

Review: Caesarean Section: Essays on Suicide

by Devawn Wilkinson



In the darkness, the sound of glass shattering, ragged breaths, the dull thud of bodies thrown heavily against the floor. An orange rolls through a spreading pool of blood-red wine. A woman climbs a man's body like a rope ladder, like a tree, scrambling higher, finding footholds on hip and collarbone, but he buckles and lets her fall. Teatr ZAR's *Caesarean Section: Essays on Suicide* offers us images that are both strange and strangely familiar – its envisioning of self-negation is suicide as painted by the pre-Raphaelites and poeticised by the Romantics, a deed darkly eroticised and horrifically alluring.

This fragmented, discordant quasi-narrative is made up of frenzied, painful power-plays between a trio of nameless, ambiguous figures identified in the programme only as 'man' (Matej Matejka) and the 'women' (Ditte Berkeley and Kamila Klamut). Predominantly a dance piece, *Caesarean..* is accompanied by a miniature on-stage orchestra of strings, piano and rusty upright saw, along with the swell and hum of unearthly choral voices. A fissure runs through the centre of the wooden platform, brimming with glimmering shards of glass, and the performers are drawn to its glare like magpies. Though the duets that sprawl and skitter around the stage seem recognisable enough – tender brawls, violent embraces between lovers, rivals, parents and children – as they intensify, we understand them more as struggles between the will to life and the desire for death, tense tangos between self-destruction and salvation, where the urge to destroy, though often tamed, is never quite defeated.

Brief stabbing moments of near-comedy keep the piece teetering between darkness and light. To a soundtrack of jaunty music hall piano, Berkeley puts a noose around her neck, the other end of the rope knotted around the branch of a potted sapling. She holds a watering can, and waits. We start to laugh, until she breaks free of that cartoon and bites at her wrists, smashes them against the floor, massages the veins to push the blood out. We reconsider our laughter, we swallow it. As an experience, a sensory onslaught, it's almost irresistible – the gorgeous, startling visuals, the polyphonic sound that seems to come not from the performers' bodies but our own, resonating from the very walls and foundations of the Council Chamber we're sat in. We are ensnared in the endless interplay of choreographed chaos and the real, unadulterated risk of harm – the dancers' bare feet so vulnerable to all the scattered sharp edges, the way the chairs they're sat in keep pulling suddenly out from under them. At one point, Klamut runs in circles, knocking over chairs and instruments, hurtling around with such frightening abandon that, for a moment, the frenzy onstage is uncontrollable and spills out into the audience, making our vision blur, our hearts beat erratically.

Yet, whilst Teatr ZAR might be lauded for tackling a taboo topic, I can't help but see something problematic in its consciously poetic and therefore markedly insensitive treatment of the subject matter. *Caesarean Section* is undoubtedly beautiful, but perhaps it's so beautiful to the point of being damaging because, whatever Teatr ZAR's intentions, it manages to contribute more to the over-mystification of suicide rather than ever incisively investigating it. Completely de-contextualised, we find ourselves trapped helplessly in a pre-psychiatry dark age where death glitters invitingly as the fragments of glass, dark and sweet as the spilt wine. Seemingly content to stun us with spectacle, the stunned silence the piece leaves us with is exactly that – a silence that refuses to answer any of the troubling questions it raises, that does not open up a dialogue or provoke debate – and there is something brutal, even callous, in its finality. Though the visual language is rich and dynamic, it also betrays a grand lack of eloquence about the reality of suicide, a reality muted, here, by a revelling in the baroque images that it can conjure. By painting the suicide victim as a perversely willing one, Teatr ZAR is in danger of suggesting that suicide is not really a concern, but a necessary dramatic conclusion – that those who find themselves drawn to such an act are beyond language and ultimately, beyond help.

Caesarean Section: Essays on Suicide is playing at the Battersea Arts Centre until 18 October. For more information and tickets, please see the [Battersea Arts Centre website](#).

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