

## Staging Trauma: A Review of Bryony Kimmings's *I'm a Phoenix, Bitch*



The show begins as a mini-spectacle: from the sound system, a loud scream and a roaring horror march of brass instruments and bass drums. Greenish spotlights shift in time to the beat, as though conducted by the single figure center stage. She wears a fiery sequined dress and bright heels; she has long, curly blonde hair. Her arms and legs extend and compress throughout a presentational, choreographed pantomime. Is she a stripper? A monster? A femme fatale? The bass drums key up to a last burst, as the performer simultaneously mimes her vagina exploding. The lighting bumps into a stark wash, revealing the performer center stage surrounded by four scenic pieces covered in white sheets. She pants, then speaks:

Imagine if I started the show like that! What a prick. Autobiographical performance artist Bryony Kimmings at your service. Welcome to my show, 'I'm a Phoenix, Bitch.' What's it about? I hear you cry. Hmm where to start – OK, potted? In 2015 my life burnt to the ground babes. I lost my mind, my partner, my house and in some ways my son Frank. This is a show about that traumatic time and very importantly my subsequent recovery.

*I'm a Phoenix, Bitch* premiered in 2018 at the Battersea Arts Centre in London as part of the Centre's Phoenix season. The season was so called, in unplanned symmetry with Bryony Kimmings's piece, in celebration of the venue's reopening of the Grand Hall following a fire in 2015. Effectively, Bryony Kimmings's life and the Grand Hall both burnt down in 2015, and both reemerged, renovated but with scorch marks intact, in 2018. When I saw Kimmings's piece on 14 August 2019, it was performing at Pleasance One as part of the British Council's Edinburgh Showcase in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. With extensive tour dates in Brighton, Edinburgh, Melbourne, Brisbane, and Manchester throughout 2019, it is impossible to experience Bryony Kimmings's work without turning a question over in one's mind—how can she manage to perform the trauma of this piece over and over again?



Bryony Kimmings's *I'm a Phoenix, Bitch*. Photo: The Other Richard

The first scene of the show functions like a preface, an introduction to the shattering of personal identity that occurred for Kimmings in 2015. As she sashays through a playful recitation of her past works as a performance artist, all of which she recollects involved “lots of crying,” she orients the audience to her costume as a representation of “pre-2015 Bryony [...] bad wig, ASOS sequins, little shimmy.” She is playful, both self-deprecating and brave, scattering moments of humor like pieces of harmless glitter that reassure the audience that she is a performer, an entertainer, safely on the other side of what she is about to reveal: “You’re safe, I’m safe. This is something I do for a living, I’ve done it for a long time.” Then, she lays herself bare. She removes her wig and her costume, revealing the comfortable black workout clothes underneath. Her hair is short and straight; she sets the glamor aside. She describes this to the

audience as a coping mechanism, a way of orienting away from her fear of what others will think about how she looks. She packs her “old Bryony” costume away, and then introduces the audience to another coping mechanism. She brings out a small dictaphone and speaks into it, recording—she says— for her son Frank. She speaks to him about how she is feeling about being onstage, and invites the audience to say hello to him. Then she moves into a coping mechanism that allows the primary narrative to unspool: rewinding. She brings out a tripod and video camera, and describes the psychotherapeutic process of “watch[ing] events from your life back as if you are watching yourself on film. One step removed to keep yourself safe. You can stop and start and of course rewind the film and change events if you wish. Slowly things begin to lose their traumatic power...” The coping mechanisms Kimmings flags for the audience are gestures of authenticity and vulnerability. She invites the witnesses to differentiate among layers of her performing self, and offers the healing Bryony of *I’m a Phoenix, Bitch*, clad in black and prone to inner-criticism and the aftershocks of painful trauma, the “broken Bryony,” as an invocation of the real.

