AUTUMN 1990

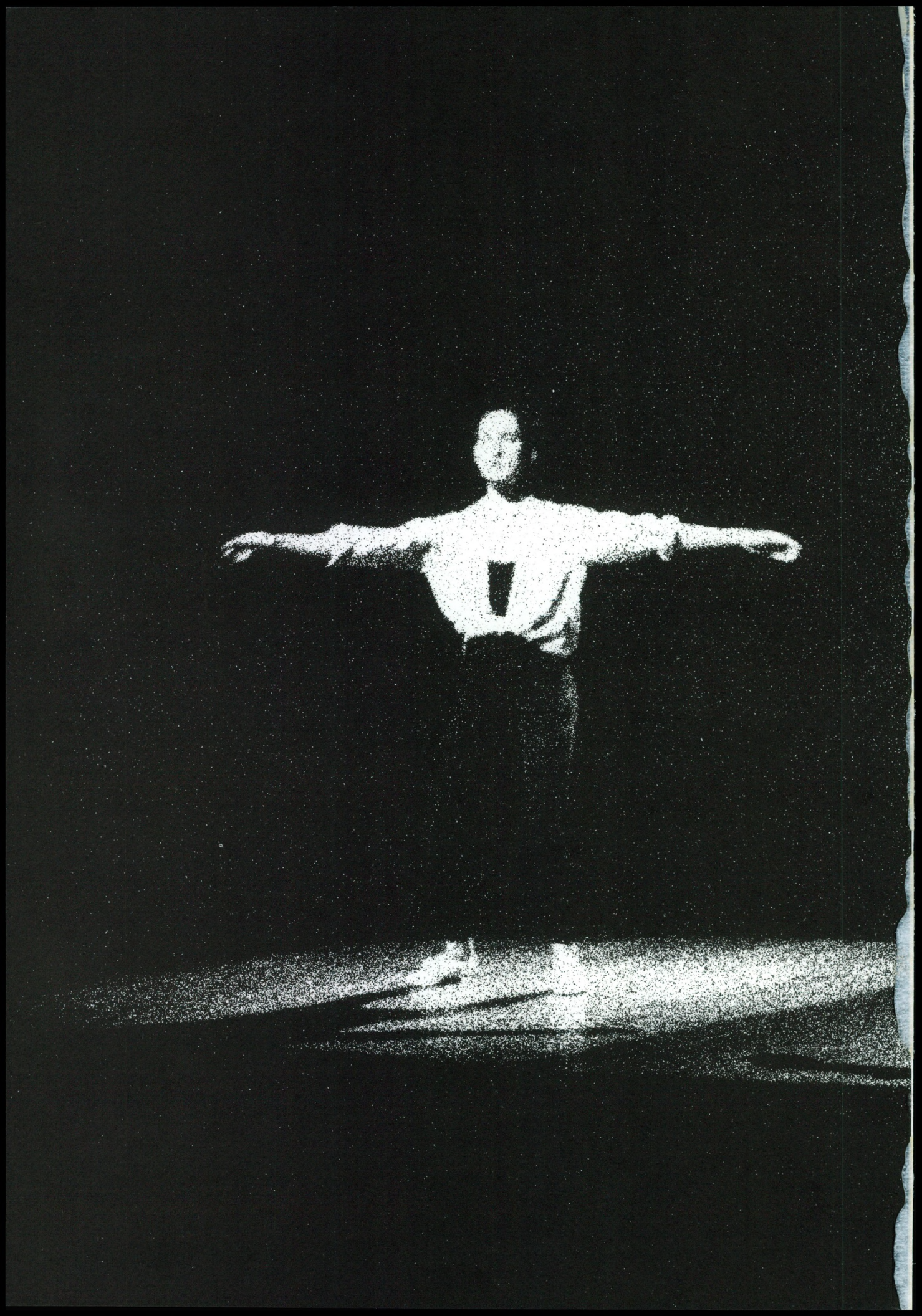
Writings on Dance

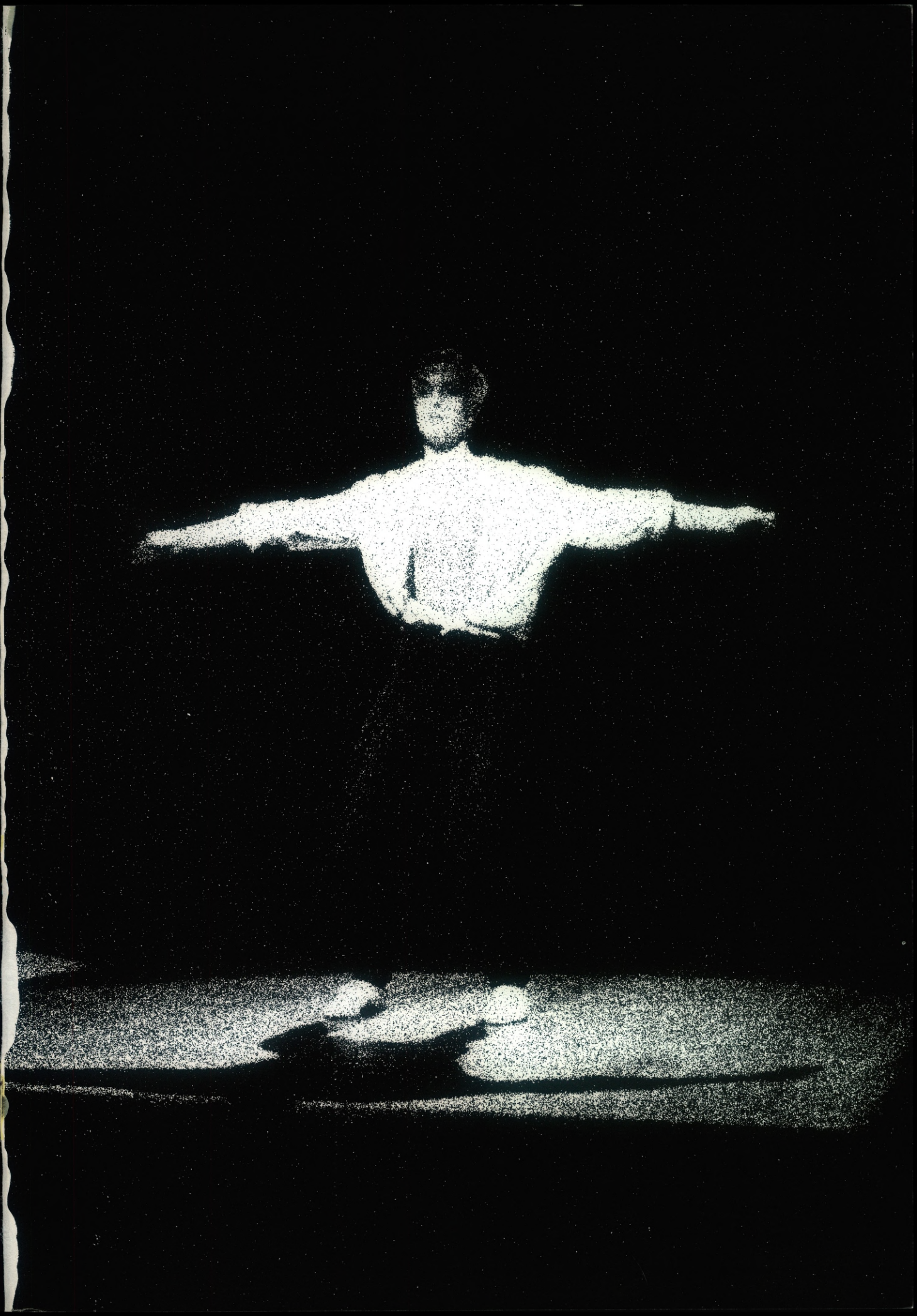
5

Local Practice

RUSSELL DUMAS • LYNDAL JONES • MERYL TANKARD

FAIR EXCHANGES – COMPUTER/DANCE/MUSIC PROJECT





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5. LOCAL PRACTICE

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ENDPAPERS:
FRONT: DANCE EXCHANGE, *GISELLE 2000* (1986),
CHOREOGRAPHY BY RUSSELL DUMAS. (PHOTO: STEPHEN CUMMINS)
BACK: *TWO FEET* (1989), MERYL TANKARD. (PHOTO: REGIS LANSAC)

