

Bodies at the Edinburgh Festival

What extraordinary jobs we have. People trust us with their bodies. They show us their bodies. Or bits of them. This clinical context may serve to dilute our appreciation of how amazing and beautiful and funny and grotesque the human body is.

Enter Ron Mueck, sculptor and master of making us examine our perceptions of the human body. In his exhibition at the Royal Scottish Academy, a baby fills a room, a huge woman's figure in bed returns us to our childhood perceptions of our mothers as huge creatures, a small man in a vast boat is 'cast adrift on the ocean of life', an adolescent self-conscious of her body stands against a wall with averted gaze, two small old women stand hunched over, gossiping and disapproving. Mueck's sculptures are never life-size. We see ourselves writ large or very small. Rather than being a celebration of the human body his work questions our perceptions of nakedness, of scale, of what we all have in common especially at key moments in our lives.

The international physical theatre performances of Aurora Nova at St Stephen's are an annual highlight of the festival and they are a celebration of the human body. Imaginative, provocative and extremely creative, they often deal with complex emotional issues in a way which is more powerful for the lack of words. In the week when the media was focusing on the influx of Poles into the country and the UK Human Trafficking Centre in conjunction with UNICEF were drawing attention to the horror of human trafficking, a Czech dance company were staging a production, *Sclavi (The Song of an Emigrant)*. With polyphonic and ritual songs from Slovakia and the Ukraine, it told the story of a Slovak migrant who, in the end, 'Though he has returned to his homeland he will always be an emigrant'. The visceral response stimulated by the movements of the pained bodies and the rhythms resonated with the current political debate and made it more real.

The audience's appreciation of the dancers was not primarily due to their

beauty, although some, of course, were young and strong and very beautiful. It was their expressiveness, honesty, and rawness which made it special. What Mueck's exhibition and Aurora Nova's theatre both did was to express complicated concepts in an accessible way, to use the human body to challenge pre-conceptions and the status quo, to encourage the audience to identify with the images and actions. And perhaps, therefore, to feel more comfortable with, and accept, some of the less pleasant aspects of being human and having very imperfect human bodies.

As I walked through the waiting room this morning I noticed two elderly women sitting in the corner clearly gossiping and complaining about having to wait. I thought of Mueck's sculpture and smiled to myself. A good way to start the day. Thank you, Ron Mueck.

Lesley Morrison



In Bed, by Ron Mueck, 2005

RON MUECK
 5 August – 1 October 2006
 ROYAL SCOTTISH
 ACADEMY BUILDING,
 The Mound, Edinburgh
 Admission £6.00
 (concessions £4.00);
 free to children under 12