

All kinds of mess and trouble

an interview with Tilda Indigo

Muffled Anthems for Tomorrow, the latest work by Tilda Indigo, premiered at The Indistinct Space last month. It was an epic nine-hour viewing marathon, stretching across the middle of the night and performed over four evenings. Founder and curator of The Indistinct Space, Cameron Granata met Tilda to discuss this haunting work and pull apart some of her creative processes.

CG: In experiencing your work *Muffled Anthems for Tomorrow*, I'm struck that at times the scenography carefully unfolds, and at other times it obtusely spills apart and loses form. There seems to be a precarious tension between material form, badly-behaved bodies and a relentless text of inner thoughts which swoop down and plague space. The seemingly known everyday objects continually morph through unusual configurations and fragments, often marrying with the wild and irrational energies of the bodies in action/inaction, but sometimes working against them in unsettling and disparate ways. There's so much complexity and obscurity in all that we witness. Where does it all begin for you?

TI: It all begins with the dust - the tiny particles or remnants of a thing, or the many things. It's something that is not an exhaustive thought process - it simply appears and then we begin. From the dust, a new layer builds, and then this new layer needs a conversation partner. An invitation is made and a body, thought or thing, in turn, responds. Then they are speaking: the dust and the other thing. This dialogue then splinters off into different directions and new dialogues and relationships are formed. This process of accumulating substance and thoughts from the dust can take several years until it reaches a cacophony - too loud to distinguish a single word. It all goes a bit too far. Just at the moment when it reaches this threshold of 'too far', that's when we instinctively know that the work is ready for the next phase. But you only asked about where it begins, not what happens next, so I should stop myself from going on.

CG: [Laughs] Ok. I appreciate your astuteness. Of course, I'm intrigued to know what happens next, but I'm a firm believer in allowing space for mystery, so I'll also stop myself from going on. Although perhaps with the idea of mystery in mind, I'll linger around the edges for a while.

As a former park ranger, you have a particular relationship with the wilderness and the way that (some of) us humans try to lose ourselves in the woods, to a degree. There's a certain melancholic act of partial disappearance that you're accustomed to, given your former line of work and the loneliness that you've found in the woods. In *Muffled Anthems for Tomorrow*, though the work is far from a serene landscape, I feel a sense that there is a melancholic park ranger wandering through the work, seemingly autonomous to everything else that happens. I can't really speak about a concrete example, it's just a feeling. Is this a feeling that you purposely try to conjure up?

TI: It's funny that you should mention this because I thought I had managed to get away from the ranger. But now that you say it, of course, it's obvious, the ranger is always present. It's not something that I consciously wanted to impose, like pointing the spotlight at a sort of nomadic protagonist, but then again, I also didn't try to desperately flee the ranger, in the hope to reach higher ground. I suppose at the forefront of my mind when making *Muffled Anthems for Tomorrow*, was the swarming of irrational activity, the folding and spilling over of bodies, matter and language. All of these things mashing up against each other in a kind of composed havoc. This type of scene seemed so very distant to the lonely woods and valleys that the ranger inhabits, so I thought I had made a clear break. Perhaps, however, when one looks more closely, all of these apparently paradoxical scenes and persona are actually overlaid. They play out simultaneously, on top or beneath the other.

CG: It sounds like you are quite attuned to the making, or inhabiting of... worlds. Or at least environments that have a very specific logic, or... anti-logic to them. There's always a definite moment when we the spectators, exit the space and move back into our "real" world, it's quite shocking. Coming back to our supposed reality is like some sort of travel back in time, not that I'd describe your pieces as futuristic per se, but more a deep stretching and twisting of eerily familiar surroundings and behaviours, which are often external to the lines of time. How important is it for you to continually construct these environments? Are you disillusioned by our common world or reality? How important is escapism to you in art/life?

TI: Well firstly, I like to think that I don't construct a single thing. It was always already there. I see my role is simply to gather, but not to construct. The elements come and go according to their own free will. I spend many years gathering the elements. This is the most time-consuming part of the process. It's only in the final months that all of the elements dance 'ensemble'. That's when we lock the doors and allow them all to co-exist - *you do you* (together). I suppose you could say that the gathered elements, inevitably find ways to go on together.

Is this a world different to the one outside of these parameters, and nestled neatly in the confines of a standardised reality. Well, yes - otherwise I wouldn't be doing it. So in answering your questions about disillusionment and escapism, and to speak directly to these questions - yes I'm disillusioned with the confines of so-called reality, but I wouldn't refer to the work as escapist. I don't believe it ever succeeds in escaping. At best it manages to invert our perceptions; reconsider the things that we know too well, the things that we've become complacent about; turn them inside out and mutate them somehow.