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Preface

I've always looked upon composition as being a creative process, as distinct from a product. If I have criticism of a lot of the composers today, it's because they make products, and I don't think of composition as being a product. I think of composition as being a process, an exchange of concepts, and an exchange of ideas... KEITH HUMBLE (1989)*

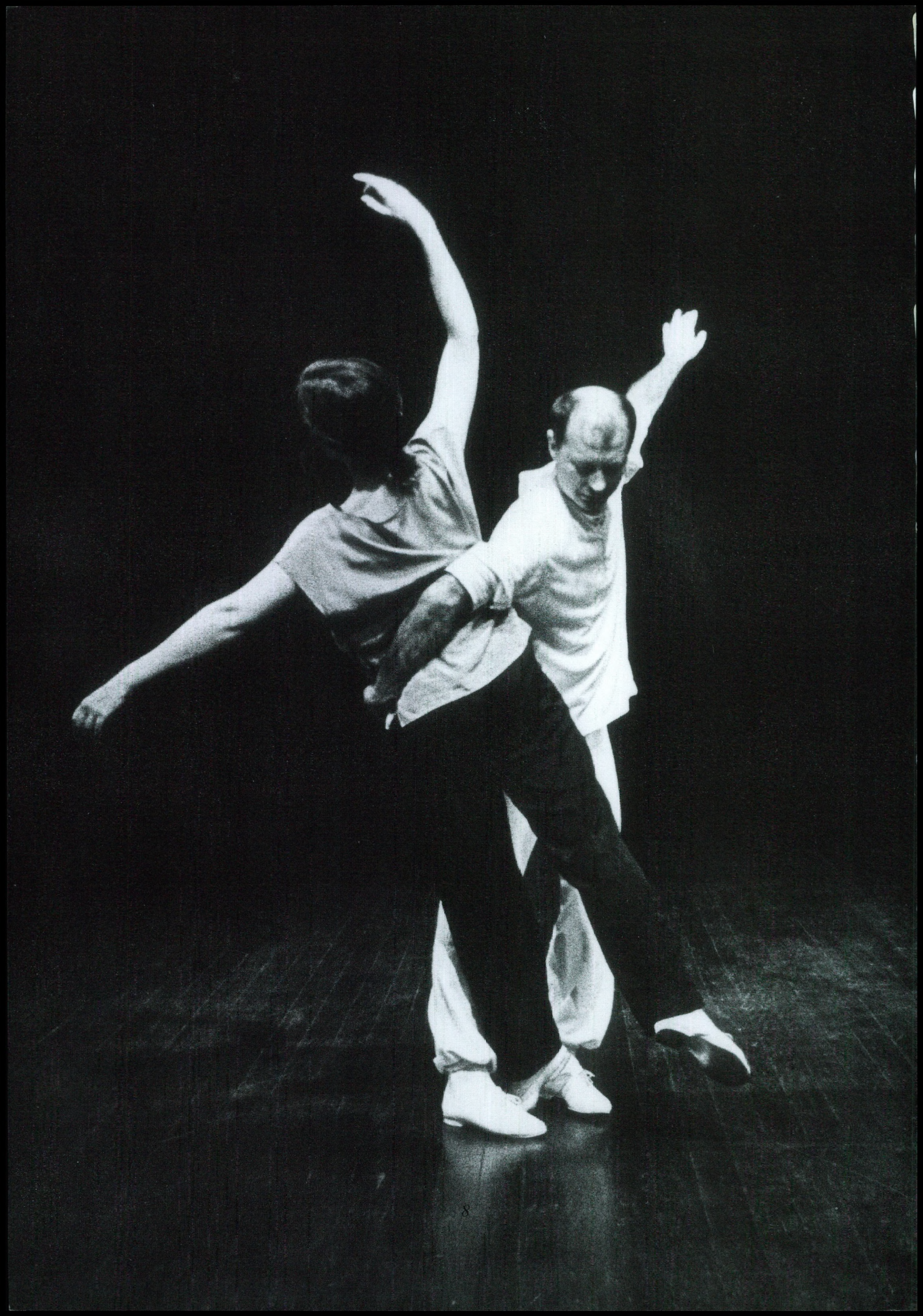
KEITH HUMBLE is speaking here of music and musical composition, but his words might equally well apply to the practice of choreography. This fifth issue of *Writings on Dance* focuses upon compositional process in dance and looks at possibilities and potential for exchange both within choreographic processes and between dance and other art forms.

