



THE LAST SUPPER REVIEW (MALTHOUSE AT NGV, MELBOURNE)

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The Last Supper, by the British theatre group Reckless Sleepers, takes place in the National Gallery of Victoria's Great Hall, that stained-glassed chapel of the secular religion of art. The setup suggests a banquet, with white-clothed tables arranged in a rectangle. The performers — Leen Dewilde, Tim Ingram and Mole Wetherell, who also wrote the piece — sit along one of the shorter tables and the audience around the other three.

They begin by telling stories about the deathbed scenes and last words of Nostradamus, Copernicus, Newton: starting out mildly enough, the fifty-minute performance soon modulates into the grotesque — Elvis on the toilet — and the violent: Rasputin and Che and John Lennon, and, in the evening's most extended, gruesome and piteous set-piece, the murder of the Russian royal family in 1918.

Between their accounts of these deaths, which are compellingly written and performed, although the acoustics could at times be unhelpful, the trio also read out the names of condemned men, the date of execution, and the prisoner's last meal. (In a couple of cases no meal was requested, but rather "Justice tempered with mercy" or "Love peace and harmony".) As the words are spoken a waiter brings the last meal out, serving dome and all, and puts it in front of an audience member.

A famous person's death is often an essential part of their legend and their last words proverbially become famous: "Shoot, coward, you are only going to kill a man" (Che), or "Kill me, or else you are a murderer." (Not Groucho Marx, or Sam Goldwyn, but Franz Kafka.)

But all we learn of the prisoners is what they ate: we are left to conclude that they are all American, as the names tend to be Anglo and the executions all took place in the last 20 years. Nor are our emotions coloured by knowing what they were executed for. These meals were their last words.

I wasn't served food myself, so I can't tell you what it felt like to be offered liver and onions, or two cheeseburgers, French fries, scotch eggs, and a jug of fruit flavoured milk, or a plate consisting solely of fruit: bananas, peaches, coconuts. When I passed on the wine that was handed around, however, I did get a glass of the flavoured milk. Drinking it did seem faintly transgressive to me: fleetingly, the milk seemed tainted, and it was as if some taboo had to be overcome.

In turn this seemed an odd response, which might have been self-dramatising had it not also been almost barely conscious: because what taboo, exactly, was being challenged? (Against making light of the dead, with cruel, trivial, snobby reactions to their low-class tastes? Against necrophilia, of a highly attenuated, conceptual kind? One's grandparents' idea of good taste?) It was art we had come to consume, in whatever form it might take, even if it turned out we had to literally digest it. No-one else was keen to attempt their meals until the show had ended and the performers started to mingle: then people began to pick at the food, clearly without enthusiasm but wanting to participate.

In traditional Catholic liturgy, words spoken over the bread and wine turn them into the body and blood of Christ. With a name and a death pronounced over them, the fries presented to the young woman in the Great Hall were no longer quite the same kind of thing as the fries you could buy at the food stalls just up the road.

Objects derive an aura from the story attached to them, but in the theatre the fourth wall can buffer us against too strong an emotional response to mere props: here the patrons were having their appetites aroused, or repelled, and either way notionally invoked by these pathos-ridden plates of stuff.

What seemed most powerful about *The Last Supper* was not ethical or political, was not that it provoked compassion for men on death row or thoughts about the differences between death grandiose and death obscure and abject, and how, far from being a leveller, death is also stratified. The magic lay in its staging of these transubstantiations.

The Last Supper is at the Great Hall, NGV International, until July 12