CARNESKY’S TAROT DROME

4-15 SEPTEMBER 2012
THE OLD VIC TUNNELS

PRESS REVIEWS

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Carnesky's Tarot Drome

Until Sat Sep 15  Old Vic Tunnels, Station Approach Rd, SE1 8SW

Theatre: Fringe

Time Out says ★★★★★

By Ben Walters  Posted: Mon Sep 10 2012

Marisa Carnesky has - as she tells us, tongue firmly in cheek - been doing this trendy 'immersive cabaret circus promenade performance' thing for years. Her unique niche of interactive end-of-the-pier esoterica has fused ghost trains, anatomical models and tattoo culture with religion, feminism and class consciousness in ways both playful and rewardingly demanding.

In 'Carnesky's Tarot Drome', she plays ringmaster to a dozen-odd live incarnations of the major arcana of the mystical deck, embodied by performers associated with alternative performance companies as varied as Ducky, Boom Boom Club and Lucha Britannia. It’s a rich, heady and provocative experience.

In the first half, punters are free to wander the shadowy arches of the Old Vic Tunnels, seeking out eye-contact encounters with the likes of the Empress (Suri Sumatra), all enveloping arms and seductive fruit; the Chariot (Rhyannon Styles), who combines transgender identity and slob-culture narcissism; and Death (Nina Fella), a transformative figure who emerges from striking immobility into unbounded flexibility. Bosch-style beasties, self-sufficient singalongs and aquatic thrashings are also to be found.

Then comes an archetypal struggle channelled through the medium of Mexican wrestling, and a stage-show of celestial tumult presented as lamé-clad roller disco. Initially boasting roiling rock from Rasp Thorne And The Briars and some striking visual coups, this sequence drifts and drags anticlimactically - particularly regrettable given the impossibility of exploring all of the promenade work in the allotted time.

This is the real heart of the show: a test-bed of images, thoughts and ideas flowing from the figure of the Hanged Man, tremulously suspended between dissatisfaction and risk-taking, as most of us are. At its best, ‘Carnesky’s Tarot Drome’ invites and enables us to embrace agency and change. Just pick a card.
Carnesky's Tarot Drome

30 August 2012
The high priestess of circus wonders comes up trumps

Marisa Carnesky's new theatrical homage to the carnivalesque is a divinely divinatory affair, Roberta Mock discovers

Carnesky’s Tarot Drome
The Old Vic Tunnels, London
4-15 September

Marisa Carnesky is a show-woman who specialises in reanimation. Waxworks, dolls, ghosts, half-remembered traditions, mythical goddesses and now tarot cards are brought to life in her quirky and provocative brand of entertainment.

Carnesky is a difficult artist to label. As her career has progressed, she has piled genre upon genre, increasingly blurring the boundaries of performance. "What I do," she told an interviewer in the online listings magazine Run Riot, "is really a mix of performance art, spectacle, circus and experiential promenade installation theatre. Or perhaps it’s easier to say that it’s experimental visual theatre." What this fails to convey is just how sexy, strange and fun it is to attend a Carnesky production.

In her last major show, 2010’s Dystopian Wonders, she led audiences through an exhibition of bodies that merged flesh with beautifully constructed wounds and organs made of wax, silk and embroidered felt. One had two heads. A naked lady levitated. A glamorous contortionist disappeared into an open torso. Among the featured artists was Marawa, who gracefully climbed a ladder of sabres barefoot, recreating a turn made popular by the female French magician and crocodile-charmer, Koringa, in the 1930s. Carnesky is committed to bringing a living tradition of popular performance by women to wider public attention.

Her new production, Carnesky’s Tarot Drome, will be held at The Old Vic Tunnels as part of the London 2012 Festival. While focusing on personal transformation rather than death and resurrection, it bears some inevitable resemblances to Dystopian Wonders.
"The themes of my pieces," she explains, "are always in the same vein with a different interpretation: cultural identity as it lives in the unconscious, folklore, ritual, sexual performance and the politics that surround women’s bodies as entertainment." Like Punchdrunk (which put on the site-specific performance Tunnel 228 at the same venue in 2009) and Shunt, Carnesky makes immersive theatre that aims to sensually envelop its audience.

The invitation to move wherever and whenever one pleases distinguishes this work from the equally immersive Carnesky’s Ghost Train, a phantasmagorical fairground ride with state-of-the-art optical illusions, mannequins and live performers. First presented in London’s Brick Lane in 2004, Ghost Train then toured to various festivals and towns before finding a permanent home in Blackpool. At the heart of this hybrid art installation/scare attraction ride are spectral women caught between borders, spinning through the air, falling through floors, levitating and evaporating. The train hurtles around a series of stations, each marking a place of mourning and disappearance, as a grieving mother searches for her lost daughters.

