

Fierce Festival, Action Hero: Slap Talk

Action Hero: Slap Talk
Warwick Arts Centre
6th October 2013
Review by Anneka French

If other events from this year's Fierce Festival are marked by physical labour and bodily aggression (Heather Cassils, Kate McIntosh), then 'Slap Talk' is their verbal counterpart. Performed by Gemma Paintin and James Stenhouse of Action Hero, this four-hour event operates as the ultimate discursive arena, interrogating the construction and application of dialogue and performance.

A darkened theatre space is the site for an exhaustive argument between a man and a woman. They are spot-lit and set up to face each other across a stage. As they each speak into a television camera, their faces appear in close-up on monitors at the front of the stage so that the audience simultaneously watches a live exchange and a filmic recording. Formally, the audience is positioned separately from the performers. The viewer's vantage is framed and fixed as it would be in a traditional theatre, placed at a physical remove much further than in other of Action Hero's works.

Ostensibly, the two performers are in confrontational dialogue with one another, albeit one mediated by a camera. Sometimes their speech slips into monologue as Paintin and Stenhouse read lines of varying lengths from autocues only they can see. The audience, as part of the wider theatre, are implicated in this framework, activated and affected by the violence and tension of the exchanged threats such as, "I'm going to pull your face off," or by the humour of their child-like insults, "I'm going to flambé your gerbil." Like much of Action Hero's previous live works and as their name would suggest, it is the artifice of film and television, or performance more generally, that is revealed and explored. They describe this piece as referencing the televised verbal sparring between warring politicians, and pre-fight boxers: that particular kind of argument as performance.

In 'Slap Talk' there is also much to be found from the verbal performance of everyday life: the daily one-upmanship and squabbling of children, the low-level constant bickering or shouting matches of a couple at the end of their tether. Smaller, disparate narratives themed around surgery, lions, accident claims and YouTube build in the work and develop into a larger non-linear discussion characterised by anger and calmness, threat and insult, silliness, sulking and undermining one another. Attention is drawn to the mechanisms and impact of intonation, vocabulary, facial expression, the volume and speed of speech, the intentions and emotions behind words, and the power they can effect.

Action Hero, despite the script and the considered delivery of every line, emotionally expose themselves to the audience in moments of apparent tenderness such as, "I'm punching above my weight. You're above my weight," and in insults which uncomfortably seem to contain very personal elements of truthfulness. Truth and fiction is contested throughout the duration of this highly stripped-back work, as Paintin and Stenhouse occasionally slip 'out of character' to discuss directly the nature of their dialogue and its duration. This self-reflexivity adds yet a further layer of meaning to this intimate, engaging and unsettling work.