HOT brings Australian dance to Glasgow Tramway

A FLAVOUR of Australia's dance culture is taking residence at Tramway. Expect innovation and energy, says Kelly Apter

Jake works as an engineer at the Port of Melbourne, Mike designs websites and apps for a living. But later this month, they'll be flying to Glasgow to perform with one of Australia's most acclaimed contemporary dance companies, Lucy Guerin Inc.

It's a prospect that would fill most people with dread – stepping onstage with professional dancers, when your own dance tuition amounts to nothing more than a few days rehearsal prior to the show. Yet Jake Shackleton and Mike Dunbar had to fight for their place in Untrained, one of two works Guerin is bringing to Tramway as part of HOT, a festival of Australian contemporary dance and performance.

Performed by two highly trained and experienced male dancers, and two members of the public who have not danced previously, Untrained explores notions of what is, and isn't, worth watching. All four men have to execute the same movements, be it twirling, leaping, rolling or jumping. Suffice to say, two of them find it easier than the others.

"It was a really amazing experience, having a room filled with untrained guys dancing," says Guerin of the audition process, "and then having to decide which two really fit the specific requirements we have for the Untrained show."

by Kelly Apter
So, apart from a complete lack of formal dance training, what was Guerin looking for?

"An ability to get their personalities across on stage," she says. "You get a lot of people auditioning who just try too hard, show off and over-perform. And then you get the ones who are just painfully shy and look at the ground all the time. But I was really looking for the same thing I look for in a trained performer – for an audience to be able to connect with them as people."

Guerin toured Australia with Untrained, auditioning men in each area as they travelled. Sadly, due to time constraints, the men of Glasgow won't have the chance to become temporary members of the company, hence the reason Jake and Mike are jetting in for the occasion. Like those who went before them, they're in it for the challenge.

"Dancing is a particularly fearful area for a lot of men," says Guerin. "But when we held the auditions, we asked them why they wanted to be part of this show, and so many of them said, to be taken out of their comfort zone. There was this desire to go beyond the everyday and have something new in their lives, it was a big motivation."

Happily for the men involved, their willingness to enter into the unknown has been well rewarded. The sense that "one of us" has mustered enough confidence to get up on stage and dance has led to a warm reaction from audiences.

"Initially, it's very humorous seeing these guys who haven't trained attempting to do particular movements," says Guerin. "But pretty quickly there's this real groundswell of support. So whatever they do, even if it fails miserably, the idea that somebody has given it a go is very much supported by the audience."

Guerin's other contribution to the HOT programme, Conversation Piece, also takes contemporary dance in a new direction. Performed by three dancers and three actors, the show starts with an eight minute conversation between the dancers, all of which is recorded on iPhones and then re-delivered by the actors.

"Their conversation is random," explains Guerin, "and we never know what they're going to say. It can go from being quite hilarious to really very dark."

Smart phones play a starring role throughout the show, being used to film movement, play songs, and provide apps to assist the performers in a range of tasks. "Social technology is so completely embedded for us now," says Guerin.

She is one of six choreographers represented at the HOT festival, chosen by co-curator Robert Walton because "she's the most interesting choreographer working in Australia at the moment". For him, both of Guerin's works offer audiences a new way to view dance.

"Conversation Piece is an incredibly satisfying piece of work, and different every night," says Walton. "Many people here in Australia watched it multiple times, just to see what the difference was. And Untrained allows us to see what training does to a body, and what it really means to dance."

"It highlights the grace of both the normal human body, as well as the dancer – and how art doesn't have to be perfect to be beautiful. It's the idea of the valiant attempt."

Associate head of theatre at the University of Melbourne, Walton was the perfect choice to pull the HOT programme together. Based in Australia since 2011, he was previously a theatre practitioner and teacher in Glasgow, giving him an insight into both worlds.

"I tried to home in on what would be the most interesting work for Scottish audiences," says Walton. "And how we could give a flavour of contemporary Australian practice."

He's assembled a rich and diverse programme which not only reflects the current cultural output, but fundamental aspects of Australia itself.

Hailing from the north-west of the country, Marrugeku specialises in intercultural dance theatre drawn from the indigenous Asian population in that area. Their solo, Gudirr Gudirr, features movements which, as Walton says, "have been performed by a thousand generations".

Similarly, Shifting Ground, a performance and installation by Zoe Scoglio, uses rocks and fossils to explore the connection between geology and humans over centuries.

"Australia holds the oldest continuous cultures in the world," says Walton, "and it's also one of the most multicultural countries in the world. So there are all these voices, words and languages swirling around. Questioning where our culture comes from - the moves we're performing, the words we're saying - is one of the questions Australia is asking itself, and features in some way in all of the works in this programme."

At the other end of the scale lies Robin Fox's Laser Show which, according to Walton, features "full-on sound and visuals that rattle your bones". During the show, light is converted into sound, and vice versa, to create an immersive experience for those caught in the audio-visual storm.

The desire to fuse the ancient with the modern also prompted Walton to programme Tamara Saulwick's Pin Drop. Not for the faint-hearted, the work goes deep inside that most basic survival technique: fear.

"Although Pin Drop has a very contemporary Australian feel," says Walton, "Tamara is working with this ancient core that we may have
forgotten about. We might be in our suburban lives, but there is the potential for it to be changed or taken away.

“You sit in the theatre, and the way she messes with your senses is very creepy and exciting. I didn't know how deep the space was anymore, whether there was anybody in front of me or beside me. It really creates a sense of fear inside you, which is fascinating.”

• HOT is at Tramway, Glasgow, 12 June until Thursday 3 July, www.tramway.org (http://www.tramway.org)
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