

THEATER

Review: In 'Sleep,' a Wakeful Woman Faces Long, Surreal Nights

Next Wave Festival: Haruki Murakami's Sleep | NYT Critic's Pick | Off Broadway, Play,

Experimental/Perf. Art, Drama

1 hr. and 15 min. | Closing Date: December 2, 2017 | Brooklyn Academy of Music - Fishman Space, 321

Ashland Pl.

By ALEXIS SOLOSKI NOV. 30, 2017

What do you do when you can't sleep? Do you take deep breaths? Do you take pink capsules? Do you tally worries, count sheep, or do you decide to give up and get up and stay there?

That's the choice made by the woman at the center of "Sleep," a gorgeous and surreal adaptation of Haruki Murakami's short story, directed and devised by Rachel Dickstein and Ripe Time at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

An unnamed woman (Jiehae Park) wakes from a nightmare and finds that she can no longer sleep.

When we meet her, she says, "This is my 17th day without sleep. I don't sleep. I can't sleep." (I have two very young children, which is to say, "Girl, I feel you.")

To pass the darkened hours, the woman rediscovers the novels she loved as a

teenager, chiefly “Anna Karenina.” Soon Anna and Vronsky and a few ghostlier figures are languishing in the corners of the tidy condo she shares with her dentist husband and school-age son.

Because the short story is written as a monologue, the playwright Naomi Iizuka, a writer too little seen in New York, has an easy enough time adapting it. She wisely grounds the magical realism by adding in a few quotidian details, like the woman’s disgust when her husband has a piece of food stuck between his polished teeth. And she gooses the dramatic tension with a few scattered hints — such as the woman’s neglect in taking her Honda Civic to the shop — that later flower savagely.

But words have never been of chief interest for Ms. Dickstein. Her particular and abundant skill as a director is in melding sets, lights, movement, sound and video into intense and unsettling environments. Here the set is a narrow gray box, initially anyway, backed by what seems to be a mirror and is soon revealed as a second set placed just behind the first.

As the woman mimes child care and chores — chopping, soothing, cleaning — another woman, in the same leggings and the same gray sweater, repeats her motions. Off to the side, the musicians of the NewBorn Trio rub the rims of glassware, strike metal objects and blow into bamboo flutes, producing a superlatively haunting score.

Together these elements help “Sleep” straddle reality and hallucination, using the ordinary tools of theater to build an eerie symbolic space.

Just what does it symbolize? That’s trickier. Going without sleep seems to be a protest against the prescribed rhythms of a homemaker’s life, a way to find time to read novels and sip brandy amid the domestic drudgery.

And we are told, in Ms. Park’s forceful, breathy voice, that the wakefulness is exhilarating. But liberation never comes. The sense of confinement doesn’t lift, and darker motives linger. Is it a death wish that sends the woman speeding out alone to 24-hour diners and empty parking lots. Is she taking notes from Anna?

As in other Ripe Time productions (“The World Is Round,” “Septimus and Clarissa”) “Sleep” is a little too in love with its own ravishing aesthetics. I couldn’t help wishing it had been twinned with another short story by Mr. Murakami, a choice Complicite made in adapting “The Elephant Vanishes,” to open things out and make the piece less hermetic.

But “Sleep” still testifies to Ms. Dickstein’s creepy stagecraft. The downstairs concession should stock valerian tea and maybe some Ambien, because later, after you have left the theater and snuggle under your duvet, some of these images will play behind your eyes and keep you awake.

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bam.org: <http://www.bam.org>

Category Off Broadway, Play, Experimental/Perf. Art, Drama

Runtime 1 hr. and 15 min.

Credits Written by Haruki Murakami, adapted by Naomi Iizuka; Directed and devised by Rachel Dickstein and Ripe Time

Opened November 29, 2017

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Sleep

Through Dec. 2 at BAM Fisher in Brooklyn; 718-636-4100, bam.org. Running time: 1 hour 15 minutes.

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