



CONJURING SOMETHING
OUT OF NOTHING
O ELEFANTE NO MEIO DA SALA
DE VÂNIA DOUTEL VAZ
FRANCESCA RAYNER

SINAIS DE CENA III.2
DEZEMBRO DE 2023

FRANCESCA RAYNER

CENTRO DE ESTUDOS HUMANÍSTICOS DA UNIVERSIDADE DO MINHO (CEHUM)

O ELEFANTE NO MEIO DA SALA [THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM]

CONCEITO, CRIAÇÃO E PERFORMANCE: Vânia DouTel Vaz

DRAMATURGIA: Josefa Pereira

DESENHO DE ILUMINAÇÃO: Letícia Skrycky

SOM: Tiago Cerqueira

FIGURINO: Nina Botkay

ESPAÇO: Letícia Skrycky com colaboração de Nina Botkay

TÉCNICA DE ILUMINAÇÃO E DIREÇÃO TÉCNICA: Ana Carocinho

PRODUÇÃO: Alkantara

CO-PRODUÇÃO: Teatro do Bairro Alto, Teatro Municipal do Porto /

DDD – Festival Dias da Dança, A Oficina / Centro Cultural Vila Flor Data

LOCAL E DATA DE ESTREIA: Alkantara Festival, 12 de setembro de 2022

It didn't start promisingly. Aware that her solo was part of the Guidance dance festival in Guimarães and conscious of the fact that her extensive international experience and training meant most people would have come to see her dance, Vânia DouTel Vaz nevertheless met these expectations head-on by beginning the performance sitting in a chair talking to the audience. In this conversation, she acknowledged explicitly the audience's expectation that she would dance without explaining or justifying herself, told differing stories about the performance she had created, and established an immediate sense of presence through tone of voice. If this deliberate flouting of audience expectations and emphasis on storytelling through voice rather than movement suggested a rather inwardly-directed, somewhat conventional solo performance, slowly, almost imperceptibly, it became something altogether different.

For me, this transformation became noticeable when Vaz asked for the music to be turned off. Only as she said this did I become aware that there had been some sort of sound in the background which had now ceased. This ability to conjure objects and identities seemingly out of nothing and to make them immediately and vividly present continued throughout the performance in a delightful sequence of imaginative narratives. The initial refusal to cater to audience expectations became a game rather than the high seriousness which can sometimes dog contemporary dance. The body remained at the centre of this game and there were virtuoso moments that showed the dancer's technical abilities, but it was the body in all its poly-somatic versatility and its interaction with space, texture, lighting, and sound that Vaz shared with her audience here.

O ELEFANTE NO MEIO DA SALA, CONCEÇÃO, CRIAÇÃO E PERFORMANCE DE VÂNIA DOUTEL VAZ, 2022
(VÂNIA DOUTEL VAZ), [F] PAULO PACHECO.



Several scenes from the performance are firmly etched on my mind. For no apparent reason, Vaz came to the front of the stage and embodied a series of “characters” through facial gestures and subtle corporeal shifts, ranging from the shy but bored woman to the evil one to the woman torn between crying and laughing. These little vignettes were primarily comic but illustrated at the same time the versatility and control of the performer’s movements. In another sequence, what seemed to be one stage costume was revealed to be multilayered as Vaz shed layer after layer of clothing in neatly-folded piles on the stage. As she did so, she lowered her voice to a murmur so it could hardly be heard, challenging the audience to listen attentively to the stories she told as she involved them in the choice of whether to remove a piece of clothing from the top or lower half of her body. The colourful patterns of the clothing were later unexpectedly doubled as Vaz turned back a piece of the floor covering to reveal a similar floral pattern underneath which then became an impromptu bed in which she took a brief nap. The row of lights above her responded sensitively to the sound of her voice. Elephants and other animals were also conjured up during the performance, either through the suggestiveness of folded material or through the guttural, animalesque sounds and jerky movements made by the performer in yet another courageous experiment with body and voice that in a less talented performer might have been disastrous.

Towards the end of the performance, having returned to her chair in a different part of the performance space, Vaz began softly to sing the words to Tina Turner’s Private Dancer. Her slightly mournful phrasing created a tense parallel between the dancer dancing for money in Turner’s song and Vaz’s own performance, laying bare the financial transaction that underlies all artistic endeavour. Yet she followed this with Whitney Houston’s One Moment in Time, which

became here not a rather cheesy love song but a heartfelt vindication of the power of the performer. She followed this with a confession of how much she loved and was good at such performing, somewhat tongue in cheek but at the same time absolutely believable after what had gone before. In a performance characterized by magical transformations and the ability to focus on something that seemed invisible but had in fact always been there, this was a fitting end to this joyfully creative performance. Or not quite. Left on her own as the audience began filing out, Vaz greeted the applause with a casual shrug of her shoulders, deconstructing even her own pride in the performance. Every person I spoke to afterward had a smile on their face, temporarily transfigured by this wonderfully eclectic performance. This is Vaz’s first solo performance and if this exceptionally accomplished piece of work is anything to go by, she certainly has a long and successful career ahead of her. In an increasingly risk-averse performance culture, such bold, inspirational pieces are ever more necessary. ::

