

Vaslav explores the fine line between genius and insanity

 By Michael Britton 14 Nov 2019

I saw *Vaslav* recently and came out of the theatre disturbed and saddened. Not by the performance of Godfrey Johnson, his portrayal of Vaslav Nijinsky or by any other aspect of the production.

On the contrary, Johnson is brilliant and I cannot think of another performer who could have brought the same empathy and depth of passion to such a harrowing story.



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Too early to be accepted

What disturbed and saddened me was the way Western culture deals with members of society who do not fall into tightly-defined behavioural 'norms'. It seems that if someone, anyone, regularly challenges the rigid societal boundaries, they are regarded as 'different'.

Different in the sense of being scary dangerous.

Vaslav Nijinsky was different, too different to be acceptable – despite his genius for dance and choreography. While he was celebrated for his skill, sensitivity and intensity, his radical interpretation of the challenging music of Stravinsky created friction in his audiences.

His sexuality (in Debussy's *The Afternoon of a Faun*, he mimed masturbation) outraged society. This was a society struggling to come to terms with changing socio-political events and shifting boundaries. Nijinsky was, perhaps, a few decades too early to be accepted.

In Nijinsky's words: "People thought I was mad, I just thought I was fully alive." He was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic when he was 29 and spent the next 30 years in and out of institutions.



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It's a fine line between genius and insanity. And it is this fine line that Godfrey Johnson's one-man show explores, crossing and re-crossing that line until you wonder what side you're on. But Johnson always knows just where he is.

Whether he's at the piano crashing out Stravinsky or soothing with Satie or jerkily moving across the stage – he's always in control.

Johnson takes you on an emotional journey as he explores the contents of Nijinsky's mind. The primary source material for this is Nijinsky's diaries, written in 1919.

Enhancing the fractured and tortured nature

Secondary sources are the words of people who were associated with him or close to him. So you see the dancer through the eyes of multiple characters, enhancing the fractured and tortured nature of the Nijinsky story.

While Nijinsky may not have been the first person to be diagnosed as schizophrenic, it's interesting to note that schizophrenia, while it may have existed previously, was only identified and labelled 11 years before Nijinsky's diagnosis. Makes me wonder how many Nijinskys and Einsteins are languishing in the institutions where we park our societal discards.



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It's nine years since I first reviewed a Godfrey Johnson show. And one sentence from that review comes back to confront me. I wrote, in a review of *The Shadow of Brel*,

“It may be premature to label Godfrey Johnson as a master of his art, but he certainly has the talent, humour, passion, verve and versatility to become one.”

Well, it is no longer premature to regard Johnson as a master of his art. He's clearly in a league of his own. Bravo, Godfrey! Bravo!

Vaslav will be performed in The Fugard Studio Theatre until 17 November. Shows are on from Tuesday to Saturday at 8pm with matinee performances on Saturdays and Sundays at 3pm.

Tickets from R150 to R160 can be booked through The Fugard Theatre box office on 021 461 4554 or through The Fugard Theatre's website at www.thefugard.com.

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