Inside the “rewinding” strategy, Kimmings transposes the interior process of imagining oneself and one’s memories *as if* on film, into actual live-action videos projected large-scale. First, she uncovers one of the scenic pieces concealed by a white sheet. Underneath is a facsimile of a kitchen, a small film set with props strewn about. She sets the camera up to project a continuously close-up shot, dresses her top half (makeup, fake eyelashes, large bouffant blonde wig), takes her seat inside the kitchen, and sings about her morning-after plan to ensnare a lover (Frank’s father). The audience sees the production mechanisms behind the presentation: Bryony’s undressed lower half, for example. The sound and image of bubble gum pop is clear, deliberate kitsch—she winks at the camera as she self-consciously performs a representation of womanhood that is (she sings) “half like your mother and half like Babestation.” This moment is a tongue-in-cheek window into one of pre-2015 Bryony’s manifestations of an archetypal/dysfunctional feminine persona. The constructed reality of the music video unfurls with cartoonlike color, sanguine energy, and upbeat tones that satirize the toxicity of what Bryony performs: “I’ve rounded up all your ex-girlfriends/the ones that are pretty are tied up in the basement/so this looks like a hostage situation if you try to leave me alone.” Part of the pleasure of this performed identity derives from the lightness of the confessional (I-know-I-shouldn’t-but-I-do-it-anyway), and part from the virtuosity of Kimmings herself as a performer. Her charisma transcends the language, fills the small set-like kitchen, and explodes into the large-scale projection and out into the auditorium. She playacts, with verve, a conscious parody of a role she has played in life. In the midst of an overarching performance that deals with the aftermath of having played so very many roles, so very many identities in her life, it is poignantly evident how very good she is at playing a part.



Bryony Kimmings's *I'm a Phoenix, Bitch*. Photo: The Other Richard.

As she moves through subsequent scenes, telling the story of meeting her son's father, becoming pregnant, moving into a utopian rural cottage by a stream, experiencing the onset of postnatal mental illness, learning about her infant son's devastating medical diagnosis, Kimmings's filmed/projected storytelling characters proliferate. It is almost as though a chorus of selves accompany her as she speeds, with interspersed interruptions by the real Bryony, the "broken Bryony" of post-2015, toward the theatrical and emotional catharsis. One self is a womb-centric pregnant woman, a flower-crowned hippie preparing for a miraculous birth. Another self is a defenseless woman that seems borrowed from a 1930s suspense film, desperately calling for help on the phone. The many selves of Bryony Kimmings are also representational tropes: the crazy woman, the helpless woman, the jealous woman, the seductive woman. These tropes, scattershot throughout *I'm a Phoenix, Bitch*, are both autobiographically relevant and specific and disturbingly widespread. That familiarity enables a participation in Bryony's playacting that creates strong empathetic links between performer and audience member.

That empathy is perhaps what makes *I'm a Phoenix, Bitch* a trauma shared as well as staged. The witnessing audience watches Bryony's body move back and forth between identities that are obviously constructed, and an identity (post-2015 Bryony) that seems real. We see ways in which the production plays with scale: some scenes use a dollhouse-sized cottage and doll-like figures to represent Kimmings and her former partner. Later, as Bryony hallucinates, the modestly crafted stage space splits open to reveal an almost mythically scaled hill. Inside that hill, the kitsch of previous projected clips falls away,

and Will Duke's projection design reinvents an image of madness: in a white, stained nightgown, Bryony claws her way through projected trees, digs and falls down a grave-like hole, and is overcome by a flooding deluge that she described earlier in the piece as a bucolic, rippling stream. On top of the hill at the top of the stage, she somehow scratches her way back into memory.

### *A Postscript*

After the cathartic horror of traumatic madness staged, the production's return to everydayness is its own kind of trauma. Even after experiencing a mind unhinged, *I'm a Phoenix, Bitch* does not avoid the jagged edges of life still to be lived. Bryony cannot fully escape the lure of the cottage, which becomes a symbol of her fractured self and episodes of psychosis. She cannot escape the crushingly repetitive litany of medications and fears and waiting that accompanies her son's illness. Even as the content of the piece stages repetition, revision, and rewinding, so the process of performing day after day stages a similar cycle. As recently as September 2019, a month after the performance I attended, Kimmings gave an interview that indicated how carefully she must work to keep the performance safe for herself. She continues to experience mental health challenges, despite the reassurance of recovery she grants the audience in the first moments of the show. In an article published in *The Guardian* on 16 September 2019, Van Badham writes that "after an Edinburgh run, Kimmings was suffering 'delusionary kleptoparapsychosis' and imagining spiders were infesting her house and her skin." Perhaps, among its many generous gifts, the production reminds us that strength and wellness are not the same. When we watch *I'm a Phoenix, Bitch*, we might ask: is Kimmings really safe as she plays current and former Bryony onstage? Has she really worked her shit out, as she claims in the first few minutes of the show? What could that even mean, within an artistic language of bottomless grief and undeniable trauma? Perhaps Kimmings's remarkable, autobiographical, epically rendered production stages a rising phoenix that is more than a single moment, that is an ongoing—even lifelong—process of emerging from flame too hot to touch.

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