In Australia today, public discussion of dance, and debate concerning its future, is becoming increasingly dominated by the rhetoric and logic of industry. While the term 'dance industry' may be appropriate to certain activities and in certain contexts, it cannot adequately represent dance as it is practised as an art. Nor can it describe the vital, exploratory work of choreographic artists. A narrow, market-driven conception of dance reduces choreography to the status of mere commodity, thereby excluding from discourse some of the most distinctive and radical aspects of the art.

The local artists featured in this issue, however different their respective compositional processes, have this much in common: a commitment to inquiry, to research and experiment, and to the expansion and renewal of their art. In this their work stands as a challenge to the limitations of industrial or market-place perspectives which define choreography simply as a product within an industry called dance.

Elizabeth Dempster
JANUARY 1990

*INTERVIEW WITH KEITH HUMBLE, JOHN WHITEOAK, N.M.A. 7:25, 1989.



ELIZABETH DEMPSTER

An interview with

Russell Dumas

January, 1989 Melbourne

RUSSELL DUMAS has danced with some of the major dance companies of the world including The Royal Ballet, Ballet Rambert, Netherlands Dance Theatre and the Companies of Twyla Tharp and Trisha Brown. For the past fourteen years he has choreographed in Australia as director of Dance Exchange.

Defining his role as a choreographic artist in broad yet rigorous terms, he has been active not only as a choreographer, performer and teacher, but as a critical analyst, dance theorist and writer. More recently the Dancelink program, established by Dumas in 1985, has seen him functioning as a kind of cultural ambassador, promoting and coordinating international exchange between dance artists from the USA, Europe, Asia and Australia.

Speaking of his own choreographic practice Dumas says that he is not interested in dance in the typical mimetic or narrative form, but rather one that poses and explores questions. In his approach to making dances he uses ideas drawn from various cultures, other disciplines and practices such as anthropology, philosophy, and film. In the final realisation of his choreography, however, he is a purist, preferring to show the dance movement alone without dependence on other art forms.

For Russell Dumas, dance is not a peripheral entertainment but is central to the business of living. His work in Australia over the past fourteen years has been directed to the realisation of a distinctive vision of dance. It is one in which dance functions as a powerful and resonant cultural force, a means by which we might come more fully to comprehend, celebrate and debate our society and our world.

In this interview Russell Dumas outlines the development of his choreographic philosophy and method with a detailed discussion of a number of recent works.

FACING PAGE: Russell Dumas and Jo McKendry in *No Points in Time* (1988). PHOTO: STEPHEN CUMMINS

DEMPSTER: Yesterday in Deborah's (Jowitt) workshop you briefly outlined the structure and development of *Rough Cuts.* (1980) Could we talk about that process in a little more detail now? Firstly, how was the original material generated?

