

SOIT – We Was Them

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To start at the end. Or, an ending. Somewhere past an hour, Ivan and Harold (I think) sit on the edge of the pool, sweat-soaked, wet, shaved heads, mirroring each other, shaking in tension, spasming in staccato, until Ivan takes off his clothes, slips into the weed-ridden pool and floats away to invisibility, darkness, ending.

A perfect moment to finish, a resolution both of narrative, and musically – or sonically; a coming-home. Also a perfect moment to keep going. To have stopped here, despite the obviousness of the conclusion, and whatever else that might have followed would have been an easy task, the appearance of meaning and resolution, somewhat uplifting and hopeful, in fact were absent. To stop here then, would have been deceitful, as if to say of what preceded, ‘here is what it all meant’, when it didn’t mean that at all.

Hans’ performances – well, this is the first I’ve seen from the outside – can be a remarkable frustrating experience for those seeking expected narrative tropes, coherent development of individual character (or for that matter any development at all that might be supposed to be linear or sensible), and an exposition of group or interpersonal relationships. Equally frustrating perhaps for those unallied with realism who seek metaphors or attempt a reading of harmless and heartwarming eccentricity that purport to speak deeply of the human condition.

Lucky for me then, that my idea of a good time is one where I come away with a sense that something happened, and it was quite brilliant, but I really can’t say just what.

Reading J.G. Ballard recently, having avoided him for years, and *Empire of the Sun* in particular, and then to be dismayed I had missed such an acute and disturbing text, my first thoughts of the staging were somewhere between the internment camp out of Shanghai, and the fecund, tropical, desolate London in *The Drowned World*.

An evolution of the staging of [Settlement](#), the front of the stage cut by a part-empty swimming pool, aquamarine tiles stained by the detritus of abandonment, the pool itself sliced lengthwise so as not to finish, but were it not for the audience, continue on away from the stage. To the right, the housing, broken windows, rust-dirt walls, a tattered flyscreen door and peeling wallpaper. Weeds and plants grow in the cracks, and in the background, the length and height of the theatre, brushland stretching to a horizon swollen with brooding clouds.

What happens then, in this camp, or isolated, perhaps gated community? Or cult compound.

A small metal stationwagon on the end of a golf club is pushed in darkness, noisily around in circles, lit by a single emergency torch, the black-clad and masked driver somewhere between stagecrew and sinister apparition. He appears again with a soiled double bed raised almost vertical onto which he throws the fitfully sleeping, sleepless and restive Harold and Anthea.

Later he bursts from the flyscreen door attacking Anuschka with two white pigeons, a frenzy worthy of Hitchcock wherein the neurotic subconscious manifests itself in a Lacanian irruption, tearing and surging across her flailing body. Or maybe just the shock of disturbing some roosting and panicked birds.

Other aspects of *Settlement* recur, though taken to a far more considered, intricate and powerful level. The fighting, white-face, sweating, violent and aesthetic, as though the symbolic representation of the form of attack and mêlée are as important in the personal consciousness as is the decision to unrestrainedly brawl itself.

One short instant remains singular in this, Ivan, towards the end when all are exhausted and bruised, stalking with renewed zeal, clarity, emotion, sliding and bending on legs like snakes, completely certain of his strength and ability to fight. So swiftly over, yet intoxicating, brilliant and compelling and in that moment to be taken outside of being submerged in a performance and to think, surely one of the outstanding moments in dance and performance I've seen. Anuschka repeats this, throwing herself, flailing and spinning wildly on one knee, having roused herself later from another mattress. Her appearance and movement is uncanny and with a quality as if she is always on the verge of being possessed that makes for startling and forceful performance.

The fighting finishes with repeated dunking of heads into the pool, arcs of water and spluttering until collapse. Later, Anthea on rollerskates, singing and wearing a feathered warbonnet gliding in circles again with the black-clad stage wraith.

The abandoned and blown-out toy house moves forward, a ballerina doll is devoured by a dog, barking growling, all begin howling and snarling, a pack of savage mongrels. Harold lays his hands on each and fingers, wrist, forearm, even head and torso sliding inside pulls out something ... poisonous? Souls? Something anyway to cause their bodies to jerk like a shock.

And Harold again, whipping ropes, Jim Jones and every other cult leader, earnest, sincere, depraved and dragging each of them towards him, cleaning their chakras and bellowing, “Come to your death!”

And soon it could finish, though it continues, wet clothes, always under dim unfiltered lights from high above, never quite coming to dawn, or leaving the night, always with soft shadows, and always with sound swelling and ebbing, as if ears too sensitive hear each breath and movement through long minutes of decay to silence.

To talk of all this being seen, heard, felt, scenes and passing of time, I’m wondering what lasting effect this piece has. Certainly each performer, Ivan Fatjo, Anuschka Von Oppen, Anthea Lewis, Robert Clark and Harold Henning are individually and together a decidedly commanding group, each with their own abilities, and also sharing qualities together that make them a rare and memorable ensemble. Staging also, the set and its attention to detail, the simple and highly considered lighting, and the superb soundscape from James Brown, Eric Faes and Jason Sweeney is unequivocally one of the best I’ve heard, complimenting the performance sublimely. A performance that I thought, when it finished after nearly 90 minutes that it didn’t feel so long and could have kept going. Where to, then?

Hans is, I think, making performance that neither conforms to standard theatrical narrative progression, nor its current opposite, a decidedly antagonistic refusal to be anything other than opaque – both of which are unsatisfying in their simplicity. Something of a psychological experiment then, perhaps like Lacan and his seminars, or group analysis. It is difficult to say much beyond what happened, and pointedly, whether the session was a success, the patients recovered, or at least found some further way to go.

Not to confuse that though with the success of *We Was Them*, which I would certainly see again, and joins that small group of theatre I have seen that my main disappointment in is that I wasn’t part of it myself.

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