

### Matthew Barley: *Light Stories*

Trauma is the Greek word for wound. When we think of a wound, the words that seem to associate themselves naturally with it are *open, gaping, weeping* - but also *closing* and *healing*. Matthew Barley doesn't use words to express this, and indeed his cello seems to magically banish language from the womb-like space where we are held, for an hour and a half, floating with him in a contemplation of these various aspects of trauma. It is as if his amygdala - the small almond-shaped part of the brain that triggers our response to a threat to life - has been given a voice.

The abstract visual projections on the screens behind him as he plays - as ethereal as the invisible workings of the amygdala itself - seem to flow in perfect harmony with the music. When the cello pulses and stabs, they pulse and stab. When the cello glides and purrs, they glide and purr, in a relentless journey through dark caves, starlit pools and rocky paths - but always, always seeking the light. A menacing triangular creature (is it a moth? a stingray?) appears out of nowhere and stalks us all for a while, until the music chases it away in a flurry of visceral love, and every one of us is suddenly a small child being lifted out of harm's way by strong, soothing arms. A silhouetted dancer moves across the screens at times, his body contorting and then slackening as if prodded by the cellist's bow.

I know almost nothing about the cello, or about the composers of the various pieces which Matthew is playing, seamlessly transitioning from one to the next. Some of them are his own compositions, I'm told; at one point, I recognise the unmistakable Baroque strains of Bach. The versatility of the instrument staggers me: a cello can do *that*? At various times it is a double bass, a violin, a drum - it can even sound like a slide guitar. The clever use of a pre-recorded backing track to create layers upon layers of sound gives the impression, at times, that there are many Matthew Barleys on the stage playing many different cellos.

Which, of course, there are. One thing I do know about is trauma. Without any prior knowledge of his life story, I knew that what we were experiencing were the different stages of Matthew's journey from hurt to healing. Towards the end, something seemed to suddenly retrigger his trauma. The unuttered howl on his face as he plucked his pain from the cello strings, accompanied by the shattering of a window pane on the screen behind him, made me realise with a jolt that redemption was surely close now. And indeed, the moment of resolution soon came, as the music found a way to express the inexpressible: that sweet spot between processing the past and being at one with the present. The concert ended with blue skies and lingering clouds, as a very different Matthew let out a long breath and let his whole body relax into the glide of his bow. We, the audience - who like the wound had opened, gaped and yes, wept - were now healed, and closed.

Maggie Morgan

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