CG: Hmm. Okay, I can follow what you mean, to an extent... I must say though that I'm a little unsettled by some of the language that you use in explaining the conditions of these environments. Specifically, the way that you describe 'locking the doors' on what you have gathered, and then you go on to say that you 'mutate them'. In any other professional or social context, alarm bells would be ringing. It sounds like some sort of torturous imprisonment. Have I gone completely off track, or is there a certain intensity or violence that you hold onto in the creative process? In any case, how do your collaborators feel about being caught up in it all?

TI: I really should have chosen my words more carefully [laughs]. To be very clear, there is no overt violence in the process I embark on, particularly not when it comes to collaborating with the wonderful souls whom I'm fortunate enough to work with. When I describe locking the doors, of course, I'm speaking figuratively, but I'm also making a point that there comes a time when all of the free-form swirling around, finally needs to be contained, because if things don't at some point have parameters or limitations, then there is no real confrontation or tension to pull apart. I will always get drunk on wild and uncontained energies, but to burrow deeper into complexities and nuances in relationality, restrictions become necessary.

CG: Let's continue to tease out a couple of subjects that have now come up. Relationality, confrontation, tension... collaboration: you say this has always been central to your process. In most of your work, an ensemble is gathered, and there is a sense of 'grouping', which involve broad and eclectic casts of performers. Watching your ensemble pieces feel very different to other ensemble performances. Perhaps it is the fact that yes, you work with mass bodies, but each individual within the mass is totally idiosyncratic and offsets any chance that the group as a whole, could ever reach any form of synchronisation, harmony, or even a compromised agreement. So in this way, the tension that you have raised is always present and delicately balanced. There are a few questions in here:

Who do you invite to collaborate with you and perform in the work?

How much time does the cast spend together?

Do you work with social codes and if so, do they speak to certain political ideologies or critiques?

In short, tell me more about working with individuals and groups - what's your approach?

TI: There's a level of serendipity that I hold dear. Some of my closest and long-term collaborators, I've met in public spaces like the swimming pool, or waiting for a bus. I met Felix Santucci when they smashed into the back of my car! From these often serendipitous encounters, I tend to invite the person to spend time in the studio, and we start experimenting openly. In most cases, this then snowballs, the years pass by until we realise that we've created a number of works together. It gets slightly more complex when several other collaborators come into the fold, who often don't know each other at all. Then some awareness needs to be placed on our shared or contrasting social fabrics and ideologies. We're not all like-minded, we're not all on the same page, but then we share space and try to figure it all out as we burrow deeper into co-existing on the fly.

Are there political undertones in all this? Well it's really up to the viewer to perceive what they will from the situations that arise, but if there was a political message, I suppose it would be something like: we're never going to work it all out and reach a common utopia, no political system has ever achieved that, and we won't waste time aiming to simulate this ideal for art - so at best we need to learn how to become friends with our enemies.

CG: Hmm. An imperfect system. A certain strand of anarchy breaking through it seems. Maybe that's what makes your work so distinct, this very tangible sense of conflict and dissonance, but with a careful consciousness of care behind it all... I certainly resonate with your yearning for or romanticising of serendipity. With so many things automated these days - including how to recruit friends, lovers, professional networks, or even to get on and off a bus without needing to say a word to a single soul, how do you make space for unique encounters, without coming across as a nuisance?

TI: Well that's a very good point. It has certainly become harder. With the increased evolution towards automation and individualism, it is fair to say that spontaneous social encounters are becoming quite rare. Yet, I see it as my work, which I take very seriously, so I am obliged to push the threshold of social norms. I simply put myself out there - if that means being a bit of a nuisance, so be it. But I'm also very aware when others aren't open to this kind of encounter or don't feel comfortable, so I think I have a pretty good radar on when to leave people alone!

CG: To continue on this idea of being a nuisance, or exploring the threshold of social norms, I want to return to what I called earlier 'badly-behaved bodies'. In *Muffled Anthems for Tomorrow*, we see performers deliberately aggravate one another, whether by urinating on or pouring salt over the other, or cutting up the others' clothes and burning them, there's a sharp antagonistic tone in the work, which is never directly physically violent, but it is certainly very hostile, not merely a difference in perspective. What are you getting at with these scenes?

TI: Well we have a creative licence to do things on stage which would have very different consequences off stage. We always start with very simple and innocent interactions, but we are willing to push the subsequent reactions to quite surreal and dramatic places. There are almost no limitations on where we can take our intuitive responses, and we all have very clear agreeance on one another's boundaries. In any case, I encourage the team to work with their emotional motivations and to tease out the scenographic potential of their instincts. Most of the time, this is liberating, even therapeutic for some - performer and spectator alike. We have a lot of fun getting into all kinds of mess and trouble!

In terms of "what I'm getting at", I want to show how we humans tend to suppress a range of alternative pathways in our interactions, holding on to social etiquettes and upholding the idea of 'getting along'. And to be clear, I agree that this is the best-case scenario in most contexts. But as we're working in a different space, it's important to fully embody the potential of these expressive capacities and to follow these pathways to see where they take us. Sometimes antagonism leads us to revelation and discovery. It's probably better that there are avenues to tread this path in art, rather than with bombs or other types of threats in the 'real world'. We're in a safe space here and therefore have an ideal basis to then explore the extremes and thresholds of being human.

