Clown directs Hamlet for a night

There is still time (as long as tickets are still available) to spend an evening of laughs with a dash of catharsis at this year’s University of Auckland annual Drama production A Night with Hamlet – a production of two scenes from Hamlet and six adaptations.

It is not surprising that a performance based on Shakespeare’s famous tragedy should take a feisty twist – it is directed by a clown.

Over two weeks the internationally acclaimed actor, director, playwright, mime, clown and jester Dr Ira Sedenstein has been working with students to generate and develop ideas while imparting some of his wealth of accumulated knowledge and skill.

Ira, who is in New Zealand to teach workshops in master-clowning, has had a long association with by Auckland artist Alex Monteith. Facing in opposite directions, one camera recorded material as it came towards the vehicle while the other one, mounted to the rear of the vehicle, tracked material as it was left behind.

Screened concurrently as a dual-channel video installation, the resultant footage has the potential to be completely disorientating and bewildering. However, Monteith avoids this by her pacing of the work which, rather than confusing the viewer, helps to create an oddly calm and syncopated rhythm between the adjacent frames.

Monteith is renowned for her penchant for extreme sports, dizzying speeds and dare-devil antics; 1020 metres in 26 minutes is definitely one of her more serene works in terms of tempo. The central dividing line acts almost like a magnetic vortex as streams of traffic merge and the harbour bridge’s iron pylons seemingly dissolve into one another. In contrast to this melting band, the right screen details cars inching slowly forward while more cars, complete with billowing flags, mark out the road ahead on the left screen.

Supremely clever in its simplicity, the footage offers an enchanting lyricism because of the wealth of visual interest that the piece contains. A key facet of the work is that it is filmed in real time with no cuts or editing. As a result 1020 metres in 26 minutes uniquely documents an important piece of New Zealand political history objectively, and allows it to be revisited and re-experienced much as it unfolded second by second. Content aside, however, the work is also visually appealing as it rolls and eddies past the viewer.

Born in Belfast in Northern Ireland, Monteith immigrated to New Zealand in 1987. She later completed a Fine Arts degree majoring in Photography at Elam School of Fine Arts before moving to the Intermedia Department of Elam to complete both a masters degree and a doctorate.

1020 metres in 26 minutes is set to feature in the comprehensive exhibition of Monteith’s work opening at the Govett-Brewster Gallery in New Plymouth on 25 September. Monteith is also one of four finalists for this year’s prestigious Walters Prize at the Auckland Art Gallery, nominated for her piece Passing Manoeuvre with Two Motorcycles and 584 Vehicles for Two-Channel Video. The winner of the Walters Prize will be announced on 8 October.

Jemma Field

1020 metres in 26 minutes Waitangi Day Auckland Harbour Bridge Protest 2008
Two-Channel Video
7 metres x 3 metres, 26min looping cycle