There’s no doubt *Conversation Piece* will amount to just that. And there can be no doubt that Lucy Guerin, choreographer and director of this co-production, is a vital, important, influential and innovative choreographic and theatrical force.

But while the premise is irresistible, it doesn’t necessarily make for 70 minutes of compelling theatre. Maybe 20. Or 30. When I say doesn’t, I should say didn’t, as it’s designed to be different every night. In fact, it can hardly help but be since, as the name implies, it’s based on a spontaneous conversation three actors improvise, from scratch (or so we’re told), in the moment, before our very eyes and ears.

When I say actors, in this production, the line is blurred between actors and dancers. So it’s actually the dancers we see on stage first, acting. Well, having a conversation. Being themselves, presumably. Or so we’re led to believe. The factors (a term jokingly coined during rehearsal) are Alisdair Macindoe, Rennie McDougall and Harriet Ritchie. The actors involved, seen on stage precisely eight minutes later (the timed length of the generated condo), are the gifted Alison Bell, attention-getting Megan Holloway and multifarious Matthew Whittet.

On the night, conversation centred, in heaped spoonfuls, around food. Macindoe was informative, relating facts about the unsustainability of seafood. The next generation may never taste fish. Ritchie told tall tales, of a stepfather that once ate 96 oysters, without ill effect. A cool dude, a surfer, he strode on out. There was discussion of projectile vomiting, life-size sex dolls, the relocation of the Sizzler empire to Thailand, an all-you-can-eat Korean BBQ restaurant on Rundle Street. All of this recorded on iPhones. In fact, this was a 70-minute ad for iPhones and cool apps. Talk about product placement: if the production wasn’t sponsored, it was an opportunity missed, on both sides of the equation.
In come the actors, recapitulating the original conversation as it’s fed through their earphones. This was the moment when my cynicism was aroused, since there seemed to be a very conscious, overt attempt to accentuate the idiosyncrasies of the first utterers, particularly for comic effect, rather than be strictly true to the premise of the work: faithfulness should’ve been the objective, rather than exaggeration. What was interesting, I suppose, was the decision to subvert the communication by freezing all gesticulation. This transforms the inanities of everyday social discourse into something one’s more likely to read about in the DSM IV. Even the slightest differential in pauses, a louder, more cacophonous laugh here, a marginally more anxious response there, cranks the dial from average, or ‘normal’, to weird, or downright perverse.

Re-enter the dancers, who reverse the polarity, communicating the entire conversation through movement as individually expressive as their verbal styles. From this point, it’s reinterpreted in many and various ways: excerpted; monologued; delivered as a telephone conversation; inflected with accents; stripped of words and recreated as a language comprised of nonsensical sounds. The last is engaging, as we’re reminded of how much, say, facial expression, volume, pitch, intensity, emphasis and other qualities bring to bear insofar as understanding between people, even when there’s no language, as such, in common.

There are startling moments, such as when Ritchie embarks on a athletic solo, bending and stretching in ways few humans can. And there’s certainly humour in Bell’s futile, but creative attempts to follow suit. Indeed, this is reiterated when Holloway tries to join the troupe, as they indulge in a complex, synchronised routine. Later, the tables are turned, when Macca seeks to mirror Holloway’s wild loungeroom abandon. Other than in these episodes, much of the other choreography is, for mine, unremarkable; even questionable. And the tearing down of border fences between dance and theatre, which sounds so exciting and new on paper, isn’t entirely or convincingly effected.

Bell’s sergeant major like harangue of Ritchie is probably the most amusing scene; Bell gets a ringing endorsement for her comedic sensibility from me. Robin Fox’s composition and sound design plays a prominent part, as do interpolated songs from people like Johnny Cash, singing Nick Cave’s The Mercy Seat which, much as I enjoyed them, left me in a quizzical state, pondering the relativity. Especially as they seemed to break any flow that was established. Blessed relief, perhaps? Like a commercial break?

Macndoe’s destructive slomo performance was fastidiously realised and was one of the most impressive sequences but, again, why? It’s all very well to fall back on cliches about abstraction and an overarching aspiration to provoke thought, feeling and foster further exploration, but what suffices academically, or in the confines of a rehearsal studio, workshop or festival of dangerous dance and theatrical ideas doesn’t necessarily stand as theatre for which people area expected to fork out their hard-earned.

While the work has much to offer insofar as generating feelings of compassion, understanding (the manipulations of conversation prompt realisation that in the act of ‘conversating’ we are desperately seeking recognition, acceptance and approval) and empathy, it tends to follow a sinewave rather than arc in its dramatic effectiveness. While the opening night audience seemed, on the whole, wildly enthusiastic, I wasn’t. I fear some of us may be talking about Conversation Piece for all the wrong reasons.

I will be checking out those cool apps though. On that whatsaname that, as Guerin has observed, so effectively keeps us isolated, even while opening us to a universe of connections.
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