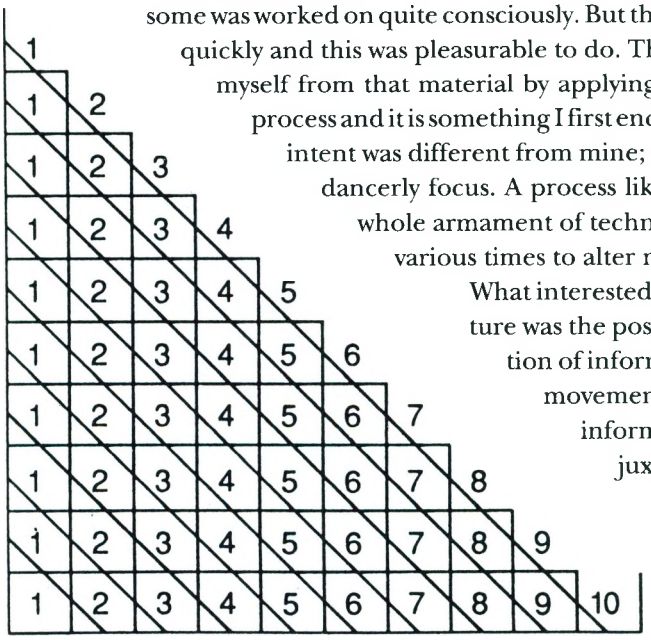
DUMAS: *Rough Cuts* was built from ten phrases of increasing length – the first phrase was a one count, the second, two counts and so on. Each of the phrases dealt with a particular kinaesthetic memory or movement experience and some of them referred back to specific moments in my own dance history. For example, one phrase relates to my work with Trisha Brown. This movement is for me quintessentially Trisha – something to do with looseness in the joints. In another phrase there is an aikido-like movement from Rose-Marie Wright (of the Twyla Tharp company). The fourth phrase was something to do with childhood memories and the movement of waves – the breaking and throwing and spreading and drawing back of waves, the body drawing diagonal lines like body surfing. These phrases are like sentences, very particular, very precisely drawn. The process of refining the material involved taking movement back to an origin, the often forgotten thing it was anchored in. The movement was etched in my body and I was concerned to be able to show its derivation.

DEMPSTER: How did that relationship between movement and memory express itself in the development of the phrases? Did you find movement first, which then triggered memory, or vice versa?

DUMAS: Well, it was a bit of both. Some of the material was arrived at intuitively, while some was worked on quite consciously. But the original phrases were made fairly quickly and this was pleasurable to do. The next stage was about distancing myself from that material by applying a grid. This is quite an arbitrary process and it is something I first encountered with Twyla (Tharp). Her intent was different from mine; she didn't use the grid with such a dancerly focus. A process like this would be just one part of a whole armament of techniques and devices she deployed at various times to alter material.

What interested me in working with this grid structure was the possibilities it suggested for juxtaposition of information embodied in the individual movement phrases, and the making of new information and new insights from that juxtaposition. The process was partly about displacing the techniques implicit in the original material.

To illustrate what I mean by that: if you study say Graham technique intensively you'll tend to reproduce a Graham – like style of movement. The more persuasive the physical technique, the stronger its influence will be. If you don't separate yourself from it, the technique indeli-



Rough Cuts Figure 1. The grid can be 'read' in any number of ways and presents numerous possibilities for the generation of new phrases. In Dumas' diagram the original phrases are represented horizontally. When the score is read vertically a secondary group of phrases is produced. These phrases are know by Dumas as the '..zies' – that is '1-zies', '2-zies' etc – phrases made from the first or second counts of the original phrases. The score could also be read in reverse. That is, beginning at count 10 of phrase 10, the dancer performs the material in retrograde. Diagonal lines could be drawn to produce yet another set of phrases.

bly marks your body, your mind and your kinaesthetic memory. When you apply a grid structure such as this you open up gaps between yourself and the technique; you make other choices available.

DEMPSTER: The two stages – first making the movement phrases and then using them as the basis for another compositional process – were quite separately conceived and executed?

DUMAS: Yes, and each of the phrases was also developed autonomously. The rhythmic structure and the counts are not consistent across the ten phrases, and I didn't make cuts from one phrase to the next so that they could fit easily. The transitions that I was interested in were the most difficult, the most virtuosic, and not those that were most natural or inevitable. Of all the many possibilities presented by the grid I'd look at the most difficult physical transitions and choose to do those. You'd have a ten count phrase that was almost physically impossible and therefore this would be the most interesting to do.

DEMPSTER: The materials you begin with are not at all simple, but they have an organic, kinetically logical feel about them. Using the grid you embark upon a complex process of first defamiliarising, and then 'naturalising' or reclaiming that material as your own.

