

Dance Umbrella, Andros Zins-Browne & Mette Edvardsen

This year's Dance Umbrella programme definitely feels like a curated affair. A two-hander by festival Artistic Director **Betsy Gregory** and choreographer **Jonathan Burrows**, this collection of visual and performance works is streamlined and eclectic, showcasing fewer and generally smaller scale works than in past years. The feeling is that of a gallery exhibition, sleekly designed to focus on process and the formal questions fundamental to choreography. Burrows' artistic sensibility seems obviously at work here, the pieces, visual art and dance alike are rigorously conceptual but with a wry and affectionate wit, a combination resembling Burrows' own work with composer/performer **Matteo Fargion**, also on display this year.

Friday night's most elaborate spectacle was *The Host* by **Andros Zins-Browne**. The playing area was covered in a thick plastic lining and a sound like a plane taking off filled the theatre as we waited in the dark for the piece to begin. It turns out that this was the sound of many powerful blowers pumping air into an inflatable floor, slowly turning it into a bumpy landscape, which three cowboys gradually began to traverse. Yes, cowboys, complete with cowboy hats, boots and strong silent-type manly mannerisms. These good ole boys checked out the terrain, prodding the air-filled mounds with the toe of a boot before climbing on for a ride. The first half of *The Host* was a kind of performance action, in which the performers were set the task of first exploring this alien world and then wrestling it into submission.

Once they got going they vigorously unsheathed the large cushions of air that lay underneath the first layer of flooring, pressing and jumping on them full-bodied in order to forcefully deflate them, tacking these awkward structures as they might a runaway calf out on the range, before folding them up and hauling them away. Once they had cleared the space they celebrated with a kind of stomping hoedown; toe-heeling and boot-scooting around in various combinations of one, two and three, dancers **Jaime Llopis**, **Sidney Leoni** and Zins-Browne himself displaying real skill in this country clod-hopping idiom. Then the really giddy surprise: the floor they had worked so hard to uncover, itself began to inflate, eventually lifting the ranch hands right off the ground and bucking them around like rodeo contestants, the three heroically attempting to carry on dancing as they slid around on the back of this giant stage-sized bronco.

The piece started off slow like a sleepy morning out on the range, which was necessary in order to build up to its rollicking conclusion. Balancing on playful abstraction, in the form of its bouncy synthetic prairie setting, *The Host* employed the rhythms of manual labour, absurdist machismo and highlighted the ultimate futility of trying to bend an unruly world to the will of mankind. Yes, man-kind as opposed to the more politically correct hu-mankind. For these variously bearded and moustachioed cowmen in tight Levis, tipped the wide brims of their hats in flirtatious congeniality, walked stiffly as if they they'd been in the saddle a good few hours, and gamely humped the air out of those faux-beast inflatables, presenting a feast of masculine posturing and blow-up Brokeback homoeroticism. This sexy texture lightened the mood and made the piece all the more enjoyable for the knowledge that it wasn't taking itself too seriously. In the local vernacular: *The Host* was a hoot.

A good deal more subdued, but no less remarkable, was the festival's understated opening act. A deceptively simple solo created and performed by Norwegian choreographer **Mette Edvardsen**, *Black* is a pared down and polished example of the festival programme's conceptual aesthetic, in which form becomes formula, but executed with the warmth of a welcoming smile. Edvardsen, entering from the back of the empty, brightly lit studio space, walked modestly to the centre of the stage and began to bring the room, well, a room into being. She held out her hands flat in front of her and intoned: *tabletabletabletable* causing the furniture to 'appear' in front of her, fuelled by the power of her incantations and a clever co-opting of our collective imaginations.

Edvardsen moved around the space methodically handling the 'chairs', 'lamps', 'water bottles' and other accessories of her pantomimed chamber, manifesting them out of thin air by repetitively invoking their names, and interacting with them in a manner that was in turns functionally stoic and dryly humorous. She transitioned from objects to actions to animals, cursing the *damndamndamndamn dogdogdogdogdogdog* and

bumpbumpbumpbumping into the aforementioned *tabletabletabletable* more than once, as she wandered around in this literally en-chanted make believe world.

Black was an inspired choice to open Dance Umbrella 2012, as Edvardsen's piece communicated with an economy of means the preoccupations of many vanguard experimenters in contemporary art and performance today. Indeed, the Dance Umbrella line-up includes cross disciplinary artists and art works, practices that all seem to interrogate in some way the nature of the choreographic in its broadest sense and the ground upon which representation itself awkwardly stands in our image-infused, but virtual age.