

One the Bear (La Boite, Brisbane)

By Zenobia Frost for **Daily Review**, October 14, 2017

One the Bear is the co-creation of Candy Bowers and Kim ‘Busty Beatz’ Bowers of Black Honey Company. If intersectional feminism had a mega-church, their award-winning cabaret, *Hot Brown Honey*, would be its Sunday mass – I’ve seen them fire up some serious crowds.

One the Bear is a very different offering from Black Honey Company. It’s a show designed for teenagers: “the next generation of queens”. Written entirely in rhyme by the Bowers sisters, *One the Bear* uses Afro-punk spoken word poetry to dissect the commodification of women’s bodies and culture – especially those of women of colour. For two best-friend bears scrounging in the big city, life’s no picnic: One (Candy Bowers) and Ursula (Nancy Denis) dream of living without fear of being hunted by humans. Their habitats destroyed, they’re doomed to live meagre lives off the scraps of their oppressors – eating junk food like Columbus Crunch and Captain Cookies.

When One is seduced by a human talent scout and money-hungry agent, she is blinded by superstardom. While her human fans appropriate her bear tail and ears, One’s agent urges her towards human plastic surgery to become more palatable and less wild. Ursula, her neglected bestie, has to step up to make sure One doesn’t become the pet of her oppressors.

It’s a fable that could easily fall into didacticism, but in the hands of electric duo Bowers and Denis, the story of One is told with warmth, humour, and dank beats. Their words have a lot of work to do, as they traverse systemic racism and police brutality, poo jokes, celebrity culture and drug addiction – and then rise from a wheelie bin covered head-to-toe in bear bling.

Co-produced by Black Honey, Campbelltown Arts Centre and La Boite, *One the Bear* arises from collaboration between several talented creatives. Award-winning street artist Jason Wing designed the set, which seems simple at first: a boombox, a teddy-bear, and a throne made of bones dominate a backstreet bear-den strung with camouflage netting. Under blacklight, the set and costumes (by wearable art designer Sarah Seahorse) light up in a rave of neon. Projection transforms the den into a stadium full of fans growling for more from One.

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Busty Beatz’s compositions are infections, though there’s something about the design of La Boite’s Roundhouse Theatre that dilutes sound; we struggle to hear One and Ursula’s lyrics and poems clearly once there’s music in the mix. This is a shame, not only because the Bowers sisters are talented writers, but also because the show packs a lot into One’s journey from rags to riches and back to her roots; any missed detail meant a little mental catch-up. Fortunately, the visual language of the show is strong enough to guide us back, and there’s plenty of audience participation (by way of bear claws and growling) to keep us engaged regardless.

One the Bear – a “fairytale for the hip hop generation” – is art-activism at its best, performed with compassion, vibrancy and joy – backed up by a nuanced, critical understanding of its subject matter. (Read dramaturg Sister Zai Zanda’s essay on “the black radical feminist dreamer gaze”, in the *The Lifted Brow*, after you see the show.) *One the Bear* charges its young viewers (and reminds those of us not-so-young) to stand tall and ask big questions as they grow up in a world that is designed to let some flourish easier than others.

One the Bear is at La Boite until October 21. Take your cubs.

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