A festival of possibilities: the faraway nearby

Kristy Edmunds unwraps MIAF 2006 for Keith Gallasch

What was great about the fifties is that for the first time, people could paint, they could sign their names. "From the faraway nearby, Georgina." What is that faraway nearby that is here? A festival of possibilities that have never been before. These are the works of the late, great American composer Morton Feldman quoted in a recent New Yorker: Our own era, with its proliferating art hybrids, myriad new means for delivering art and audiences happily playing co-creator, is like the 50s, although the sense of mystery is much larger than it was. New forms are born in the lab, artists boundaries blur, artists' roles are fluid. Meanwhile conservatories backpedal into commodifiable old categories. Melbourne is enjoying a wonderful mini-rennaissance of arts innovation thanks to Mulhouse, Arts House, Black Lung (p43), FULL TILT (the Victorian Arts Centre's contemporary performance program, see RT 79), and a host of companies like Back to Back, Stuck Pig Squatting, Chunky Move, Lucy Guerin Company, Apshead and others, and numerous individual artists. The Melbourne International Arts Festival is very much a part of this exciting evolution.

Kristy Edmunds' second MIAF is a fantastic festival of possibilities across forms, across media, across cultures, across political thinking and very much achieved through new forms of collaborations. It features some of the greats of the last 30 years who are still incredibly influential. They include provocateurs of 21st century art—Robert Wilson, Dumb Type, Bill T Jones, Peter Gurrroway and Richard Foreman—along with more recent innovators, Romeo Castellucci, Jérôme Bel, Marie Brannard and with a strong contingent of Australian innovators: Lucy Guerin, Apshead, Ros Wibyr, Max Lyravides, Big HART and Richard Mcpheters. This is a festival that's open-ended, rich in possibilities.

What drives you in the creation of your festival?
I kept hearing people describe Australian culturally in terms of the 'v�ness of distance' and geographic isolation which made me think, yes, all those things are true, but they're ideas that have no poetry in them and it limits what I was actually experiencing. When Georgia O'Keefe left New Mexico at the height of her career so she could paint, she would sign all her letters, "From the faraway nearby, Georgia." What is that faraway nearby that is here? Places that are supposed to be the most similar to us, whether it's our home or our country, or even ourselves in a way, can become far away, or unfamiliar, very quickly because of various forces at work. I don't make a claim for the festival, as you know, but I do try and find cohesion. A lot of what the artists are dealing with in the festival is about place and home—how you have in a sense of your home, how you belong—in terms of national identity, cultural identity... So there's a lot of work in the festival either celebrating a sense of home and place through tender little personal histories, a really deep questioning of what it does now mean to me to be part of this place, or finding a place in language.

In the 51st (slower) state, the black American artist Selov Sundaika also asks very rigorous questions about language, it is essentially colored either in the corporate sector or political speech. Certain words that we use to be able to use now have new meanings or are harder to use—like "racial" or "family." How does one reclaim that language, because if you don't you're silenced slowly. Sundainda's kind of getting a State of the American Soul Address, questioning en emple. He's also questioning it from his own sense of self. What does it mean to be an African-American poet/artist/musician? He's such a wise man.

We saw him perform blowing the brows at the National Review of Live Art in Glasgow this year, which is also in MIAF 2006. It's a fabulous performance—very present but also reminiscent of form of work from the early 70s: Njogu wa Njoroge (RT 707, p67). The Big HART show that you've developed over these 2 festivals, it's very different look at language in which the audience becomes actively participatory. It's also focused on place with two features: Eason Johnson's account of the effect of nuclear testing in the 50s on his South Australian home and land and his people's dispossession.

Imagining to fill out grass proposals for Njogu wa Njoroge's work so many people absolutely thought that it would be impossible for them to pull it together. And, of course, when that sort of thing happens, my instinct is that it's only not possible if we don't engage.