CG: In contrast to the various shades of hostility that we witness, the text that floats in and out of the space has a starkly different sensibility. It's almost like a slow and persistent declaration of love, though not strictly of the romantic variety. It's really quite unnerving in its care. These incongruous layers of soft text and hard behaviour, rub up against each other in such dynamic ways that it puts the spectator in a contradictory state of dreamy suspense. How was this text generated and what were your intentions in insisting on a subdued, poetic medium against these scenes of disarray?

TI: This is a text that was created quite democratically, between all eight members of the cast. As part of the process, we went away together for a month-long writing/nature retreat. We hiked through the wilderness of the Takayna/Tarkine country in North West Tasmania. We stayed in a dwelling thick in the bush and put our heads together, considering questions like: How would you write sincere and empathic love letters to your enemies? How could you redirect your thoughts of spite, disgust, or whatever negative feeling there may be so that these feelings evolve full circle? To transcend these negative impulses and instead dig deeper until you can find something admirable, attractive, or even magnetic in those that you despise. This was extremely challenging, to say the least, and there were some personal and collective traumas to work through, but we all remained both supportive to one another and dedicated to the proposal, so we were eventually able to break through to the other side. Once we reached this tipping point, we were able to generate an enormous amount of discussion and writing. We became liberated by the idea that we could work through feelings of contempt for others, and in most cases find kernels of love and empathy, though sometimes buried deep in the dark recesses of our psyche. We collectively contributed to the development of this text, which evolved to become a significant layer in the final performance.

So in a sense, the abrasive performative actions that you witness, and the soft, tenderly text that you absorb, both come from the same place - just two different sides of the same coin. They sit side by side in this work. We attempt to embody the paradoxes and complexities of being human together.

CG: My first thought was that it was a bit indulgent of you all to go away together for a month in nature, in order to work on the text, but given the subject matter, I can now see how this would have been very difficult, and that there probably was contention within that process, because on the outset, the idea that our darkest enemies could also be loveable in some way, that seems like an enormous emotional stretch to make. I personally would be very unsure if this is a thought experiment that I would want to entertain.

TI: Indeed, and as I mentioned the proposal generated often difficult discussions, and at times people found it near impossible to find an element of light in the darkness. It was a long and arduous process, but it was up to each individual to determine just how far they were comfortable to go, and it was our collective duty to respect that. In any case, by the end of the month, there were flecks of light to be found in the most unlikely places.

CG: I can only imagine that this must be reassuring, in some way.

When you talk about this nature/writing retreat, it reminds me of an extremely vivid scene in *Muffled Anthems for Tomorrow* in which a vehicle is lowered gradually from the sky, it looks like a very battered version of the quasi-futuristic car and time machine in *Back to the Future*. As the rusty vehicle descends, it begins to rain quite suddenly - but not in the form of raindrops. Instead, hundreds of potplants of all different sizes fall dramatically from the dark void above, smashing into a thousand pieces on the ground repeatedly. It doesn't take long before the grounds they fall on start to build up with more and more plants, broken ceramic and soil. The soundtrack of potplants falling and smashing is one of the most beautiful and relentless soundscapes I've experienced, and it is accompanied by a thick aroma of plant matter.

In the thick of this storm, we see the ensemble huddled together underneath the battered vehicle as it lowers from above, threatening to eventually squash them, but temporarily acting as a shelter from the storm. They repeatedly chant together the chorus of a haunting and unfamiliar song:

*The more you push us
The more you break us
We hold you tighter
The day turns brighter
We scream outside but
It's not so frightening
Returning to the deep, dark quietening
Always finding more in spite
Of all the things we could not try to be*

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The scene ebbs and flows for what felt like maybe an hour, but time was becoming very abstract by that point, so I could be totally off. Within the repetition, there were times of both clarity and utter confusion, for those in the crowd. It was one of the most bewildering experiences I've had with art, but I felt a kind of chemical shift within my senses.

I won't ask you anything further about this scene, I feel it's best to leave it floating, but I just wanted to attempt to describe this experience for our readers, to implant a final image in their minds, particular for those who weren't able to attend the performance.

TI: I really appreciate that and I think you've crystallised this moment in your description of it.

CG: Finally, Tilda, I want to congratulate you and your team on achieving this radical and provocative work that operates on so many levels. I wish to thank you for taking the time to discuss some of your processes with me today. I've found it to be an incredibly generous and important conversation.

TI: You're very welcome. I always look forward to our nourishing conversations, dear friend. I'm grateful that you were able to see the work at The Indistinct Space, in particular, the work always falls into place in this extraordinary venue - performing here feels like coming home.

words: Tim Darbyshire