



Edinburgh Festival review: The Trisha Brown Dance Company

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Ismene Brown reviews the Trisha Brown Dance Company at the Edinburgh Playhouse

- **Edinburgh 2007**

Young Trisha Brown loved trees and scampering in her native Washington woods, and this sense of outdoorsiness, of there being a larger world than just the stage, is her gift to theatre.

In 1971, Brown got a girl to walk horizontally along the glass walls of New York's buildings (supported by three helpers). It's still one of the most exhilarating sights I know in dance, and the wheeze recurs at the start of *Set and Reset* (1973), the first of the three dances brought by her company to Edinburgh.

Brown's 1970s ideas still seem modern today, and *Set and Reset* felt like the freshest thing of the night. Its Robert Rauschenberg set still teases - the gauze encampment of tents that rise into the air, vintage newsreel projected in disconnected flashes onto them, never quite making sense.

Laurie Anderson's electronically disjointed score refuses to elucidate the pictures, with its garbled computerised voice unresponsively repeating "Long time no see." And yet, despite all this noisy visual and aural pressure, the dancers lope and softly play, jaunty, free and young.

The gauze curtains and the translucent newsprint costumes blur away the acidic sensory attack.

That such ordinary, light jogging about should be so pleasing to watch is due to Brown's taut phrasing, the way she enmeshes one person's presence into another's space, the way certain dancers, such as Hyun Jin Jung, make such insouciance seem coherent and important.

But ingenuousness can't last a lifetime. *Present Tense*, Brown's 2003 effort, seems to be the present tense of the verb "to plod".

Elizabeth Murray's design is a severe handicap, a daub resembling black smoke rising over a red and green Stonehenge that hangs behind dancers in traffic-light colours, the visual crudity ill-fit to the witty piano score by John Cage.

In this distracting set-up, Brown's dance is flattened. She can't play conceptual games of space as the daub locks her dancers inside its rectangle; and against Cage's capricious plinky-plonky, her choreography is shown up for its indecisiveness and lack of speed.

Yet 10 years ago, Brown found an eloquent new body-language in, of all places, baroque music.

The 1997 dance *Canto/Pianto* distils her choreography for her lauded production with Simon Keenlyside of Monteverdi's 1607 opera *L'Orfeo* (its recording is used here), in which the spare and stylised gestures she created carry a theatrical load as rich in discovery as her young conceptual pieces.

Again and again, she is arresting. Emotion is suppressed in a taut gesture until the tension suddenly fires through the body.

The Underworld's messenger dominates Orfeo and Eurydice with her monumental solo (Judith Sánchez Ruíz using her large hands with eloquence). Gravity-defiance once again appears: as Eurydice dies, her body is spun by unseen hands, like a lost astronaut - or a girl dreaming in a tree.

It's strong, touching work, but it's Trisha Brown in the past tense, not the present.



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