pzazz



FRANK

CHERISH MENZO

Monsters in the making



Oonagh Duckworth
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‘FRANK’ by Cherish Menzo is a visual, theatrical, choreographed confrontation with the violence that our actions and our gaze has imposed, now and throughout history, on the ‘other’.

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The set-up is chilling. Three walls of transparent plastic and a white cyclo define a square space. A suspended thin red thread trickles down into the centre. Is this an execution chamber on death row? A sinister, sanitised operating theatre? There’s also a figure, clad in black, face concealed, waiting motionless for us to settle on one of the three sides of this human-size aquarium. Is it the angel of death incarnate?

On the back wall there’s a text that I learn later is part the poem ‘Alastor, or The Spirit of Solitude’, by Percy Bysshe Shelley, husband of Mary Shelley, author of the 1818 Gothic novel ‘Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus’ that has inspired more than just the title of Cherish Menzo’s new show.

“Thy shadow, and the darkness of thy steps. And my heart ever gazes on the depth…Of thy deep mysteries…” Before I’ve finished reading, a fragmented voice over begins: Welcome, good evening…or is it day…? Bienvenue, bonsoir…. ou est-ce le jour… ? Tonight’s program takes us backstage to witness firsthand the creation, start to finish, of a concoction of imaginations mounted on the frightening….” French and English merge and overlap. Somehow this breaks the tension; we’re in a theatre after all.

Three other performers (Malick Cissé, Mulunesh, Omagbitse Omagbemi), also wearing what turns out to be swish, black, shiny mackintoshes join the dark angel. All four begin rhythmically striding around the parameters of the square. Long steps, torsos leaning forward, elbows out, half Salvation Army-cum-military marching, half Bob Fosse-esque saunter. But they soon break ranks from the jaunty unison and the pattern disintegrates. In the increasing heat they peel away and discard parts of their black garb to reveal patches of red: a waistcoat or apron, shiny, as though daubed with fresh blood; then we glimpse flashes of hands in red palmed worker’s gloves: stop signs? more jaunty jazz hands? or those of a blood stained, monstrous executioner? The pristine white floor is now

becoming sullied. What could be soot, hair or dead leaves keeps appearing. I gradually understand it's the performers strewing the contents of their pockets around the stage. The lights occasionally flash blindingly, like the scene of a crime is being photographed.

Who is looking in or out at whom? Who is imprisoned, and who is protected from whom?

This rapid succession of powerfully symbolic images, now-you-see-me-now-you-don't style, combined with Maria Muehombo's thundering soundtrack, is harrowing. As is when one of the performers comes up close to the transparent wall with a wide-eyed, open-mouthed, red stained grimace, and fixes us with an incensed stare. Who is looking in or out at whom? Who is imprisoned, and who is protected from whom? The answer to this question is in perpetual mutation throughout the piece. The four performers masterfully mesh hip-hop moves to African dance, ritualistic rhythms to theatrical address, and the soundtrack does as much.

At one point Menzo prowls out beyond the aquarium wall. "You don't think I would just stay there?" she asks us, half seductively, half enraged. This shifting from one mode, one atmosphere, one theatrical code to another, creates a thrill that's akin to fear, an apprehension or anticipation that something horrific is about to happen. We're transfixed by images that seem to evoke the damage and devastation inflicted, historically and still today, on 'others' and specifically black people, by, not just a society's actions, but by its by gaze too.

Being probably one of the few audience members who is seeing Menzo's work for the first time, I discover that 'FRANK' is the last part of a tryptic and is the follow through of an *oeuvre* that "attempts to detach bodies from forced perception and their daily corporeal realities, underlining the complexities and contradictory nature of images that seem recognisable at first glance". In this 'FRANK' succeeds prodigiously. It also employs the mechanics of theatre to the full: text, set, light, literature, sound, movement, with the performers themselves dismantling the walls of plastic, Morgana Machado Marques' scenography, towards the end.

But it's after that moment, which possibly symbolises the notion of "collapse", a word that we've heard uttered throughout the piece, that the show seemed to overextend itself and tilt into verbosity. Seeing 'FRANK', and indeed the setting, brought to mind the horrifying installation '*Can't Help Myself*' by Chinese artists Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, that consisted of a huge mechanical digger closed off by glass walls, programmed to sweep up a viscous liquid that looked like blood. I had the opportunity to witness it 'live' and the experience still lingers. So shocking in its simplicity, later a video of it did the rounds of social media. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZS4Bpr2BgnE I'm not suggesting complex ideas within layered forms should be tictokable, but with 'FRANK' I somehow craved the silence and suspension points that allow an audience's imagination to also concoct and fill in there where words, explanations or action have reached a limit.