male piece being directed by a woman and how the story of masculinity is coming from a feminist gaze. But Vincent assures the audience that the piece is driven by the perspective of the dancers and other influences from the media. (Most notably "Manhood: The Bare Reality" by Laura Dodsworth which is filled with photos of men's penises with stories about the men attached).

The main aim is to challenge gender politics and an all-male cast is certainly a good way to make this statement in a traditionally feminine style of performance. So, it challenges not only gender politics as a whole but also the specific gender politics of dance and the role of men in performances.

For the most part, the dance world reflects the real world. In most cases, most dancers are female while the choreographers and leaders are male. The women are the workers while the men have the well-paid leadership roles. Shut Down's opposite structure is certainly an interesting switch up in the industry. It particularly exciting to see younger cast members, as young men are often discouraged from contemporary styles of dance.

This is the first time that the feminine perspective isn't forefront in one of Vincent's' production. But this lack of female representation allows the audience to think and reflect on the impact that this toxic masculinity has on women.

Bravado culture

Shut Down was conceived at the height of the #metoo movement and Trumps campaign for office and this had a heavy effect on the piece as the worst kind of masculinity was prevalent in the media at the time. The context is white male privilege and the bravado culture of straight men.

When asked about the risk of stereotyping and generalisations, Vincent said that her intention was to fully embrace the archetypes of behaviours. The opening line of the spoken word narration states that “This is a piece about men” and it certainly represents a wide range of men’s experiences; absent fathers and lonely sons, victims of abuse, porn addicts, gang members and those with more fluid ideals of masculinity/femininity.

There’s a high level of emotional intensity (even from the non-professional younger members of the company). The show promotes the idea that men should be allowed to cry and breakdown when life becomes too much and these scenes are done in a touching, heartfelt way. Some scenes linger too long in their silence and start to feel uncomfortable. But that’s exactly the point. They’re not supposed to be comfortable scenes.

It’s easy to see where the real-life influences have come into play. We all know men and boys like the ones depicted on the stage. The audience can instantly recognise and connect with the characters and this grounding in reality makes their message even more hard hitting.

Shut Down does exactly what it intends to do. It holds a mirror to society and points out every toxic flaw it can find.