

Visceral exploration of origin and being

DANCE

Black Marrow

Chunky Move. Choreography by Erna Omarsdottir and Damien Jalet. Merlyn Theatre, Malthouse, Melbourne. Tickets: \$45. Bookings: 1300 136 166. Ends tomorrow.

CREATED by Erna Omarsdottir (Iceland) and Damien Jalet (Belgium), *Black Marrow* is a compelling, genuinely original piece of dance-theatre that explores primal instincts within our collective memories, rituals and biology. Simultaneously confronting and comforting, the piece highlights the troubled symbiosis between Earth and mankind.

By turns surreal, absurd and abstract, the narrative meanders slowly back to its origin: a stunning representation of bubbling primeval slime, dancers moving under clumped black plastic sheeting and smooth silky expanses to suggest geothermal energy rippling to the surface.



Primordial: *Black Marrow*

Suddenly a crouched, bare and seemingly headless figure is revealed, angular shoulderblades jutting like tentative hatching wings. Similar creatures appear, scampering in rapid, insectile moves and interlocked wrestles, before coalescing into a throbbing cocoon of naked limbs.

A bearded man emerges in waistcoat and half-tails, puffing away on a stretch of clear tubing: an umbilical cord whose

addictive contents, he tells the audience, make one feel happy. But the hallucination turns nasty, the impish manipulator thrusting his groin aggressively into the cocoon until it collapses into five human forms.

Creation mythology cast aside, the dancers depict futile human industry, forming frenzied machines of intricately synchronised moving body parts. A Dada caricature, the manipulator taunts the audience and controls his hapless stage companions. Wearing stylised masks, they are auctioned off circus-style as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, hypnotised into lifelessness, then resuscitated to the sound of a heart monitor: beating stomachs developing into full-body jolts. One painfully traverses the stage like a slug, burdened by the manipulator who reclines on his back and spouts sensual doggerel.

Finally, the manipulator is physically squeezed into submission and the dancers adopt infantile characters.

Plastic dinosaurs are handed out, emphasising the irretrievable nature of

that which is lost. One of the females, tearfully refusing to accept history, attempts CPR on her dinosaur before collapsing in exhaustion. One of the males climbs under her dress and into the remnants of primordial sludge; a return to the womb that produces a child, constructed from modern rubbish, that leaks a black liquid from its umbilical cord. The dancers slowly slip and stumble through this muck, gradually descending into the sludge from which they emerged.

Tackling themes of birth, death, violation, modernity and the subconscious, this is brilliantly troubling theatre, cerebral in construction but visceral in experience. Its inventive choreography is executed to perfection, while design contributions from Ben Frost (sound), Niklas Pajanti (lighting) and Alexandra Mein (set and costume) seamlessly intermesh to capture the work's emotional contrasts and underlying dark mystery.

Eamonn Kelly