



Review: STILL LIFE: FLESH, Barbican

Heartfelt tragedy and unspeakable beauty

by Alexander Cohen Jan. 26, 2023



From four images flow a smorgasbord of emotions. They spill out off the stage and fill the **Barbican Theatre** with their tender embrace. In just under an hour and a half *Flesh*, the UK debut of Belgian theatre company Still Life, communicates tragic truths about the human condition all without uttering a word.



Four performers, Muriel Legrand, Sophie Linsmaux, Aurelio Mergola, and Jonas Wertz, present four scenes: The final moments of a man in a hospital bed, a socialite overeagerly unwrapping bandages after plastic surgery, a woman lost in the fantasy of a VR experience of the Titanic, and a dysfunctional family gathering after a funeral.

They might seem random, but the creative team gently scratch at the images to discover a vulnerable emotional nexus behind each sequence. Underpinning everything is a distinctly human urge to love and be loved in return. It manifests in different guises, mourning the loss of family, the desire to become beautiful, escaping the reality into a fiction.

Love and its infinite ethereal possibility may hum gently underneath the music of our lives, but we still have to manage that alongside our situatedness in the world, our entanglement as physical things who dream metaphysical dreams. Human flesh is a recurring motif, how we use and abuse it, how it eventually betrays us.

The constant yearning to transcend our bodies ends in failure. We are doomed to fail. Love just leads to loss. Fantasy is a maze that leads back to cold hard reality. The second scene ends in Cronenberg-esque horror when the still malleable plastic is distorted and ruined by a lover. Terror ripples around the room as the socialite becomes a freakish monster shuddering with fear. All we can do is laugh at our hubris. We are doomed to be human, all too human. Let's try to have some fun while we are at it.

The third sequence is, despite how hilarious it is to watch a woman oblivious to onlookers recreate *Titanic* (car sex scene and all), a silent tragedy. Her desperation is palpable, each long satisfied breath she takes, each ship's horn and ocean wave crash that rumbles from her headset completes the illusion. But it is nothing more than that. It comes cascading down to earth when she removes her VR headset and is almost aggressively confronted with a dull grey room, with a disgruntled employee goading her to hand over the headset.

It's all thanks to the four performers who evoke subtly a rich depth to each character they inhabit. There are no ostentatious decisions, nothing particularly theatrical. Just intelligent direction reflecting quantum level idiosyncrasies that go unnoticed in the everyday humdrum of life. Only the tiniest flickers of their characters' inner lives are visible. Each icy look, loving gaze, and eyebrow twitch screams with a torrent of language and all without uttering a word. It's intensely moving but you can't quite tell why. It's beyond language.