« The francophone company displays a healthy respect for the maturity of its young audience ... There are many splendid examples of physical theatre, but one in particular speaks beautifully about the way the woman’s memories of her lost family are her foundation. The woman is raised high above the ground; each step she takes in the air is supported by a different parent or sibling ... Although it is wordless, the universal appeal of I on the Sky speaks to anyone from anywhere. »

   Kevin Prokosh - Winnipeg Free Press

« When it comes to acrobatics, Cirque du Soleil may have the dazzle, but DynamO Théâtre has the soul ... another exquisite piece of physical theatre ... the five-member cast turns this universal tale of alienation into a poignant, sometimes comic, and ultimately hopeful ballet. »

   Martin Morrow - The Grid

« ... it fluently blends music, movement and, of course, some high quality acting to tell a complex story of a young woman ... a story they tackle with an almost ferocious intensity and physicality ... there is wit aplenty, all offered up in a style that trusts its audience to figure out right from wrong, the humane from the inhumane. ... a work that boldly challenges a young audience to blend their own imaginations with those of the performers to enrich their theatrical experience ... »

   John Coulbourn - Toronto Sun

« ... Director Yves Simard has set up some ambitious choreography, this young and energetic company more than delivers. The movement in this piece is spectacular ... judging by the audience reaction - gasps, laughter and applause at regular intervals - they’ve got exactly what it takes to hold the attention of a room full of sixth-graders. »

   Mike Anderson - Mooney on theatre

« Young People’s Theatre has opened its 2012/13 season with a fantastic show by DynamO Théâtre of Montreal ... From simple gesture and facial expressions to vast leaps and aerial flips, the range of ability of the troupe of five performers is impressive ... I think this is such a dynamic work and so well performed that people of any age will enjoy it ... To see such a subtle psychological change presents in such a vivid, highly physical way is truly a remarkable experience. »

   Christopher Hoile - Stage Door
At first bush, DynamO Théâtre’s production of *I on the sky*, currently playing at YPT, might seem a strange, even over-demanding, choice for an organization justly celebrated for its ability to bring theatre artists and young audiences together to the enduring maximum benefit of both. But not so fast.

Created for montreal-based company and directed by Yves Simard, the hour-long work may be all but devoid of spoken text, but it nonetheless fluently and fluidly blends music, movement and, of course, some high quality acting to tell a complex story of a young woman who finds herself alone and unanchored on a park bench in some un-named park, a refugee full of hope but haunted by her memories.

But as told by the artists of DynamO Théâtre, her story really needs no words. Tormented and bullied by a group of teenage thugs, the waif-like heroine nonetheless finds refuge not only in the occasional kindness of the strangers who mill around her but in her own memories of familial and romantic love – memories that appear to grow from the very music they evoke. That music (composed by Christian Légaré and J.S. Bach) and an ever-shifting sky-scape that serves constantly to enhance the ever-shifting mood (part of an ingenious set created by Simard and Pierre-Étienne Locas) are the only additional clues the five-member cast use to enhance a story they tackle with an almost ferocious intensity and physicality.

And while the absence of dialogue might initially prove distancing for some members of their young audience, the athleticism and commitment in performances crafted by Laurianne Brabant, Andréanne Joubert, Marie-Ève Lafontaine, Frédéric Nadeau and Hugues Sarra-Bourret soon serve to draw that young audience into the heart and soul of these characters and the story they tell. In the finest sense, this is a theatrical colouring book that challenges its young audience to fill in the emotional colours of the story that is being outlined on stage.

And such a story. Using a rich mix of dance, acrobatics and mime, these artists populate the un-named park with a rich pastiche of humanity, blending the rambunctiousness of youth and the self-involvement of the middle class into a tasty stew that requires no heavy handed preachiness as spice. Instead, there is wit aplenty, all offered up in a style that trusts its audience to figure out right from wrong, the humane from the inhumane.
When it comes to acrobatics, Cirque du Soleil may have the dazzle, but DynamO Théâtre has the soul. Montreal’s veteran young people’s troupe is back in Toronto to open the YPT season with *I on the sky*, another exquisite piece of physical theatre. In Yves Simard’s wordless story, a refugee (Andréeanne Joubert) from a war-torn country sits alone in a busy park, watching the changing sky and revisiting memories of her lost past. Working with just a park bench, a trampoline, and an array of costumes, the agile five-member cast turns this universal tale of alienation into a poignant, sometimes comic, and ultimately hopeful ballet.
... a parkbench in New York City begins a journey by Yves Simard (Scriptwriter and Director).

As a performer, I've spent a significant part of my professional life on tour. I had the chance of meeting many interesting individuals. I also had the opportunity of witnessing people living their own lives in their own unique way. In fact, one such experience provided me with the basis for the I on the sky project. The whole idea for the show popped into my mind as I was between performances in New York City. When you are on tour and not performing, you often have free time you may not know what to do with. In this instance, I decided to go out for a walk in Central Park. I walked for a while taking in the sun and seeing the many individuals going about their daily lives. I decided to sit down on a bench and look up at the beautiful blue sky. As I saw the people walking by, I suddenly realized that I didn’t know any one and that in fact, I was something like a temporary immigrant in the USA. Which got me thinking about people you come across in the streets. In fact, you don’t know most of the people that pass you by. You have no idea where they come from, where they’re going or even why. I was sitting on a park bench, the weather was beautiful, the sky was blue... and I was homesick. That is what I was feeling at that moment.

