ESSENCE by **Buried Thunder**

Review

Martha Buss
Tableau Dance

"Astrological semiotics motivate discussions around identity and relationships as the audience carve out a personal digital journey" – 4 stars

Venue: Eko (online platform)
Date: 8 April 2021
Ticket price: Pay What You Can

I was lucky enough to be invited to the community premiere of **Buried Thunder**'s *Essence* on 8 April 2021, making up a small viewing group three days ahead of the performance's release date. After being welcomed by the company's creative team on *Zoom* I was encouraged to indulge in the 20-minute long experience, marketed as an 'interactive digital project'. *Essence* provides a fresh take on the relationship between science and dreams, finding connections between astrology and reality. The blurry space between fact and fiction is one that has been discussed for many years and how we create our own belief systems is not a new conversation, yet elements of controversy allow the subject to remain relevant.

Viewers are encouraged to use their cursor to click on words and symbols that appear on screen at intervals throughout the piece, which subsequently determines your route. Buttons include the obvious iconography of star signs as well as more ambiguous buzzwords like 'purpose' and 'purity'. Each decision is time-sensitive with a countdown in the top right corner that neatly encourages impulsivity and gut instincts to be followed (ironically, I managed to avoid my own star sign throughout: I'm not sure what that shows about my Leo nature!) The logistics involved in arranging a bank of performance clips this way and accounting for the impact free choice might have on story telling is an ambitious feat but seems to run smoothly for **Buried Thunder**. The interesting concept, not dissimilar to the successful 'Black Mirror: Bandersnatch' film, is made possible through the digital platform, **Eko**. The power you hold over your own navigation simultaneously makes your experience feel special whilst also peaking your curiosity around what you may have missed: perhaps sparking second and even third viewings.

In a fresh and bright opening, my first choice led to a solo performance where the concept of extending anatomy was explored beautifully. Only a few minutes long, this section of *Essence* revealed itself to be representative of Aquarius. Next I chose to enter the woods where an earthy and symbolic take on Capricorn was performed. Following this were beach, grasslands and bonfire locations each depicting another branch of astrology, including a kaleidoscopic edit for the Sagittarius episode. Using natural landscapes, subject to seasonal change, is perhaps a purposeful nod towards the ever-moving relationship some find with celestial bodies.

Interactivity can feel daunting for an audience member, especially those more use to passively observing dance from the back of a dark auditorium, and this aspect was not something I was expecting to encounter and certainly didn't realise it was so central to the experience **Buried Thunder** have created. Yet once the digital performance began, any potential pressure dissipated into intrigue.

As *Essence* was created in the midst of pandemic restrictions the dancers adhere to social distancing regulations throughout, yet the work is strong enough that you forget this once unusual aspect and focus easily on the theme. Their movement is either set against conversational dialogue or intense monologue, varying between extracts. The former being part of the research and development process for the project involving discussions with 16-30 year olds about their encounters and opinions on astrology: with some voices of interviewees featuring in the final piece. This creative choice helps *Essence* steer away from the airy-fairy stereotypes of astrology and instead find a true and unashamedly human way to represent the pursuit of meaning.

Buried Thunder ensured that advocating for a digital community was at the heart of their funding bid and subsequently secured support from the Arts Council. The team behind *Essence* wished the work to stand out from the currently congested digital scene by introducing an active relationship between the viewer and the work. Whilst I think the piece succeeds in this goal, I am sure more and more companies will be similarly exploring greater levels of interactive relationships until it can no longer claim notoriety in the field.