Flashes of brilliance in a Cold War cavern

Ismene Brown reviews the Siobhan Davies Dance Company at Hangar 3022, Upper Heyford

By Ismene Brown
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Dancing on a military airfield is Siobhan Davies's latest outing for her choreographic muse. Soft, warm human bodies in a cold, hard, iron place: the female principle contradicting the male, jetes instead of jets, make art not war. Any number of vaguely political themes is suggested by this new venture, and Davies is probably Britain's most politically expressive choreographer.

The strength of her compact, discreet dances with their flowing, everyday vocabulary has been the balance of recognisable reality in what the dancers' bodies are doing with

the imaginative force that she whips up around them. Plants and Ghosts has the most imaginative packaging that I can ever recall in a Davies dance, because it is being staged throughout its tour in a range of unlikely locations that will force their own characters on to this transparent but rambling work.

I can't imagine it having a more tremendous place to be performed than Hangar 3022 in Upper Heyford airfield, a world of its own reached by a two-mile drive across a bare plain studded with relicts of Cold War militarism. The corrugated hangar hunkers down on the grass as if awaiting bombs or gales; inside gusty, explosive sounds are being summoned by the impressive score by the sound-sculptor Max Eastley.

As you reach your bench seat, the sense of quitting the normal world has softened you up for the imaginative experience that Davies is to provide. (Such delicate dance works as she likes to make, without story or bravura to drive them, need a slightly altered state to receive them, and today's municipal theatres are prosaic places that offer the audience no imaginative preparation.)

Even so, I found Plants and Ghosts a patchy, not wholly absorbing experience. Fragmented and episodic, it starts arrestingly with ghostly shushing sounds and moving searchlights picking out a lone dancer in black tittuping nervily on the balls of her feet. By the end, a long 75 minutes later, the dancers have walked on stilts, wielded white poles in a quasi-martial combat, performed deaf sign language, and enigmatically displayed long knitting needles.

The latter reminded me of the American choreographer Trisha Brown's remark that she loved details but had to beware that her dance did not look like secret knitting. There is a lot of very detailed choreography, with individuals hunched on the ground twitching toes or fingers, beautiful and organic, but not evincing much of the cursive thrust of Davies's finest work. Nor did I feel that she was thinking with quite the sculptural grandeur that this cavernous setting calls out for, despite some very striking costumes and lighting.

Unusual locations demand a different mode of physical movement and of fantasy than the flat theatre stage. These will be atmospheric venues to visit, but one doesn't want the dance to look undecided whether it wants to be there.

- Touring to London, Saltaire, Bristol and Brighton. Information: 020 7228 6020