

One Song

Created by Miet Warlop. Transform Festival at Leeds Playhouse. 19 and 20 October 2023.

Georgie Hook

SNAP.

A metronome. A megaphone. A balance beam. A double bass. Orderly rows of water bottles and stacks of numbered towels arranged on a long bench, quiet in anticipation. The component parts of the performance space wait, along with the audience assembling in Leeds Playhouse's Quarry Theatre, for the unfolding of an event: the UK premiere of *One Song*. The show, a conception and creation of Belgian artist Miet Warlop, blends the visual languages of a theatre performance, a music concert, and a sports competition. The ensemble is comprised of one commentator, one cheerleader, five spectators, and five musicians/athletes in collaboration with various equipment. Each musician plays their instrument whilst completing an athletic task—the violinist walks across the balance beam, the vocalist runs on a treadmill, and the drummer sprints across the stage to reach their sparsely arranged drum kit. A single song is repeatedly performed over the course of

the hour-long show at varying tempos dictated by a metronome. What unfolds is a wild and thrilling live experience.

BREAK.

With no explicit dialogue (only the song's text), Warlop's *One Song* exists as a scenographic spectacle. From glistening pom-poms and chalky footprints to puddles of water and nonsensical muffled commentary, each sensory contribution feels loaded with intention. The onstage spectators perform choreographed gestures that are tightly synchronised, yet dishevelled and loose. This tightrope of order and chaos is navigated in all aspects of the show, eliciting a tension that keeps the audience gripped. Echoing how the instrumental motifs are introduced in succession, new scenographic elements are assembled like building blocks on top of one another, until the metaphorical tower of blocks is so perilously tall that the audience is left marvelling at how it's kept from crashing down. Until, in some ways, it eventually does. Order surrendering to the chaos. And so, the form of the performance embodies its dramaturgy—the dance of life before death; the exhausting, extraordinary drive to push and keep going through it all until inevitable collapse.

CRACK.

Whilst the stamina and perseverance of the performers are undeniably impressive, rather than concentrating on individual heroic acts of athleticism, the show foregrounds the significance of the collective. There is a constant interplay between the musicians, the commentator, the cheerleader, the onstage ‘crowd’, and us, the audience. During the performance, I felt a degree of self-consciousness at my seeming lack of input and low level of energy in contrast to the ensemble giving it their all. I wasn’t hollering like the crowd, spinning like the cheerleader, or doing sit-ups whilst playing the double bass—nor could I! I was an attentive yet sedentary member of the audience. At sports matches and music gigs, my participation in the emergent event feels more obvious—I’ll cheer words of encouragement (or despair) at my team or sing along to my favourite lyrics. The blurred edges of *One Song*—slipping between concert, competition, and theatre show—heightened my awareness of my role in and amongst it. How was I contributing, if at all? Of course, by gathering there at that moment, the audience is always already a key part of the show—a concept that *One Song* draws attention to by keeping the auditorium lit throughout. The connections between those on- and offstage existed in the direct and defiant stares of determination from the athletes, in the vibrations of the music I could feel in my chest, and in the table tennis balls batted into the rows of seats. As the performance progressed, it became increasingly evident that

through this gathering, all of us were exorcising, not just exercising, something together.

FOLD.

Listening to the music of *One Song* as I type, I'm not only transported back to the immediacy of the live encounter but also drawn more deeply into the lyrics. They speak to the relentlessness of grief, that despite its 'shapeshifting'—felt in the onomatopoeic list of *snap, break, crack, fold, ripples*—'is like a block in your head'. In conversation with these underpinning themes of grief, *One Song* is a show personified by its vitality. The audience are directly confronted with the liveness of the moment and of the human bodies being pushed to their physical limits. Inner despair, articulated in the lyrics, is made tangible through the incessant looping of the song and rendered visible through the performers' bodies under stress—they breathe more heavily and sweat more profusely to the point their grey shirts darken. Living with grief is exhausting. Continuing to deal with the external intrusions of life—represented by a heckling crowd and a leaking ceiling—amidst grief is exhausting. Nevertheless, the ability to carry on, to keep running on the treadmill, and what's more to come together and share in the experience is quite beautiful. In contrast to the performers, my physical appearance underwent no discernible change. Yet after

one intense hour, I left the theatre feeling euphoric and dizzy: the same felt experience as leaving a rousing music concert or a victorious sports match.

RIPPLES.

Situated on tiered wooden bleachers, the onstage spectators wear scarves that bear the logo ‘CITIUS ALTIUS FORTIUS—SHUT UP!’, a reference to the motto of the Olympics: ‘Faster, Higher, Stronger’. *One Song* highlights how arduous the pursuit of these words can be, but also how collective experiences can affirm and celebrate living life amongst, and sometimes in spite of, the noise. In 2021, the Olympic committee approved the addition of ‘together’ to their slogan, acknowledging the capacity of sport to unify and the significance of collective effort (International Olympic Committee). The same can be said of theatre, which at its best instils a sense of transitory togetherness—something that *One Song*, through its enthralling allegorical chaos, toils for and achieves.

Works Cited

International Olympic Committee. ‘The Olympic Motto’.
olympics.com/ioc/olympic-motto.