

Private: Once Group's 'Morning Thing' Electrifies

By ANDREW LUGG

Devised by Robert Ashley. "That Morning Thing," which is being presented at the Union Ballroom by the Once Group, shows that the group is all that it is cracked up to be. It is two-and-a-half years since this local group last did a piece in town. Some will remember their performances on top of the Maynard Street parking structure. "That Morning Thing" is more modest in certain respects but more devastating in others. This scratched at your soul.

I feel much better now that it is all over. As I see it (and this, no doubt, is only one of many possible interpretations), this event is about a woman's suicide; about getting up in the morning and facing it again; about going through another day.

Afterwards someone told me that it was about memory, beautiful people, reflecting on unattainable ends, magazines, selling cars, the animal world, grogs, and so on.

One performer told me that she felt it was like working in a swamp. It was the "darkest" piece that they had ever done. What is sure however is "That Morning Thing" is very scary.

From my first viewing, I can say a number of things which I think most of the viewers would agree with. Firstly, we saw ordinary, well-known imagery gently transformed and interlocked in an extraordinarily controlled manner.

Second, this was no amateur light show, although some of the ingredients were the same. Third, the piece demanded much involvement. At the end, everyone was quiet, subdued by a weird, mysterious synesthetic outpouring or by the fear that all "private" emotions are, ultimately, public.

Let me give a few (from many) impressions. I was impressed by the rostrum speaker, who not only defined a structure for the performance - that is verbally defined it - but also discussed the process of its creation. He told us that the American composer comes to terms with himself late in life, at that time when he reflects on death. Thus he combines happiness with nostalgia.

Or again, at the end, a voice repeats over and over "She was a visitor" ... The suicide over... Or the motor car commercial, as recorded with all the retakes... The everyday world encroaching... Or the frog-people at the beginning ... Conveyers from one zone to another. Or the singer counting to four and the pianist responding, as though from another world ... perhaps communicating, but this was nighttime... no morning thing... no morning thing.

Mention should be made of some of the mechanisms used. These heightened the quality of the performance. When a speaker said "She said..." a time delay unit was employed to give the words a phase overlap, so that you felt that the words were slipping back in time... he was trying to remember what she had said before ...

The "business men" wearing throat-mikes to give their voices a frog-like sound were "scaled down" to animal size ... frogs representing death.

Although the rostrum speaker announced that the performance was to be symbolic and gave us the "key," no easy answers were apparent. "That Morning Thing" has a complexity and a monumentality which makes it a hard nut to crack.

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