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The Dead. Visualising nostalgia

di *Bojana Jankovic*

Inspired by the last story in James Joyce's *Dubliners*, *The Dead* by Italian Company Città di Ebla is an exploration of nostalgia and memories. While both the original text and the performance focus on a woman remembering her deceased lover, Joyce chooses to do so by allowing her husband to witness a still but poignant moment of his wife's silent, yet mesmerising contemplation; in Città di Ebla's performance, it's the audience who becomes the witness to an externalised, theatricalised form of nostalgia.

Renouncing text for the most part *The Dead* instead uses live photography as its language. Images taken during the performance are projected onto a screen moments later; placed where the proverbial fourth wall usually is, simultaneously blocking clear view of the action and providing close-ups, this encompassing projection screen becomes a suitable symbol for how incomplete and edited memories often are. Behind it is a female performer (Valentina Bravetti) preparing to leave, possibly for the last time, the bedroom once joyfully shared with a man. There are two narratives here: for the protagonist, it's a simple if emotional one of packing and leaving, but for the audience it's a trail of clues and flashbacks that slowly unravel the history of a space and the people who used to live in it.

The interweaving of these two narratives is the stumbling block of *The Dead*. The present one serves mainly to support the one of the past – hence Bravetti is seen melancholically walking across the stage, touching furniture, illustrating sadness and the weight of difficult memories. The emotional intensity of the character is replaced by its theatrical representation, sacrificed so that the audience would have the experience of slowly discovering the space, as the light shifts from one object to the other. The central part of the performance, in which images taken behind the screen uncover a happy morning from the past – full of simple pleasures and intimacy – suffers from a similar issue. As photos flash on the screen one after another, the sheer mechanics overtake much of the symbolism, and the effort of silently posing in a closed off space, although invisible, becomes the dominant event.

The reason live photography hinders this performance is not necessarily in the technology employed – it's neither too complex nor too overwhelming. It's a cleverly devised tool, that mimics the fragility and unreliability of memories, which also change focus, become embellished, reduced to torcherous or glorified moments. The very fact that the photos on display are only a second old puts into question the temporality of all the heavy burden of the past – if its emotional impact is still considerable, the distinction between two days and two years ago becomes hard to pinpoint. However, while the live photography, the associative soundscape and a space that's carefully designed to be *vintage* but not time-specific, all reflect on the power, passion and debilitating nostalgia that lurk from the past, the basic narrative of the performance – that of a woman trying to escape the physical remnants of her history – doesn't offer enough scope to carry off all the connotations Città di Ebla attempt to develop.

The act of leaving is perhaps difficult but not particularly eventful which leaves all the carefully crafted imagery and sound without an anchor. In an attempt to remain a piece of theatre *The Dead* drags moments out to minutes, that then become illustrative, subduing the evocative effects of sounds and images.