She was lost in the park, looking for people to come into contact with.

And that was the basic idea for I on the sky. The park bench... a setting for encounters with people you don’t know. The only thing these people had in common was the sky over their heads. I had a sense there was a show somewhere in my mind, but work would be needed to develop it. The more I looked at people walking by, the more I asked myself who are these people. The idea stuck with me for some time, but I had no idea where it would lead me.

I had my finger on the beginning of some project. I began by drawing pictures, ideas for movements and events that could happen in the park. Over time a few story ideas began to develop. What I knew from the outset was that I did not want to use words in the production. I felt that against the blue sky, the imagery and movements would be able to convey any feeling. An immigrant woman appeared, soon to become the central character of the play. She was lost in the park, looking for people to come into contact with. Many characters popped in and out for no clear reason. Then all of a sudden, I had the image of the woman sitting in the park remembering her former life, the disasters she had experienced, her expectations for a new life and all the angst and hope of moving to a foreign land.
The backdrop of the sky was always a significant part of my project and I felt I needed to explore where it would lead me. As we always do at DynamO Théâtre, I suggested to the other directors of the company a rough idea for a piece on an immigrant woman. The only setting would be a park bench and a screen to project feelings and experiences on. Through the various exploration sessions with a group of physical performers and image consultants, various characters came into focus and I slowly developed a storyline.

The challenge for a physical and acrobatic theatre production is to tell a story without using words. I had had experiences with this type of challenge, but doing so without using any words whatsoever would be quite a challenge. Issues associated with immigrants coming to a foreign land and trying to find a place for themselves and their family was the central issue. As I explored the various scenes, I began to realize how coming to a foreign country is very similar to moving into a new neighborhood or entering a new school. The whole idea is to build relationships and develop a sense of belonging. The imagery on the screen behind the bench would provide broad information on what people who have to leave their homeland went through. With that in mind, I wondered if I could have young audiences empathize with the foreign woman. But of course, that idea had to be tested on various school groups. The surprise was that it worked pretty easily. The test audiences were getting the gist of the show and only a few adjustments were needed.

As I develop my ideas in a French-speaking environment, I developed the project from my own perspective. But another question quickly emerged. Would an idea like this one appeal to audiences in other locales? Would issues be similar? I know, we are all the same basically. We have similar fears and concerns on our minds. Some events bring some issues to the forefront. Physical gestures often (but not always) have the same meaning from one language to another, but I needed to make sure I wasn’t stepping into something I had not foreseen. Audiences usually have the same understanding of a scene, although depending on one’s background, some issues may be more important in some cities. So depending on the age, cultural background, knowledge and awarness of others, reactions do vary, but the general idea of finding a home for oneself remains and works with audiences. So the I in I on the sky can be just about anyone.
Dynamic Storytelling from DynamO Théâtre

Young People’s Theatre has opened its 2012-2013 season with a fantastic show by DynamO Théâtre of Montreal. *I on the sky* (*Devant moi, le ciel* in French) written and directed by Yves Simard forgoes words to use a combination of mime, crown, dance, acrobatics and video to tell its story. DynamO Théâtre is like a five-person Cirque du Soleil where the storytelling comes first and all else exists as integrated components to serve that single purpose. The result is an intense 55-minute long work that in its humour and emotion is more effective than many of the recent Cirque shows that have passed through town. The story tells of a young girl (Andréanne Joubert) who is blown in on a great wind storm and finds herself abandoned in a park. She finds a place on a bench that faces forward a few feet from one facing backward. There she observes the various people who pass by and has flashbacks to the life she left behind. Michel-Antoine Castonguay signals the change from the present to the past by changes in his video projections on the screen behind the girl. Suddenly the bright sky with scudding scattered clouds turns to snow or rain or to an interior shot looking out of windows into the night. In these flashbacks we see that the girl came from a happy family with loving parents (Hugues Sarra-Bournet and Marie-Ève Lafontaine) and a competitive younger sister (Laurianne Brabant). We see she was a pianist about to give a recital. She also has a boyfriend (Frédéric Nadeau). Things turn bad when her boyfriend is inducted into the army but refuses to serve. He is captured by three people in long white coats with high collars that make them look like the Russian Imperial Guard and executed. For reasons I wish were clearer, this causes her family to flee but the girl becomes separated from them.