DUMAS: Yes. The body takes over again. The intellectual labour undertaken in learning the new coordinations is made bodily; it's dropped to the muscles and becomes part of the bodily memory. I was interested in the idea of the intelligence of the body making sense of what were quite arbitrary cuts. But I didn't want it to remain a conscious thing and to present someone dancing in a very intellectual way. The movement had to be reassimilated into the body so that it came out seamlessly.

DEMPSTER: How long did you work on the piece and in what form was it finally presented?

DUMAS: Stephanie St Clair and I worked on it for months. The eighteen minute duet alone took five months, and we did nothing else during that time. The permutations were endless and we eventually decided that it was counter-productive to continue to explore new possibilities. We reached the limit of what we could do organically, and so made some decisions so that it didn't continue to be an intellectual thing while we were dancing. Nevertheless right up to the point of performing it we were rehearsing with bits of paper. The material kept escaping; it was very slippery, very difficult and we kept having to go back to our notebooks and plans.

The duet was built by following alternate lines through the grid and where phrases passed from one to the other we made bridging sections. Sometimes we swapped materials – Stephanie would take my phrase and I would take hers. It became highly complex.

The piece was originally presented Downstairs at the Seymour Centre. I set up three video monitors in the space and the piece began with the original phrases on video. The video was meant to evoke the past of the material and to present it in its first very concrete form. I also wanted to have music present, but as a memory or trace. Again this was a connection to childhood and my experience of music examinations, waiting in corridors, hearing fragments of music from behind closed doors. So what I did was to locate the music in an adjacent room. There was a grand piano in a room off a corridor adjacent to the performing area, and throughout the piece a pianist practised Bach, going over and over particular figures and passages. The piece started with the material on video monitors, the music started somewhere into that, then Stephanie began a solo, and the duet followed.

DEMPSTER: Would you consider reconstructing *Rough Cuts*, performing it as a full-length work again?

DUMAS: Not this one. All I will get back from it is the solo you saw the other day. That's stuck forever in my memory. It's like a raft to the past; and the pleasure of performing it again is in the memory it evokes, memory that is particular because I can still trace its origins. I can go back to the origins of the movement and although the dance no longer looks like the original it has a certain smell, feel, perfume, texture which evokes those particular parts of my memory. When it falls apart and I can't remember the sequencing, all I've got to do is concentrate on locating the memory of a particular move. If I find one physical move clearly enough it will spark my kinaesthetic memory and that one moment can in turn cue the whole phrase.

That solo links me in a direct way to eight years ago, but I dance it now with a body that is eight years older and which has had other experiences, other insights.

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ON VIRTUOSITY, TRAINING, AND THE PERSONA OF THE PERFORMER

DEMPSTER: A work like *Rough Cuts* makes precise technical demands upon the dancer, but the dancer's skill will not necessarily be apparent to a viewer; the virtuosity is not displayed as such. Was it your intention to mask the virtuosity involved in the dancing or was this effect simply the logical outcome of the process embarked upon in that work?

DUMAS: Well it was both. I have always been interested in virtuosity and in what I couldn't quite do, but I didn't see much value in virtuosity as it has been traditionally defined in dance. The limits that people often define virtuosity by – the entrechat, for example – always seemed to me to be fairly dumb, too obvious or just vulgarly muscular. They represent a very limited notion of the body's capacity and potential. It seemed to me that the body had all kinds of abilities that we didn't use.

In *Rough Cuts* the dancing was at times like a series of stumbles that this intelligent body was recovering from. We threw ourselves from one dangerous thing to another and it many have appeared as if we were just making it up in the moment. The idea of the body being able to make sense of all these disparate things interested me. I wanted to explore the body's innate ability to respond to the questions and problems it was presented with. Sometimes those questions and problems involved, or at least implied, a psychological dimension. The demands the dance made upon the dancer weren't always or only physical. It was often to do with memory and the ability not only to organise and order but to recall sensation and feeling precisely.

What I was interested in then and what I continue to be interested in today – in some ways what I am calling virtuosity – is related to the information that has emerged from disciplines like Todd alignment and the Alexander Technique. My notion of virtuosity is informed by knowledge drawn from those sources; it is very much to do with efficiency of action.

