

## Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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*Vanishing Point*

Compagnie Philippe Genty

Her Majesty's

It is startling to think that Philippe Genty has been performing in Australia for more than thirty years. His company featured at the Festival in 1978 and again in Adelaide in 1996, when, in collaboration with Australian artists, they generated a new work, *Stowaways*. Genty has had a long association with this country and, for many in the audience, his blend of illusion and movement has been their first - perhaps their only - encounter with physical theatre. Philippe Genty has up-dated mime, popularised the dance-theatre of practitioners such as Pina Bausch and paved the way for the rolling franchises of Cirque du Soleil.

This new show has all the signatures of a Genty production. Located next to a miniature chair, white lines on a black backdrop provide the geometric paradox of the vanishing point. From the first we are intrigued with an idea - but one that doesn't bear too much scrutiny. Instead we are propelled by Rene Aubry's music, a slick blend of world music samples - didgeridoo, Arabic dub and irresistible dance beats - all thrumming through the tannoys. The performers, some initially planted in the audience, take to the stage, peachily lit in Patrick Riou's sumptuous lighting. Their costumes are the now familiar (one would have to say, over-familiar) signifiers of the metro-citizen - long gaberdine coats, homburg hats and unfurled umbrellas. One is sporting a fez, the effect is mid-period TinTin.

"I have a letter for you," announces one, and a card with an A materialises, then a Y, then a B. With the two S's we see the clues emerging and the performers form the word 'abyss.' Again, it hints at meanings that are swiftly supplanted by the appearance of someone in an antiquated diver's suit complete with cumbersome helmet. When the diver begins to rise off the stage and rotate in the air, the blend of movement, music and light is sublime. Few can create the kind of visually fluid effects that Genty achieves, and few can sustain the profusion of images.

A man sits in an armchair and exchanges word balloons to a floppy eared dog in the chair opposite. Black clad operators carry the captions through the darkness, one of them, for brainy effect, reads  $E=MC^2$ . Genty constantly plays with scale and contrast - from large, rapidly appearing inflat-

ables to miniature manikins of the performers. Some of the loveliest moments come from the simple puppetry of an abstract mask wrapped in a bolt of silk.

For eighty minutes Philippe Genty, his assistant Mary Underwood, the performers and crew conjure a fascinating visual narrative which is beautifully moved and expertly staged. The props, from the Charles Rennie Mackintosh chairs to the astonishingly pudgy inflatable giant with his skull removed and his brain lobes on full display, are imaginative and curious. But while there is sensation and spectacle, ultimately the experience is arbitrary and lacking in affect. Who or what is this blimp-like man lip-synching to Bollywood vocals and why is this woman in the red dress repeatedly and gratuitously falling to the ground in a hail of bullets?

In his program notes, to counter the enquiries of the literal-minded, Genty talks expansively about dream worlds and inner space. Indeed, we all have long had the terminology of the surreal, the unconscious, the whimsical and the absurd to fall back on. Not that Genty's work needs to cloak itself in justifications. It is quite enough that this show is a painstakingly constructed visual pleasure.

But like his other works, *Vanishing Point* implies a depth of meaning which it then systematically evades and subverts - and that's when Genty's work starts to wear thin. A vanishing point is the place in space or time at, or beyond which, something disappears, or ceases to exist. That might also be the place where it ceases to have any point at all.