There are many collaborations across countries and cultures. Artists are typically having to function across multiple countries. So what does home mean for an artist who's Australian but collaborating internationally? How did the Indonesians work with Robert Wilson? He developed that work (2 La Gallo) in different parts of Indonesia for many years. You can see there's a lot of engaged cross-cultural collaboration just to pull these projects together. Bill T Jones' east is very international. What is it that drives artists to seek across such huge divides? For me this is the hopeful side of globalization.

How is that sense of place reflected in some of the works in the program? Dumb Type's Voyage basically starts out with the question of where we are and where we may be going. They always have very strong connections to the natural environment, versus the urban built environment. It's at a certain point in the city where there's an avant-garde-like figure looking down at the Earth. Robert Wilson uses the ancient Sergio Gala work of Indonesia's Bicicliche work. The work is sung and chanted in Hugo with English subtitles. These people hardly speak that language any more. So it would be akin to Homer's Iliad. But it's valuable for the culture they use it for predicting weather and what they should eat. It's like a bible, it has a creation myth and the whole text is about how humans try to preserve balance and order in the world.

Tragedia Endecalogata (RT 66, p57), Romeo Castelluccio's epic voyage around Europe, is another response to place. There are 11 full-length theatre works built in the cities they're named after. Some of them could only happen once in a location, others are more mobile. It's a modern tragedy of what happened in each of those cities. It's not addressing World War 1 or 2 or any of that. They're the small things that end up in the back of the papers that can then evaporate, disappear and be done with. But they leave a mark on the place and the culture, especially the culture's ability to sweep it away instead of dealing with it. So Castelluccio really grab you by the throat and ask you to have a look at something that is horrifically tragic, unexplained and then disappear. When you look at him aesthetically, it's almost like he's laying Renaissance painting and really rigidly symmetrical and geometric into a theatrical world. It's a series of slow tableaux that are quite overwhelming. This is a project that is certainly not for the faint of heart.

How do you see the place of Australian artists in the festival? Richard Mcpheters is collaborating with Dutch artists from Dafawin in a work that takes them to northern Australia to the first acts of Dutch contact in 1606. Selov and Apshead are collaborating with Swiss artists. What about dance artists Lucy Guerin and Ros Wibyr who are presenting major new works?

There's a double bill from Lucy Guerin and Japenese artist Ryo Yanazaki, Chumna 4C5 Crying, but we're also doing the premiere of Guerin's new work, Structure and Safety. She's using the collapse of Melbourne's Westgate Bridge in 1970 and principles of tension and suspension, torque and collapse as a means of getting the choreography. It's also a metaphor for those fences that are in our bodies, even if we're not dancers. Westgate Bridge had been so embedded with hopefulness and tremendous engineering but it collapsed due to human error. So she explores that and the tragedy of the people who died, but also the resilience of human beings that makes you look at yourself and say, we have a job to do and you do it again and this time you succeed.

In a very different physical language, Ros Wibyr's Monument also explores simultaneously, looking at the swamp from battle iconography and the regeneration of the soldier. In her work, she's constantly relearning in order to go to a different vocabulary and presence. Metaphorically, she's addressing the impasse for humans to want to fly, and the gravity that keeps us grounded. And beyond that, how human consciousness is happening along great traumas. How does the spirit both fly and stay grounded?

I've also put together a program with Sally Ford called Second Home with first or second generation immigrant Australians performing. What you have running through Second Home is a lament, often for the homeland but also a real celebration of it. It's really about engaging with the audience and say these are Australian musicians. They are incorporating a great richness to Australian contemporary music but at the same time they're not being looked at in world music programming inside Australia.

Morumbah, with The Black Arm band, a 21-piece ensemble, is very different because first peoples' issues are radically distinct from intregumtats or multicultural issues. Morumbah has traditional songs from different parts of the land that are listeners for it, and music for healing practices, but it's also styled with jazz overtones with a variety of other contemporary musical forms.

Peter Greenaway's festival work, which he refers to as "a personal history of animation", represents an adavance in forms and ideas, with new feature films, DVDs, a website and an interactive game.
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