

Review of 'Babel' (for Arts Hub) 2012

by *Victor Kline*

This is far and away the best show at the Sydney Festival. It's certainly the best show I have seen in 20 years and I wouldn't be surprised if it were the best show running in the world today. Please note this is from someone not given to extravagance of expression or hyperbole. But anyone there on opening night would have agreed.

It's not often a Sydney audience will rise to their feet on masse and on the instant, and just keep applauding. But with *Babel* that was a necessary release for all of us. We had wanted to do it a hundred times throughout the night, as one piece of song, dance or spoken word virtuosity melted effortlessly into the next to create nothing less than a pageant of life itself.

Thank God for modern dance. Now that the academics have reduced novels to characterless, plotless pretence; now that jaded theatre critics have reduced theatre to bitter reproachful monotonies; now that music has been reduced to tuneless silliness and poetry to much the same; now that all these once wonderful art forms have forgotten that art is about celebrating the rich complexity of real life, and respectfully hinting at what it all means and should be; out of this sad flat wilderness, in recent years, has arisen a tower built by people who don't want to lecture us, but rather who want to make us think; people who want to give us the gift of spectacle and energy and sheer bloody entertainment.

Thank God for modern dance and its fearless use of everything it has to hand, and everything it can lay its hands on. It has become an art form *sans frontiers*, an art form that recognises how life itself has no borders, and so, as a reflection of life, it will have none either. In recent years we have seen the emergence of very many highly creative modern dance companies, which have swept all the other moribund art forms before them, and in a sense have absorbed the others into themselves. The Eastman vzw Company, choreographers Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Damien Jalet, and visual designer Antony Gormley have taken this tower and made it into their tower of Babel. But theirs is not a vain attempt to reach the divine. Theirs is a ladder we all want to climb and to do it along with them, as they show us how human nature imprisons itself in language and gesture, only to free itself again in the most joyous way.

The choreography, the physicality, the music and visual presentation – all unique. Any attempt to describe them further would be destined to fall too far short of the reality. Go and see it! You probably still won't believe what you are seeing, but go anyway. It will be an experience that will knock out the memory of most of the great shows you have seen.

This is a true ensemble piece involving 18 performers from 13 countries speaking 15 languages, all of which we hear and all of which we are made to understand. It would be wrong to single out any one performer. They were all magnificent. However out of sheer chauvinistic patriotism I will mention the two Australians in the cast, Paea Leach and James O'Hara. What a wonderful time you must be having. And what wonderful performances you give.

A final word of congratulations to the producers for using performers not only of all different nationalities but, more importantly of all different ages and sizes. It made this wonderful pageant all the more real.

Babel (Words)

Choreographers: Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Damien Jalet

Visual Designer: Antony Gormley

Produced by Eastman and Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie

Sydney Theatre, Walsh Bay

January 9–11, 13-14 at 8pm

www.sydneyfestival.org.au