

Horizon

MANUELA INFANTE

A somewhat too clever puzzle



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Manuela Infante's performance Horizon is a Rubik's cube. When you think you've cracked it, look at the other side, and everything's still tantalisingly mismatched.

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The starting point is Infante's father or 'dad', and an interview that the adult artist conducted with the elderly scientist. Their relationship, and his profession as an astrophysicist and astronomer, was fundamental to her development as a theatre maker curious to seek out, investigate and sometimes articulate the 'unknown'.

Four actors, Andie Dushime , Valentijn Dhaenens, Mieke De Groote and Pitcho Womba Konga swap roles by turns, from father to daughter and back again. Their setting: a wood framed, giant half-moon backdrop, a blue lit shiny floor that could be the sea at night, and a floor level rostrum on coasters that the cast turn into vessels or beds, pedestals or school benches. We also glimpse a drum kit glinting in the back corner.

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First, the interview dialogue is relayed as both spoken text and projected written words; at times the two are in synch, at others, the verbal and the written echo or overlap each other. The narrative switches from Infante's father's discourse about the Big Bang and the origins and expansion of the universe, to her own fear of the dark. In parallel to the personal, the character of Christopher Columbus makes an appearance, already hinted at by the cast's cartoony, coloured costumes: knickerbockers, tights and tunics. The explorer's voyages into the unknown and the newly substantiated notion of the world as a sphere, gives mileage to the red thread of the work: the 'horizon' and the idea that not only do we not know what is beyond it, but that will we eternally never, ever know.

Big cosmic concepts are thus dropped into the performance amidst the bickering between the dads and their daughters, reflecting just how life was during Infante's childhood. Around two thirds into the piece, her father's encroaching dementia also becomes a narrative thread. His losing control of his bowels after failing to remember his speech loops us back to the beginning of the work where he chastises his fearful daughter for wetting herself. And since the start, the whole cast has been moving, bafflingly, with a comical shuffling gait that at this later stage, can be read as one typical of those afflicted with Parkinson's disease. Two sides of the same sphere "just tipped upside down" the text reiterates.

All the existential themes are dextrously interwoven with 'dad's' scientific conjecture; the circling back from past to present is masterly. This supplies the sensation that we're completing a jigsaw, (or indeed the Rubrik's cube) with the *Eureka* satisfaction of slotting in the different pieces of the puzzle. But why does Horizon fail to move me? I'm not familiar with Infante's previous work but learn that she is fascinated by the non-human. In Horizon, the heroes are very human. But, couching the hugely poignant experience of a daughter losing her father to dementia in cleverly complex theatrical constructs, where consciously stylised emotions and half-baked humour prevail, for me, simply doesn't ring true.

Where the piece lifts off however, is during the musical moments: the sung harmonies lubricate the lack of chronological logic, and the drum-kit comes into its own when Mieke De Groote lets rip with the sticks. This surprising burst is followed by a rapid dismantling and strewing of the kit over the stage. Through the earlier dialogues, we surmised that Infante was an ardent drummer in her youth, but not allowed to play after dark. In Horizon the drum-kit's dismembering seems to reveal more about Infante's reckoning with her father than all the previous criss-crossing conversations.