Like Dystopian Wonders and the original version of Ghost Train, Tarot Drome is performed by a cast of physically striking performers who bring their own eclectic specialisms to the show. They include kitsh choreographer and cabaret artist H. Plews; wrestler Phil Bedwell; Indonesian-Scottish dancer and vocalist Suri Sumatra; Jason Karl, a former presenter on Living TV’s series Most Haunted; and transgender lipsync artist Rhyannon Styles. Carnesky often approaches artists who make an impression on her in clubs. She cast a then-unknown Paloma Faith in Ghost Train after meeting the singer-songwriter/actress on an East London bus.

Tarot Drome’s performers will each represent a different tarot card, having worked with Carnesky to create a ritual that audience members are invited to take part in as an alternative, visual form of tarot reading. Carnesky describes the production as a penny arcade where you can watch 13 performance installations come to life, and participate in any or all.

Tarot Drome will also feature musical performances by Carnesky’s husband Rasp Thorne and his art-rock band, The Briars. "We have developed a shared language and taste and know what we want from a live experience," she says. "We both want this visceral, challenging rock ‘n’ roll energy." In the new show, Thorne will be The Fool who guides the audience to the other cards. Carnesky herself, having created an environment where the Internet doesn’t exist and old-fashioned telephones are used to communicate, will play The World as an exchange operator who connects spectator-participants and their living cards.

This is not unlike her own role as artistic director at the centre of the production process. After creating the concepts, characters and overall design of the experience, Carnesky develops the details with the performers, visual artists, musicians and designers. She finally writes the script, and draws all the elements together into the final show.

Having trained originally as a dancer and choreographer at Laban (now part of Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance) in the late 1980s, Carnesky became a key figure in London’s often overlapping neo-burlesque and avant-garde live art scenes. She was one of the members of the “post-gay” art-cabaret collective Duckie, whose 2003 production C’est Barbican won an Olivier Award. She remains one of its associate artists.

By then, Carnesky had also begun writing and performing multimedia solo theatre pieces that merged autobiography, storytelling, body modification and forms of popular variety entertainment, including magical illusions. It was Jewess Tattoos, her first one-woman show in 1999, that (quite literally) made her name. This was the first time she performed as Carnesky, reclaiming her family’s Latvian surname from its anglicisation in the 1940s.
Jewess Tattooess consolidated Carnesky’s themes, her self-image and her stagecraft. It integrated (self-)tattooing, nudity, gestural choreography, film, a “bed of nails” routine and Eastern European Jewish folktales. The production self-consciously explored her complex relationship with Jewishness by juxtaposing the taboos surrounding tattoos and menstruation in Judaism with the tattooing of Jews in Nazi concentration camps. According to Carnesky, the show was a meditation on how she felt, as a heavily tattooed woman, about not being allowed to be buried with her family on consecrated Jewish ground.

Like all of Carnesky’s shows, Tarot Drome is inspired by highly personal associations. When, as a teenaged goth, she began reading tarot cards, she was warned against it for reasons which once again conflated Jewishness with prohibition. "My grandmother would say that Jewish people must not go to fortune tellers, or try to contact the dead," she said in the Run Riot interview, "which of course made me all the more fascinated."

In 2009, Carnesky participated in the making of a deck of tarot cards for the SPILL performance festival in London curated by Robert Pacitti. The SPILL Performance Tarot consisted of performances to camera by a veritable who's who of contemporary British live art, photographed by Manuel Vason. Carnesky pouts diffidently in a red slip on one of the Ghost Train sets as the Wheel of Fortune (the card played in Tarot Drome, appropriately, by Guinness World Record-holding hula hooper Chi Chi Revolver).

While this inspired her to push the tarot archetypes further into live performance, Tarot Drome’s greatest longstanding influence has been the experimental film-maker, Alejandro Jodorowsky, whose Santa Sangre (1989) is Carnesky’s favourite film.

"It’s really dense, brightly coloured and dreamy," she told interviewer Josephine Machon in 2009. "I’m trying to make stuff like that. I want the audience to be trapped in the fantasy so it’s like being in a movie." Perhaps not coincidentally, Jodorowsky is a committed practitioner of tarot, having spent years teaching and reconstructing the original Tarot of Marseilles.

Carnesky herself is not, however, slavishly following any single tarot design or interpretative system. She claims that one of her favourite moments in Tarot Drome is a rock opera on roller skates, during which an archetypal constellation is introduced before the Final Judgement.

"I loved Holiday on Ice when I was a kid for all of the costumes," she recalls. "And I love the phenomenon of roller derby, how it’s a punky tattooed girl’s thing. It’s time for Starlight Express to step aside!"

**Reviewer:**

Roberta Mock is professor of performance studies at Plymouth University and author of *Jewish Women on Stage, Film and Television* (2007). She also puts on her own practice-as-research performances.