You dance, the festival dances

Keith Gallasch

There are 2 things you can't afford to miss in Robyn Archer's 2003 Melbourne Festival—a small cluster of important overseas works and a huge range of great Australian dance. For RealTime readers, top of the list of must-sees will be provocative artists with long track records and the capacity still to unnerve, excite and to rethink form. They are Belgian performance-maker Jan Fabre with I am Blood, A Medieval Fairytale, and, from Japan, multimedia performance virtuosi Dumb Type in Memorandum. Both have been seen in Australia before—Adelaide audiences walked out in droves or dared not go near Fabre's The Power of Theatrical Madness in the 1986 festival (allowing others of us repeated viewings of great art understood as barely controlled violence) and Dumb Type packed us in at Sydney's MCA in 1992 with pH where we peered down into a deep pit to watch a machine churning out projections, relentlessly traversing the space regardless of its hapless human co-habitants.

One-time Pina Bausch dramaturg, the performer, writer and choreographer Raimund Hogue triggers 60s recall using popular and classical music in the 2 hour reverie, Another Dream. Those who have seen Hogue in Edinburgh, and queued to see him again, warn us not to miss this show. Another Edinburgh attraction has been solo performer (and Robert Lepage collaborator) Marie Brassard in her cross-gender realisation, Jimmy, which she is presenting in this festival. A third solo, performed in an installation by Vera Rhom, comes from Catalan dancer and choreographer, Cesc Gelabert, in his reconstruction of the late German choreographer, Gerhard Bohner's acclaimed In the (Golden) Section 1.

From the Schauspielhaus Vienna (see RT#56 p8) comes Barrie Kosky's The Lost Breath, performed in English, German, Hebrew and Yiddish. The work brings together 3 stories by Franz Kafka, the reflections of escapologist Harry Houdini and the Robert Schumann song cycle, Dichterliebe in a music hall fantasia with Kosky himself on piano. Many will want to see what new dimensions there are to his work now that he's based in Europe—and hot on the heels of his huge success with Ligeti's Le Grande Macabre for Berlin's Komische Opera.

From France, as part of the Franco-Australian Contemporary Dance Exchange, which last year showed Chunky Move, Gravity Feed, Rosalind Crisp and Tess de Quincey to Parisian audiences (see RT#53, p4-7), there are 3 works. Centre Choreographique National de Franche-Comte a Belfort present Trois Boleros, choreographed by Odile Duboc. Yes, that's Ravel's Bolero danced 3 times, to 3 different orchestral interpretations. Using acrobatics, dance and film, the young performance company Kublaï Kahn Investigations evokes the agony of the refugee and the homeless in Tanin No Kao. From Burkina Faso in West Africa comes Salia Ni Seydou, fusing traditional and contemporary dance, song and percussion.

On the Australian front, there's much to relish. Archer gives top billing to Acrobat, all too rarely seen in Australia these days, the Australian Dance Theatre's prize-winning The Age of Unbeauty, Chunky Move's new work, Tense Dave ("as the stage turns,
[the characters] are caught in the spotlight of unexpected scrutiny, performing acts that usually pass unseen”), the Leigh Warren-State Opera of South Australia realisation of Philip Glass’ Akhenaten and Stalker Theatre Company’s Incognita.

The key festival dance figure though is Lucy Guerin. Involved in 3 works in the festival, she is directing and choreographing Plasticine Park, a collaboration with visual and new media artist Patricia Piccinini; choreographing Delia Silvan’s performance in Stravinsky’s The Firebird (Melbourne Symphony Orchestra); and choreographing the Chunky Move premiere. Plasticine Park will be presented in ACMI’s Screen Gallery with 8 soloists working in projected spaces created by Piccinini, Stephen Honegger, Laresa Kosloff and David Rosetzky. Let’s hope that this festival commission is a prelude to more new media performance at ACMI.

