

Helen Walkley's John Gives Shape to Absence

In 1969, Walkley's brother disappeared, never to be heard from again

John runs Jan. 12-15 at the Firehall Arts Centre in Vancouver; Jan. 20 at the Mary Winspear Centre in Sidney, B.C.; Jan. 22 at the Malaspina Theatre in Nanaimo, B.C.; and Jan. 29-30 at MacEwan University in Edmonton.

Helen Walkley's *John* opens casually and carefully, with the house lights up. Billy Marchenski sits cross-legged on the ground, playing, rather mindfully, a game of solitaire. Josh Martin perches on a wooden chair, absently looking over a stack of papers on a wooden box. It could be a family get-together, or a regular Wednesday night. In the background, an echoey and sparse soundscore adds an apprehensive edge to the scene.

John is a personal, moving work about Walkley's brother who went missing from Vancouver in 1969, never to be heard from again. It premiered at the Firehall's Dancing on the Edge Festival in 2019 and is back for four shows in Vancouver this January to kick off a tour to Victoria, Edmonton and Regina. Archival letters are central to this intimate memoir and give us a window into the life of Walkley's brother, who was 23 when he disappeared. Throughout the piece, we hear, from different angles, the story of a young man grappling with mental health issues, navigating family relationships and participating in the hippie lifestyle of the late '60s in B.C.

Marchenski sits upright on stage left, reading letters aloud with stoic clarity, his left arm swinging slightly. As cold light spills around the stage (a delicate yet direct design by James Proudfoot), Martin dances out different movement ideas, a physical embodiment of the topics in the letters. With supreme control, he balances on his heels, or sweeps his arm across in a turn, tangling himself up over and over – a visual anchor for our thoughts as words wash over us.

The written correspondence between Walkley's brother and parents, medical professionals and others recount his movement across the province in the lead-up to his disappearance – working and hitchhiking between Nelson, Cache Creek, Victoria and Prince Rupert. Fifty-three years on, these letters have a strange formality and reveal more than they say.

Notes with doctors feel clipped, strangled by the stigma of past decades. When they touch on mental health, Martin's body becomes rigid, looking right and left, or bursting into short bouts of laughter, gulping for air. James Maxwell's score is foundational to the piece's mood – reflective, sad, fleetingly hopeful yet full of unanswered questions. We, too, are left with unanswered questions but witness in aching glimpses the profound hole that loss leaves in a family.

The dancing sometimes conveys this weight of absence. More than once, Martin and Marchenski walk low to the ground, knees bent and arms swinging in almost ape-like fashion with mesmerizing synchronicity.

Though it's a heavy script to rest upon, certain moments of *John* catch a spirit of freedom even as the story unravels. To the sound of bird song, the dancers open and close their arms, turning with momentum around the stage as if they are gathering something – their motions giving shape to absence or trying to grasp a memory.

Later, in an almost humorous section with unexplained connection to the topic, Martin and Marchenski jiggle, skip around each other and let out the odd whoop to become a visual expression of loud percussive auctioneering. Their full commitment and unwavering presence carry the work to a chaotic levity until it finally resolves into stillness, and the breathless performers whistle softly while birds in the soundscore seem to respond.

John ends on a reflective note with a more recent narrative about a transient young man struggling with homelessness, recounted in unison by the performers. The narrator's own desire to help the young man, and sense of urgency, acutely brings the topic home again and reminds us that many are missing, but it's not too late.

By Rachel Silver Maddock

The Dance Current, Jan 13, 2022