

Pastry Pie Crust & Cherry Chocolate Topping

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By Zaphod R H Mann

No Strangers Here Today – a collaboration between Portland writer/movement artist, Susan Banyas and L.A. jazz artist, David Ornette Cherry. This ambitious performance piece weaves texts from 19th century slave rescuers with contemporary issues of war and freedom – the performance evokes Laurie Anderson, Meredith Monk and David Glass.

Elvis Costello once put on awful and drearily didactic concert in which he choose to talk most of the time rather than play his music. A row with some of the audience ensued, someone bellowing out: "If I wanted to be educated, I'd be in school, I paid to be entertained!" (expletives deleted)... So what to make of a theatre performance by an avant-garde dancer, paired with a major jazz keyboardist, that delivers a history lesson that spans the Civil War to the present and the struggle against slavery?

I am no fan of the vogue for 'historical' fiction, and was wary of the pretext of No Strangers Here Today – a collaboration between Portland writer/movement artist, Susan Banyas and L.A. jazz artist, David Ornette Cherry – but this documentary delivery of fact was surprisingly effective, expertly performed and should, I would argue, become an essential contribution to North American self-understanding. It seems that sometimes art and education can mix; you can have Grandma's cake, and eat it.

The work is inspired by Banyas's discovery of a diary kept by her Great Great Grandmother, Elizabeth Edwards, during the Civil War. The diary includes coded phrases suggesting Edwards's participation in the Underground Railroad movement which aided the escape of slaves to the north and eventually led to the abolition of slavery. Using these brief diary entries as the central theme Banyas has created a "monologue-with-movement about political engagement that dances between personal memory and American history from the Civil War to the present."

Cherry's presence was delightful, contributing without dominating the stark vulnerability of Banyas' demanding role. Cherry is an advocate of playing the piano "like water" so it was fitting that he immediately conjured up memories of Roger Waters's pastoral Grantchester Meadows compositions (Pink Floyd) to introduce Banyas in her childhood memories . At other times, in support of more menacing passages, he created a distant rumbling backdrop reminiscent of Moslem Gauze; and during the many nostalgic sequences he supplied melodic touches reminiscent of Abdullah Ibrahim (aka Dollar Brand). The discretion shown in his overall contribution would have been appreciated by his father, the late great Don Cherry, who specialised in such an approach.

No Strangers Here Today is a monologue, around an hour long, and in that undertaking Banyas is stretching it a little: There is some variety in the presentation, but it is limited – the use of a microphone for three speech out-takes was welcome but delivered little dramatic effect (the majority of her voice was expertly projected without amplification). One wondered if layering

the performance with a little pre-recorded voice would have let her emphasise her talent for movement and mime; and if the addition of an occasional text projection across her body or backstage would have accented the material. Banyas told me that she sees the work becoming a documentary film, and that may be it's best reconciliation, nevertheless, this ambitious live endeavour carried well and stirred the audience.

I have been fortunate in my time to see performances by Laurie Anderson, Meredith Monk and David Glass – I mention this because there were elements in Banyas's performance that reminded me of each of them. Perhaps the most obvious influence was Monk's expressive dance; Banyas interlaced the verbal dominance of the piece with numerous darting flashes of dance movement – at once suddenly distorted and twisting, or lifting into a ballet leap, or crouched in a primate defense.

There was less of Laurie Anderson's influence in the performance than I had anticipated – no electronic wizardry, but there was similarity in the textural weaving of lyrical content, and like Anderson (who never really sang) Banyas used a sweeter and higher musical register occasionally to convey some lighter moments. An excellent touch, typical of the selectivity demonstrated throughout.

David Glass is the less well known brother of the composer Philip Glass, the David Glass Ensemble have been producing remarkable physical and visual theatre for three decades (in one stunning London performance Glass single-handedly reversed my opinion about mime). Watching Banyas, I wondered if she had studied with Glass, so strong was her mime – illuminating the simple letters she recited with flurries of economic gestures that brought visual shape to their contents.

There's certainly a political edge to this work that will appeal more to liberal states: Banyas links the past with the contemporary issues surrounding current US executive policy, and encourages the audience to "vigilance against economic, political, and personal tyranny" in the press release. It would be a great pity if this story didn't obtain widespread exposure in the very states where its relevance is more pertinent.

As the work progressed forward in time, and the inevitable sequence linking the theme to Iraq came, I feared it would collapse, but in the best theatrical portion of the show, Banyas negotiated herself backwards to the rear theatre wall, there to evoke Abu Ghraib to great dramatic effect. Perhaps without such a demanding reciting overhead we could have had more of this from her. David Cherry

The production next travels south to Los Angeles as part of the ALOUD series at the Los Angeles Central Library on February 25, 2007. I highly recommend you catch it: Banyas has created something of rare importance here and Cherry's soundscape contribution is worth the ticket price on its own. A word too for the discreet direction provided by Gregg Bielemeier and Gwynne Warner, my other comments notwithstanding, they achieved the desired effectiveness on a tight budget.

Another mention must go to Bill Boese, whose lighting design was limited but stark, providing me with what I expect to be a lasting image; that of Cherry's large, dark face seemingly collapsing and rebuilding like chocolate cake mix as he played, contrasting with Banyas's lovely but pasty-coloured skin (the pie crust); the two together emulating the collaboration of those people, white and black who triumphed in the Underground Railroad movement, and those who today, continue to heed lessons from their history.