

real time



A String Section Photo Pete Brundle

When ‘hypnotic’ is good John Balley

Describing a performance as ‘hypnotic’ usually opens up a space of ambiguity that isn’t necessarily helpful to anyone, and not just because one person’s ‘hypnotic’ is another’s ‘boring as hell.’ The descriptor covers a range of experiences that can be dissimilar in intent and effect—the dazzling bewitchment of a purely sensory spectacle that fully engages perception is not the same as the work that lulls a viewer into an inward-looking meditative state, and different again is the repetitive or durational work that inspires each observer to meander off down mental avenues all their own. Two recent Melbourne performances illustrate the point, each with mesmeric effects but quite unlike one another in that respect.

Reckless Sleepers with Nat Cursio Co, A String Section

A String Section is a very curious work by Leen Dewilde of Belgium/UK company Reckless Sleepers and has enjoyed a number of one-off performances around the world, typically in collaboration with a local outfit. In Melbourne this came in the form of Nat Cursio Co, with both Cursio and Dewilde appearing in the production alongside other Australian dancers. It’s not quite dance per se, though the point is arguable, but it quickly becomes very apparent why physical performers are required for the piece.

The five dancers—all women—are seated on wooden chairs. Each is dressed in an elegant black dress and high heels and wears lipstick. Their attitude is one of gracious patience as the audience settles itself. In short, they look like a string section. The one thing out of place is the bows they have brought with them—generously-sized carpentry saws. The instruments they’ll be playing are the legs of the chairs themselves.

Dewilde’s concept is as simple as it is clever: from what is essentially a visual pun flowers a work whose danger I struggle to compare with much else. The women perch on their chairs in increasingly contorted poses as they hack away at the legs supporting them. When a chair leg becomes another inch shorter, the entire frame tips in a new direction, and all the while the visible threat of the saw blade is flying around among the performers’ limbs. As with a classical string section, of course, all faces remain largely expressionless besides the odd demure smile, and the blankness of affect is in stark contrast to the peril of the sharp edge dragging across a wooden limb a few hair-breadths away from a real, exposed calf.

Not much is really happening and it is entirely enthralling. The danger is somewhat heightened as legs grow shorter, seat angles more precarious and footholds (in heels!) ever less sure, but this isn’t the kind of escalating peril of circus. It’s more about the immediacy of live art, in this case observing each performer adapting their attack moment to moment as the thing supporting them disintegrates into sawdust, and attempting to maintain a particular composure almost absurd in the face of the action it accompanies, and which quickly becomes visibly tiring.

To describe this work as hypnotic isn’t enough—the state it induces is one of intense engagement with its presentness, in both a temporal and spatial sense. It is the feeling of a breath held for 50 minutes, all in the audience leaning forward, alert to every movement. It was only afterwards that I even began to consider the humorous associations behind the work—its deployment of classical music iconography because the performance itself didn’t invite the distance required to mentally wander in those directions.