The flashbacks are presented in roughly chronological order interspersed with the going-on in the park that the girl observes from her spot on a park bench. There is the sleepy park worker (Nadeau) who goes about picking up litter; the businessman (Sarra-Bournet) who is always on his cellphone; the fashionista (Lafontaine), also always on her cellphone, carrying ever more bags from luxury stores; the construction worker (Nadeau) who keeps trying to eat his lunch that the businessman accidentally steals; the old, bent-over woman (Lafontaine) who uses her umbrella with both hands like a walker and sits on the girls bench to feed the birds. What particularly strikes the girl are the glimpses she gets of another family quite unlike her own. Here the parents (Sarra-Bournet and Lafontaine) continually argue, each trying to take possession of their little girl (Brabant). The girl on the bench sees how her counterpart runs away from the situation at home only to get caught up in a gang of kid in hoodies who harass her and steal her copy of music by Bach. After much taunting of the girl on the bench with the music, the girl’s counterpart eventually defies the gang and returns the music to her. All of this communicated without words. The use of action can be as simple as the boyfriend taking his military cap and throwing to the ground to show he will not fight. People struggling with their umbrellas is enough to conjure up the storm.
On the other hand, the movements can be as complex as the battle between the construction worker and the businessman over their cellphones as they chase each other and use the trampoline hidden between the backs of the two park benches to somersault over each other. The acrobatics include full layout flips and the girl jumping high enough to land standing on her father’s shoulders plus general tumbling on the mats around the benches. The key factor is that the acrobatics are always used in service of the story. Atmospheric music by Christian Légaré heightens the action as does the lighting of Sylvain Letendre in changing the mood. Légaré’s music alternates with keyboard music by Johann Sebastian Bach, when the girl sits on her suitcase and practices her fingering. We also hear it when the park worker puts on his headphones making us wonder how long it will be before the two discover they both love the same composer.

The girl’s first day on the bench is alienating as she tries to understand her new surroundings and retreats into memories of her lost family for comfort. But at the end of the play when the sequence of comings and goings starts again and she (and we) see the same characters pass by doing the same things, we feel as she does that a sense of familiarity with her new surroundings is finally starting to take hold, and the feeling grips us as she turns to face the wide sky on the screen behind her, that everything may turn out to be all right.

From simple gestures and facial expressions to vast leaps and aerial flips, the range of ability of the troupe of five performers is impressive as is the imagination of Yves Simard, who choreographed every detail of the piece. The YPT recommends *I on the sky* for grades 3-7, but I think this is such a dynamic work and so well performed that people of any age will enjoy it. Everyone, certainly not only young people, have experience the fear of isolation in a new place and how that anxiety gradually dies down as one gets used to the ways of the new world. To see such a subtle psychological change presents in such a vivid, highly physical way is truly a remarkable experience.
I on the Sky proves again that words are not necessary to tell a meaningful story with intense emotions.

Instead, the vocabulary of the captivating touring production by Montreal’s DynamO Theatre is movement, acrobatics, striking video projections, lighting, acting, costumes and atmospheric music. How they are precisely combined by writer/director Yves Simard and his five-member troupe fires the imagination, even for 10-year-old schoolkids who took in a performance earlier this week ahead of I On the Sky’s public opening Friday at Manitoba Theatre for Young People.

The francophone company displays a healthy respect for the maturity of its young audience by introducing menacing characters and death, just as it did when it was last here in 2009, staging Thrice Upon a Time... . Although the immigrant story is serious, the 60-minute telling of it is fluid and relatively easy to follow.

The setting is a park bench in front of a large video screen, on which is projected an ever-changing skyscape that reflects the scene’s mood. A storm, accompanied by nasty winds of change -- suggested by people being tossed all over the stage, trying to control their umbrellas -- leaves a solitary, unnamed woman, clutching a small suitcase containing all her worldly possessions.

She appears sad and hesitant as the sky clears. She’s on edge and startles at the sound of a flock of birds taking flight. The waif-like woman watches the park denizens with curiosity -- a bored city worker, a jogger, a businessman talking on multiple cellphones and an old lady feeding the birds.

She also witnesses a couple arguing and ignoring their daughter, who then runs away. The girl and the woman, each escaping conflict, forge a bond that will eventually reinforce their will to go on and start over.

Teenage bullies harass the woman and steal her beloved sheet music, a reminder of long-ago days, when she was a budding pianist with a loving family in some faraway country.

With her present uncertain, she retreats into happy memories of her past that are abruptly interrupted by a military conflict, into which her boyfriend is conscripted. He refuses to serve and is arrested by three ominous-looking, faceless military officers in beige greatcoats, after which he is hooded and presumably executed.

The actors silently use their bodies to create character, emotions, atmosphere and pace. A trampoline hidden behind the park bench allows thugs to menace the woman by leaping high over her. There are many splendid examples of physical theatre, but one in particular speaks beautifully about the way the woman’s memories of her lost family are her foundation. The woman is raised high above the ground; each step she takes in the air is
supported by a different parent or sibling.

*I On the Sky* is a visual treat thanks to superb ensemble work, led by Andréeanne Joubert as the woman in exile. Laurianne Brabant, Frédéric Nadeau, Hugues Sarra-Bournet and Marie-Eve Lafontaine all impress with their athleticism, versatility and commitment.

Although it is wordless, the universal appeal of *I on the Sky* speaks to anyone from anywhere.