

A journey through the looking glass with Adrienne Truscott at The Kitchen in New York

By *Ivan Talijancic*

Nothing much happens in Adrienne Truscott's puzzlingly titled *...Too Freedom...* (the original title includes a sea of Japanese characters that yours truly, alas, cannot decipher), presented in its world première this past weekend at The Kitchen. The fact that this hour-plus long work manages not to be boring even for a moment, without much action and without the fireworks, is perhaps the biggest testament to the inventiveness of its creators and their ability to engage and entertain the audience in a deceptively effortless fashion.



The scent of fresh paint pervades my nostrils as I settle in my seat at The Kitchen's newly refurbished performance space – the venue had sustained massive water damage earlier this fall, when Hurricane Sandy struck New York City – the sparse décor of the stage being dominated by patches of fabric sewn together into a sort of a sail that is attached to the ceiling, and, more discreetly, a small table with only a teapot on it. A few odd pieces of construction materials are also leaning against the stage wall, and I wonder if they were left behind in the wake of recent renovations. As I later find out, I am wrong: in spite of the casual feel of this work, trust Ms Truscott not to leave any part of it unintentional.

As *...Too Freedom...* eases its way in, my first observation is that the friendly box office person, house manager and ticket taker – all actual staff members of The Kitchen – are not only taking a bit longer than usual to clear the stage, they are there to stay. As the latter (who turns out to be the choreographer herself) starts making circles across the stage floor, around and behind the seating risers and back across the stage again and again, the click-clack of her footsteps (amplified by floor microphones, supposedly) booms through the speakers. After a few cycles, Ms Truscott stops, but the sound of footsteps continues, and from this moment on, all the way through to the end of the performance, I understand that what one sees is not what one gets. Indeed, in that precise moment, it becomes clear that the stage world, as “real” as it feels, is actually part of a very whimsical fiction that is superimposed on spectators as a parallel reality.

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What follows is an odd, minimalistic, but very effective journey through the looking glass. Truscott disrobes, to reveal a tight, shiny leotard, plugs a headset into her iPhone and proceeds to practice her choreography. Though she is thoroughly absorbed by the task, she is not going for the full expression of her moves – they are contained, in a “rehearsal mode”. As the show goes on, the house manager ushers the latecomers onto the stage, and their embarrassment is directly proportional to the gleeful pleasure that the spectators get out of it. As a matter of fact, the later they arrive the more punishing the task – the young woman who arrives some 20 minutes into the performance is not allowed to take her reserved seat: not only is she cruelly separated from her friend, the seat she is taken to proceeds to be brightly illuminated with a spotlight. The woman covers her face, and the peals of laughter make the audience risers vibrate. Eventually the house manager takes a seat at the table on stage, and no sooner than she begins to pour herself a cup of tea do we realize that, surreally, though more and more tea keeps flowing out of the teapot, the cup never seems to get filled. What next? A roast chicken gets delivered to the table and slowly but surely devoured by the performers. Three construction workers proceed to build a makeshift prefab house on the stage, and take time in doing so while the dancers – finally satiated – get to reproduce the choreography Truscott rehearsed earlier on in the show.

Clearly, this show is not about accomplished dancing, nor is it meant to highlight the bravura or the talent of those involved, but it’s rather about investigating fragile boundaries between the art of dance-making and the act of spectatorship. Impressively enough, all the participants find very natural ways of “not performing” while on stage, which is a much more difficult feat than one would think, and Truscott and her cohorts are good at subverting expectations and creating spectacle out of the anticipation of what ultimately does not happen.

Even as the performance draws to a close, the surprises don’t stop coming. The construction worker tells Truscott, in Spanish, that it’s time to end. They converse for a bit (the script for the dialogue is affixed on the wall of the makeshift house) until she tells him there is one more thing she needs to do. She goes back stage and lifts the sail-like structure to reveal one of her performers (Neal Medlyn) playing a concert piano. When he stands up and leaves, as one would suspect by now, the piano keeps playing. Applause. The end? Not quite. On my way out, the cast, erm, theatre staff is back on duty, handing out playbills, managing the box office and assisting spectators on their way out – in the nude. As I walk down the rainy streets of Manhattan, the show goes on, albeit in my mind.

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