

Familiarity of situation

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There's less to *The Corporate Nightmare of Rembrandt Brown* than meets the eye.

Which, in one sense, is not as damning as you might think. In the hands of director Gyllian Raby, Blake Brooker's thin satire of the corporate jungle and the dreams it engenders in its inhabitants is undeniably an eyeful.

The Corporate Nightmare of Rembrandt Brown
Northern Light at the Kaasa
through May 21

It's not that Rembrandt Brown (Max McLaughlin) regards his speech-writing job, putting glib words into exec mouths, from the prayer mat. But when he gets canned, supplanted by a toady (Paul Punyi) in the affections of a cold-eyed boss (Giselle Lemire), the world goes wonky.

With no 9-to-5 to tame them, his inner demons emerge from the closet. Ninjas carrying swords toss his morning coffee back in his face; lunatic personnel officers leer and shriek his own words back at him; job counsellors relentlessly torture metaphors to the last frontier of madness; he appears at work in the nude, attache case in hand; a cardboard model of his suburban dream house burns at the foot of his bed.

Scenes whirl by on a revolving stage, lurid lighting glows, ominous electronic music with an artificial heartbeat thuds through the bloodstream (courtesy of Michael Becker). "Time passes so slowly and then is gone . . . and I'm still here," says Rembrandt dully, drowning in chronology, his voice amplified, drugged, detached from his body. Meanwhile, a job counsellor leans over his prostrate form, painting his portrait directly onto his face.

The hazy world of the corporate dispossessed alternates between violent nightmare activity and none — the Donahue show, the community calendar column in the paper, exec toys. Nigel Scott's blue-chip set, dominated by a huge rotating curved wall and translucent pillars like a new-age Stonehenge for corporate worshippers, is a terrific (and versatile) conception.

Curious and disappointing that a show so visually ingenious, so superbly staged, is so uninviting. For once Brooker's verbal dexterity has pulled up lame, its energy spent probing corporate yup-speak jargon that has long since unravelled. By this I don't mean that the language of resumes and memos has disappeared from the world. But it's not treated seriously enough as a language, as opposed to just a code, to make many comic sparks when it explodes.

Somehow the juxtaposition of ideas, language and visual images seems reductive here, the mere illusion of complexity. They reinforce each other in a literal and reductive, rather than a poetic, way. Having established in a variety of ways (back projections, music, sound, light) that the corporate world is a jungle, the idea of Rambo is unexciting, not to say trite. Having established that joblessness is an absurd and self-perpetuating condition, the mad personnel officer (Kevin McGugan) who holds Rembrandt hostage till he can explain a Neil Diamond song is only mildly amusing.

It's a collection of cartoon illustrations of a landscape whose familiarity is deadening — an effect that the abrupt, perfunctory irony of the ending does nothing to remedy.

But I have no hesitation in recommending the cast. Raby's inventiveness as a director extends to her actors, a fine ensemble headed by the engaging McLaughlin. He turns in a subtle performance as a guy whose glib confidence turns to ashes for reasons that remain obscure. In this world, things happen; they aren't caused. And Rembrandt's defeat is gradually absorbed in his posture, the tilt of his head, his white listlessness.

Punyi, McGugan and Lemire tackle a variety of grotesques with relish. Lemire's imperious corporate exec gleams like a guillotine and trims her words like a Veg-o-matic having a go at a cabbage. McGugan also plays Rembrandt's real buddy Deanie, a decent guy gray in mind, body and soul, who can offer only the most conventional solutions to the absurdity of the universe. And Patricia Darbasie is fine as Rembrandt's girlfriend.



Patricia Darbasie descends on the jobless Max McLaughlin
the play's thin, the actors and director first-class

PICTURE: Ken On