Other Melbourne-based dance and performance works in the program all deserve attention. At the Malthouse’s Beckett Theatre, there’s a strong triple bill from Gerard Van Dyck (Collapsible Man), Christopher Brown (the return of his charismatic mass media idiot savant, Mr Phase, RT#49 p11) and Cazerine Barry (in her the new media dance theatre work, Sprung recently premiered in Adelaide). Choreographer Christos Linou and visual artist Robert Mangion screen their CBD interventions at fortyfivedownstairs in part 4 of their Intertextual Bodies series. At the same venue, Yumi Umiumare and Tony Yap, whose duets have developed impressively in recent years, appear with their new, unpronounceable Butoh company, "\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, design by Michael Pearce, in in-compatibility. Phillip Adams’ Balletlab always intrigues. In Nativity, at Dancehouse, the company invokes the museum diorama as a site for exploring the human\/animal dichotomy. In another work about transformation (“from animal to angel, from gremlin to diva”), also at Dancehouse, the wonderfully inventive and idiosyncratic Ros Warby presents SWIFT re-frame, with design by Margie Medlin. At North Melbourne Town Hall, Kate Denborough directs Kage Physical Theatre in the premiere of Nowhere Man, a timely journey into the loss of meaning —“the story of an ordinary man’s transformation, where nothing feels familiar.” At the Atheneum II, Danceworks are celebrating 20 years of work with Symptomatic, which reads like a good companion piece for Nowhere Man—“characters struggle to negotiate competing demands on mind and body, never quite getting it right.” Transformation and breakdown are tellingly recurrent themes in these and other festival works, with bad old Humanism continuing its struggle to reassemble itself and the neuropathology of everyday life paralleling the distress of political disorientation.

Archer’s 2003 festival is a celebration of dance and movement. While it cannot make up for the sorry lack of a recurrent national dance festival, and can but hint at the range of Australian dance, it nonetheless does a mighty job. The vision of dance is enlarged by the inclusion of curator Erin Brannigan’s Body on Screen program. On screens inside ACMI and outside in Federation Square, the program ranges from Maya Deren’s innovative short films and Leni Riefenstahl’s Olympia to Singin’ in the Rain, to films about the body at its performative limits, the disappearing body, the body as narrator and, in Body of Work, leading international and Australian choreographers as filmmakers. The program also premieres Michelle Mahrer and Nicole Ma’s Dance of Ecstasy, complementing the visit to Australia, and this festival, of the Whirling Dervishes. And there’s more, a series of forums providing dance artists and afficionados from across Australia the opportunity to meet for serious dance discussion.

There’s a 90 minute symposium on drama and dance in Asia (featuring members of Dumb Type and Cloudgate’s Lin Hwai-min), a 3 day forum on skills and choreographic training and the future of dance in Australia, and a day long “research forum on contemporary dance and choreographic cognition.” The Australian Indigenous Choreographers Project will bring together Australian and Asian artists. As well there are workshops with Kubilai Khan Investigations, Odile Duboc, Salia Ni Seydou, Cesc Gelabert, Chunky Move and Raimund Hogue. Not performing in the festival (a real pity), but running workshops are Sydney artists Tess de Quincey, Gravity Feed and Rosalind Crisp. Add to this a number of key dance presenters from
around the world invited by the Audience & Market Development Division of the Australia Council and you have what adds up to a potentially significant moment for Australian dance.

There’s more to the program in music and theatre and works-in-progress. The visual arts program looks strikingly empathetic to the festival’s body theme. Last, but not at all least, there’s Neil Thomas and Katy Bowman’s The Blue Thong Club (Black Box, Arts Centre). From the Museum of Modern Oddities curators comes this “late night demi-monde”, a club where the likes of Paul Granjon (“hair technologist”), Paul Gazzola (“live art meister”), The Fondue Set, improvisers and dance artists will entertain and mingle in the context of the world’s “second largest collection of thongs.” Away from this nightly live art haven, the festival opens and closes with big public dance events. David Atkins will teach the steps, en masse, for Singin’ in the Rain on the opening night, and, on closing night there’s Bal Moderne, a well-tried European success, an evening of mass choreography at the Melbourne Royal Exhibition Building. You learn dances by Lucy Guerin, Kate Denborough and Gideon Obarzanek. This is a festival where you can see dance, talk dance and dance yourself silly.


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