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Death on the Road: Memory in Australia's Tim Winton's Shrine

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The effort of the Kin Collective behind Tim Winton's third play, Shrine, was always going to be a step onto virgin land. For one, Winton comes at the play as a novelist, thick with internalised images and noise. As the director Marcel Dorney explained of the recently concluded production, "People who spend more time in drama have a different approach to structuring that experience."

The focus of the play is death, but death in a manner reflective of a nation in love with its vehicles. The car is emancipator, a liberating device on four wheels that takes the child out of the womb of the home into the outer world.

Tim Winton (Source: abc.net.au)

That outer world comes with its dangers, including road toll figures that are staggering in their dimension. Cars of freedom can become coffins of despair. Nothing detracts from that sheer carnage, despite the yawn inducing language from the monthly bulletins issued by the Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics.

> "During the 12 months ending May 2017," goes one BITRE remark over numbers that would make a mighty necropolis, "there were 1,226 road deaths." Despite such a number, the bureaucratic instinct prefers to place it in minor, almost congratulatory perspective: "This is a 2.7 percent decrease compared to the total for the 12-month period ended May 2016."[1]

The spectacular comes up against the prosaic, the ordinariness of the lethal moment, made sacred by monuments, reflective reminders left on the road, near the scene of the cruel departure. As Winton surmises,

> “It has to be a particularly grisly death to make the paper. The private story is told by the signs that people put up.”

Winton’s own effort suggests a point repeatedly touched upon by Malraux, who was never convinced that the mystical or religious had retired from the enlightened march of secularism. Underneath the desire for progressive liberation from immaturity is an equally tenacious wish for spiritual identification. Witness that very issue now, where martyrdom retains its potent currency.

In the act of heroism or cowardice, faith beats and hacks its way through the undergrowth of doubt. Winton rightly notes that, despite an essentially secular base in the country of his birth, with its a near manic resistance to iconography, there are gloriously odd exceptions. The Australian war memorial has become the manifestation of a “secular religion”, a form of totemic mysticism clinging to such tenuous concepts as mateship and solidarity before shell and bullet.[2]

Australia is far from unique in this, though it lacks the sheer range of historical material for memorialisation. Countries accustomed to a generational change of foreign rulers, a regular shift in the guard, are also conditioned by the change of monuments, the lexical tricks that come with renaming streets and replacing designated heroes in battles over memory.

In the last decade, Spain provided a supreme illustration about how monuments and symbols from another era – that of the dictator Franco – might be confronted. The Law of Historical Memory remains a remarkable effort to reconcile yet challenge a blood-soaked, grievous past. All societies have their memorials, but some are deemed more desirable than others.

This desirability, this conflict on memory, is central to Shrine. This is not a play about gargantuan monuments whisked off plinths and ravaged by hammers and shoes. It is not about cold storage for deposed dictators. The focus is ordinary: the road death of Jack (Christian Taylor), and the shrine made for him near the spot of his demise by his flawed car companions.

The death of Christian Taylor (Jack) sets off a chain of events in Shrine (Source: The Sydney Morning Herald)

In this production, there was one actor who seized the Winton model ideally, and came across as a masterful man of realised images on stage. The grieving father, Adam Mansfield, played by Chris Bunworth, overwhelms the audience with his wine lubricated suffering, effectively displacing his dead son with an alternative figure – his variant, if you will.

The only criticism here is how overwhelming that performance is, supplanting that of the mother, Mary (Alexandra Fowler). This may well be the failure on Winton's part to fully realise the female character, a point that adds a note of lopsidedness to an otherwise magnificent effort.

The dead becomes puttee to mould, and the characters of the play supply the material. The shrine that springs up to Jack's death is not something Adam finds sombre relief in. Such an object is something to revile, a reflection of "mystic shit" rather than deep worth. Each time he drives by, he destroys it, raging at Jack's companions who survived the crash.

He has one opponent in that respect. June (Teneille Thompson) is the resident teenager frowned upon as a hick, a "bush pig" who works at the local IGA supermarket. After each destructive episode, she returns to resurrect the shrine to Jack. She proceeds to insert herself into the father's life, and recalls the last moments of Jack's last night alive. A painting is thereby realised: Jack in the company of rowdy, insecure peers; a blossoming infatuation stemming from June for Jack; acts of supposed heroism and folly.

For all the brooding rage in Adam's character, it is evident that such anger is a disagreement on how best to remember a late son, a point complicated by a reserve and denial cultivated over the years of parenthood and privilege.

June's account of Jack, a naïve, boyish enthusiasm, seems somewhat at odds with the father's. But is this her reading of Jack, or a father's wish to imagine a different son who died that early morning? Winton, and this production, keeps us guessing.

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Notes

[1] https://bitre.gov.au/publications/ongoing/road_deaths_australia_monthly_bulletins.aspx

[2] http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/stage/melbourne-stage/tim-wintons-play-shrine-tests-writers-nerves-and-shines-a-light-on-road-trauma-20170518-gw7upg.html

Featured image: Canberra Critics Circle

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