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Betroffenheit at The Broad Stage

Sarah Elgart · Wednesday, February 14th, 2018

What do you have when you mix theater and dance, words and wordlessness, and use them to describe the indescribable?

I first learned about ***Betroffenheit*** nearly a year ago, and was immediately captivated, especially after viewing the remarkable trailer (attached below) and again after hearing from many people who had seen it and seemed almost unable to articulate its power. This, as I came to understand it, was actually very appropriate.

Now ***Betroffenheit*** comes to Los Angeles' The Broad Stage this week to much advance fanfare. Created by renowned choreographer Crystal Pite and writer/performer and co-founder of Canada's acclaimed Electric Company Theater, Jonathan Young, it is in the simplest terms, a hybrid mixture of dance and theater. And it's so much more.

Jonathan Young and Kidd Pivot dancer in *Betroffenheit* (photo by Wendy D Photography)

The word "betroffenheit" suggests a state of, shock, trauma, and bewilderment. The work and its title came to be as a result of a tragedy in Young's own life; a 2009 fire that killed Young's daughter, niece, and nephew, and an intense need he had to act and create something meaningful out of his suffering. With a sense that what he was creating was going to be highly physical and working in a terrain that there would not be always words for, he sought out Pite with whom he had worked previously.

I had a chance to speak briefly with Young and learn more about the work, its inception, and how it feels to perform it. At times I had to muscle through this interview. As it progressed, I found myself from one moment to the next incredibly moved and devastated, alternately by the approach he wanted the work to be taking, and by the very real tragedy at the core of it all. While Young clearly understands the need in theater to create space for movement as a language, he is also extremely articulate with his thoughts and ideas in actual words.

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Jonathan Young in *Betroffenheit*

SE: *Can you tell me how the work **Betroffenheit** came to be and how you came to work with Crystal?*

JY: *Crystal and I first worked together on a film that Electric Company created that they needed a choreographer for. When I first met her she was just back from Frankfurt Ballet. Kidd Pivot (Pite's own company) was new and I had recently taken the helm of Electric Company Theater. Crystal had done these studies in motion with all the actors and made amazing physical sequences in an otherwise traditional narrative play. We had become friends and colleagues. I knew that I wanted to create the work. I had text, images, and had found the title, but other than that I had no clear sense of what I was going for or what it was going to take.*

Scene from *Betroffenheit* (photo by Michael Slobodian)

In his speaking it was clear from Young that when they decided to collaborate, something clicked and demanded that they move forward with the work immediately. At the time there were already dance presenters lined up for new work from Pite and Kidd Pivot. Suddenly, this new expected work became a Crystal Pite, Jonathan Young collaboration, which then became ***Betroffenheit***. He admired her for taking a leap of faith in him.

SE: *Looking up the word "betroffenheit," it's translated as "sadness, embarrassed or awkward silence." Can you clarify how you would define it, and what relationship its definition has to the work?*

JY: *It's hard to find a good translation of this word, and Germans themselves have trouble saying what it means in English… And that felt good to me because I wanted to find a word that represented what was for me untranslatable, indefinable, and foreign. That big explosive, dangerous looking word had those qualities. I was on my own and writing without knowing what I was writing. I had discovered a book by Ann Bogart, **And Then We Act**, about making work post 9/11. In it she explores the question of how you can do anything creative after something so tragic, and she said, "The one thing we cannot afford is inaction due to despair." Positive and negative potential is bound up in this state (of despair), definitions have been swept away and anything becomes possible. This idea – that in the silence you reach the limits of language… How do you explain this? I didn't want to do a show just about despair and darkness and angst. What's interesting are these cataclysmic forces.*

Humor and fear play together in *Betroffenheit*

*Humor is used a lot in this production, because when you have suffering so extreme it tips over into absurdity. Addiction and trauma work together and have their way with an individual caught in their vortex, and human behavior starts to become extremely absurd… just ridiculous, self-destructive, hopeless and funny. Downright… I'll leave it at that. I wanted to do this thing I had been doing for all these year's and that is making live theater. I wanted to get inside of that word and I could not have done with anyone else but Crystal Pite. Her physical writing says so much without saying anything and honors the content differently. There is very little, almost no concrete biographical material in the play or text but its deeply personal. And the other performers share the center of **Betroffenheit** in that at various times each of us take the role of protagonist.*

I asked Young if it felt cathartic to perform ***Betroffenheit.***

JY: *It feels cathartic to perform it now…* (long pause) *I'm very careful in using that word though, because its not about therapy or catharsis. It's damn hard to do. It takes all my strength, so no doubt there is a real sense of catharsis to be on the other side of when you perform it, and likewise a sense of fear and anxiety as it approaches. But amongst all of us there is a lot of love and a lot of play. And for me it's a great honor to perform with Kidd Pivot Theater.*

Kidd Pivot and Electric Company Theater perform ***Betroffenheit*** February 14-16 at The Broad Stage in Santa Monica. Directed and choreographed by Crystal Pite, and written by Jonathan Young. For tickets and information go to: http://thebroadstage.org/betroffenheit

(Feature photo by Michael Slobodian)

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