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Susan Walker  
DANCE WRITER

## Sign Language

4 out of 4

By Denise Clarke. Until Sunday at Factory Studio Theatre, 125 Bathurst St. 416-504-9971

Denise Clarke has taken physical theatre to an advanced level. An associate artist with Calgary's One Yellow Rabbit, she has been with the company since 1983. Several of the works she has choreographed and played in have come to Toronto. But until now – with an invitation from Factory Theatre's Performance Spring festival – we haven't seen any of her solos.

Sign Language is a simple title for a show that operates in complicated ways.

Clarke comes onstage striding back and forth in chunky heels, wearing white ankle socks and a black dress that shows off her bare, long legs. She is smiling to herself, making absurd, exaggerated gestures, like the T for "time-out."

After a greeting to the audience, she begins: "I am healthy ... I'm not drinking as much ... No more junk food in this temple ... I am a concerned and empowered member of my society."

All through this narcissistic soliloquy she is signing: hands rolling over each other means "productive"; fingers wiggling over the abdomen means "anxiety." And then the bottom line: "But I still worry," she says, tracing little circles on her forehead with two index fingers. Her goofy smile shifts to a look of panic.

The music comes on, and it is a profoundly solemn: Arvo Pärt's Miserere. As the hour progresses, Clarke goes through countless sudden changes, from sublime to ridiculous to more ridiculous.

She has the audience in the palm of her hand, then she walks into the bleachers, involving the viewers in a terribly risky bit of mime.

It would be unfair to reveal too much of what goes on in Sign Language, for it would remove the element of surprise. There's a crazy passage where Clarke mimes a struggling, paranoid female going for a shopping bag, contorting herself into unflattering positions. The bag unfolded ironically reveals the Winners logo.

You're never sure where she's going to go next, from a straightforward, graceful ballet solo, to Martha Graham modern movements, to clutching her bare bum cheek and scratching it. Clarke seems to be performing, being herself and rehearsing all at once.

This character gets distracted easily, pausing at the end of a swan-like arabesque to do a little hip-shaking jive, like a girl alone in her kitchen when her favourite pop tune comes on the radio. But the music by now is Pärt's Sarah Was Ninety Years Old, still very solemn.

Most dramatically, Clarke removes her clothes, turning her Calvin Klein sleeveless dress into a Madonna shawl over the head, a pair of dog's ears, a Muslim veil revealing only the eyes. Then the undergarments go, until she's down to nothing but a thong. Nudity onstage has never been so funny.

The lighting almost constitutes a partner in this performance. There's a trick done with mirrors that turns the audience's stare onto itself.

Solos like this can't be performed forever – even by one as agile as Clarke. Sign Language is a must-see-now.