

Performance of solitude, cigarettes and coffee

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GIBRAN KHALIL GIBRAN

St Patrick's Cathedral, Parramatta. February 18

Consider the subject - Gibran Khalil Gibran (1883-1931): born in Lebanon, family emigrates to America at age 12, educated in the Boston public school system, at 15 he returns to Lebanon and finishes college in 1902, learning Arabic and French. He then returns to the US, becoming a painter and writer. Most famous work: The Prophet. Died of liver cancer in New York in 1931.

Cultural theorists have claimed that the most interesting art is produced in places where two or more cultures are interacting (for example, any monoculture is deadly dull). Gibran's work is an illustrative example of this, especially with its concerns of solitude, struggle and exile - all aspects of the immigrant experience.

Theatre TAQA's Gibran Khalil Gibran is not a bioplay of Gibran's life. It's a thematic exploration of issues in his work, gaining resonance as the words of this US emigre are transmuted through the contemporary experience of Arab-Australians.

Gibran's line "His world can only be seen by the eye of the eye - never by the eye itself" is this work's key text. This is an interior and personal representation of the writer's work, an open text that allows the audience to assemble any meaning they care to.

The setting is superb. The shell of St Patrick's Cathedral is an incredibly suggestive space. The stone walls are still standing, but, above, the skeletal rafters are open to the sky. With the exception of the shadow of a crucifix burnt into the wall behind the altar, this could be a non-denominational place of worship. The mozzie-repelling tapers and the evocative lighting (by Karl Johnson and the company) add to the atmosphere.

With its floor of rubble and ruined walls, the cathedral represents a space of poverty and struggle as well as spirituality. Some of this production's most effective imagery is based around the floor - a woman sowing barren seeds into the unforgiving earth or crawling blindfolded in the dirt, weighed down by stones.

This a performance of solitude, of cigarettes and coffee, of finding comfort in cold stone pillars. Above it all, the writer sits, smoking a lot and typing a little. Occasionally she drops sheets of paper, discarded texts and messages from above falling slowly to the ground. In what is perhaps a subtle joke, the DJ table is placed where the altar would normally be (a God who can dance?). The sound artist **Khaled Sabsabi** and voice performer/mixer Saleh Saqqaf provide excellent work.

The setting of some of Gibran's lyrics to hip-hop provides another bridging reference to the contemporary and local.

The opening night wasn't helped by some noisy and mood-breaking radio mics, but that should be eminently fixable. And while Gibran doesn't have the rigour of TAQA's last work, Writing With The Hip, its looser style works with the content and the marvellous space. Above all, this production delivers a tantalising experience of the words of Gibran Khalil Gibran - spare, powerful and deceptively simple.

"What are you doing?/I'm looking at life./Is that all?/Isn't that enough?" It certainly is.