



THE SCOTSMAN

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Pain

Old Fruitmarket, Glasgow

Joyce McMillan

NVA is a big, Glasgow-based performance company whose work often involves theatre on an epic scale, dancing cranes in a Glasgow shipyard, or whole audiences wading up a gorge in the dark countryside; Graham Cunnington is a small, slight figure of a performer, racked by chronic rheumatoid arthritis, who stands or sits alone on stage, trying to search out the meaning of a 38-year lifetime shaped by constant pain. Yet the collision between the two has produced one of the most remarkable shows in Nineties Scottish theatre; a work constantly in progress, internationally acclaimed, now on at least its third version, yet still with enough life in it to keep changing and growing.

Perhaps the fierceness of the show's energy comes from the constant effort to strike a balance between the basic simplicity of Cunnington's narrative, and the terrific resources of soundscape, light, and projected visual images that NVA is able to throw at it; and for my taste, this current version of *Pain*, performed on a box-like stage of white screens and gauzes, has a slight tendency to say too much, too explicitly. There are moments when images and words complement one another perfectly – long ribbons of jagged glass running across the screens as Cunnington tries to describe his pain – others when they overload and overstate, leaving no space for the audience's own response.

But if this is a fault, it's a good one, in that it grows out of the same passionate will to communicate that gives the show its special quality of challenge and intensity. In the end, it draws us right into the heart of the experience of pain, which is inseparable from life itself; and bravely confronts a culture that still tends to treat visible pain as a weakness or an embarrassment, perhaps preferring a half-life of denial and control to the vulnerability that, for Cunnington, has become the key to living in full.

● At the Traverse, Edinburgh, Thursday-Sunday.