

The Ears Have Spoken: *Black Milk*

BY DAVID STRAIGHT | JANUARY 21, 2011

For those of you fortunate enough to have witnessed Douglas Wright's latest dance-theatre production, *Black Milk*, you would have most certainly been treated to something unique and memorable. A work that, as Leonard Wilcox says, is "wrenching, traumatic and exhilarating." Unfortunately, I wasn't one of the lucky ones. But now, as a happy outcome of the all-too-brief event, we have an impressive book. And **Black Milk** ([Craig Potton Publishing](#), NZ\$50) is more than just a typical documentary representation of another creative art form, but a new artistic creation in its own right.

I won't go into the meaning of the work for that is the realm of the book. Nor do I think it is necessary to know much about Douglas Wright, or be an avid dance enthusiast to appreciate this book. For, although this is primarily a photography publication about a dance-theatre performance, it goes beyond the singularity of both disciplines.

The thing that strikes me most about *Black Milk* is not simply the images or the text or the design; it is the culmination of the three. Much the same, I imagine, as the collaboration between choreographer and dancer, is the collaboration between Douglas Wright, photographer John Savage, and designer Alan Deare. Each faithfully interprets the others' artistic abilities to create a finely resolved whole.

The book is distributed into several chapters but is essentially divided into two parts. The first deals with the rehearsals and the background behind the performance, while the second is comprised of images from the live performances.

The first section is an equal mix of text and image. Deare intersperses Savage's black and white images, with Wright's poetry and prose, taking excerpts from his previously published work as well as new writing and facsimiles of his journals. An erudite essay by Leonard Wilcox on Douglas Wright and *Black Milk* also features at length towards the close of the section. And it is here that the design of the book greatly enhances the images and writing. With a mix of full bleed and bordered images, the intelligent use of text and font, and a beautiful heavy matt stock, it keeps the flow of the book pushing forward, not allowing it to become static or overly scholarly as books that combine text and image often do. At times it almost feels a chaotic but then that is probably a reflection of the emotional state of the performance.

The second section starts with a jump into colour as well as a move to a glossy paper stock, enhancing the intended slickness of the performance. This is where Savage's images come into their own. Whereas in the images of the rehearsals there seems to be a quietness to them, these images jump out in a passion of movement and colour. There is something in the motion of these images akin to Alexey Brodovitch's legendary book *Ballet* (Soon to be re-issued by Errata Editions).

Again the use of text is apparent here, this time only as singular lines to pique the reader's thoughts. Also the use of colour is employed to great effect; deep black pages, blood red and gold. They convey a dark emotional resonance. The images, often appearing as if submerged in black, can be haunting and mysterious, seldom giving away their meanings. There are many images here that revel in darkness and ambiguity. It is in these images that Savage has interpreted Wright's vision and created something new. By capturing the movement of the dance, he has allowed us to stop and look again at the essence of what the performance is about.

David Straight is an Auckland based documentary photographer. His work can be viewed at davidstraight.net.

John Savage's website: johnsavagewebsite.co.nz

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