

Death and Burlesque

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The twin muses of Experimental Performance and Burlesque battle for the soul of the theatre critic. What will happen?

Given her almost nihilistic approach to both life and art, it is unsurprising that La Ribot's death, as represented by Via Negativa, is a naked body in a welter of blood. While a tape-recording of Ribot's thoughts on life crackles on the side of the stage, she lies there, ribs, breasts and bright red wig, slowly fading away, an installation to mortality. Once she is gone, the wig and her shoes are gathered up in a shoe box, her remains packed away with less ceremony than a pet buried in the back garden. Her words deny meaning, deny magic: not just a Godless world, but one devoid of purpose and coherence. In this imagined death, the human body is a mere object, bereft of soul or erotic intent.

Twenty four hours later, at *Va Va Voom* in Edinburgh, I am watching Cat Aclysmic's Powder Puff routine. Once a fairly simple bump and grind addition to her repertoire, she has powered it up through close study of classic American burlesque and a cheeky British humour. It's playful, and sexier for it: the body is tattooed with meaning, the focus of attention, and desire. Where La Ribot's body is exposed and explicit, it is mere flesh. Cat Aclysmic's body teases and implies, becoming word.

If Via Negativa perform *Four Deaths* – the symbolic murders of four artists – Va Va Voom, through Cat Aclysmic and Cherryfox, create *Four Lives*: sensual routines of assertion and energy. Both Via Negativa and Va Va Voom use humour – as the cast of *Four Deaths* announce, “theatre is fun.” But where Via Negativa gradually shift to melancholy – Marina Abramovitch's departure is a slowly dissolving fall of bubbles that uses an obvious metaphor in a moving finale – burlesque leaves the audience dancing.

Ian Smith, MC of the National Review and head honcho of Mischief La Bas, has commented that humour allows serious artists to comfort the audience before leading them into darker territory. Via Negativa, with a tinny rendition of Mozart and a wry self-depreciation, relax the crowd before focussing on death. La Ribot's terse material notwithstanding, *Four Deaths* is a spiritual journey, like a Buddhist meditation on impermanence. It also offers concise summaries of four artistic greats' aesthetic, describing Tim Etchells from Forced Entertainment's dangerous relationship between health and performing and Abramovitch's notorious study of the body. It is intelligent, thoughtful, drawing a connection between the stage and life: the friendly, natural personae on stage add to the blurring of boundaries. It's as if the audience is being invited to conspire in the company's own fantasies.

I left the CCA calm and moved: despite the blood and scattered body parts, death is recognised as part of a natural cycle, possessing its own resonance and beauty. Even the pitiful dissolution of Pina Bausch into a final smoking cigarette becomes a symbol of her life and achievements. Yet Va Va Voom left me agitated, dispersed. The erotic thrill transforms into a terse questioning, the celebration of life compromised by the impolite desires swirling around my thoughts. My erudite contemplations on Cat Aclysmic's use of tradition and narrative, dressed up in formal language, are driven by an undercurrent of raw physical desire. If burlesque is a meditation on life, life is confused, the mind and body locked into a conflict only resolved by tiny deaths.