DEMPSTER: Traditional dance techniques presume not only defined standards and types of technical proficiency but also particular styles of delivery or performance presence on the part of the dancer. *Rough Cuts* is developed from heterogeneous sources, insofar as the original ten phrases are linked to very different periods of your own history. In performing this work you're slipping between many different experiences and different kinds of dance materials.

These materials in their original form suggest very contrasting ideas about the persona of the performer and the nature of technical expertise required of him or her. But the work when performed is not at all eclectic.

DUMAS: In order to perform the material and to achieve some organic unity in the dancing, I had to look outside traditional techniques and the information afforded by them. I had to focus on joint action, on thoroughly analysing how the actions worked. This process has led me to new insights about the body, about physical virtuosity and about training.

In this respect my work is very much a product of what happened in the 1960s and 1970s to the idea of the body in dance, and to ideas concerning the training of the body. These ideas focused upon functionality and the aesthetics of function. The idea of dealing with what was appropriate particularly interested me. It meshed with my experience of Japanese culture and with my understanding of Haiku. What was appropriate work was not always the most beautiful. Movement had to have a certain robustness. It was beautiful because of its use; it was beautiful in use. In some sense I feel that my background in classical ballet predisposed me to a certain kind of culturally outmoded, or partially outmoded form – a kind of high courtly tradition which seemed to have lost its way. The traditional dance techniques we had were all about control and mastery of the body; in the old forms gravity was to be conquered. The new techniques that I was introduced to in the 1970s acknowledged the subjectivity of the dancer. Time was invested in the experience of sensation and of feeling. These techniques gave value to the sense of trusting the body, of returning to the body as authority, rather than it being something that had to be overcome and mortified. The body information that was surfacing in modern dance in the 1960s and 1970s had been around earlier but came through as a rich vein at that time because the culture opened up to it. That period opened up other possibilities for bodies and for dance. New energies were released and artists were looking for ways of incorporating the new information into dancing.

So, in a work like *Rough Cuts* for example, I was balancing bones, I was seeing how much I could free muscles to reflect emotions, to reflect thoughts so that they shimmered off the body, off the movement. I felt these ideas and approaches to dance allowed for a much more complex relationship between things, not simply a one-on-one, illustrative connection between movement, thought and emotion. The mind works on all kinds of levels. I get little pleasure from dance which doesn't acknowledge that complexity and subtlety.

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DANCING SARA'S PHRASES I (1987)[1]

DEMPSTER: I am interested in your idea of training your dancers through repertory. At the outset of the *Dancing Sara's Phrases* project you informed your dancers that there wasn't to be any training other than that implicit in the learning of the dance. This approach to the development of dance and dancers would seem to be fundamental to much of the work you do. How do you see the relationship between your choreography, the work that's produced, and the training that your dancers are undergoing?

DUMAS: It's a broad principle; it shouldn't be taken to refer to just that piece. The idea is that the most effective training for a dancer is the production of work and that in the endeavour to

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1. *Dancing Sara's Phrases* was first presented at the Performance Space, Sydney in 1987. The result of an ongoing dialogue between Dumas and New York artist Sara Rudner, this fifty minute work for six dancers was built from one and a half minutes of thematic material developed by Rudner in 1986. The basic units of dance material provided by Rudner were played with and built on in ways that develop the choreographic intelligence of dancer and audience and that encouraged whole-hearted engagement with the issue at hand, that is, dancing.

ABOVE: ***Dancing Sara's Phrases*** **(1987). PHOTO: STEPHEN CUMMINS**

get that work out the dancers are exposed to rigorous processes. I have a vested interest in making sure they understand what my intentions are. If they don't understand they can't articulate the work, their bodies won't have the resonance that I am interested in. And yet they can't have my experiences, so it's a matter of communicating my understanding and encouraging them to find experience akin to this in their own lives.

Often when experience is codified into a dance technique the sense of it being a lived experience is diminished. The process of codification reduces the richness of experience. It becomes a series of muscular sets which speak primarily of a certain kind of achievement and mastery. Other resonances, other meanings are excluded.

DEMPSTER: When dancers come to work with you either from a school or another company situation where the division between technique and training, and rehearsal and performing is a matter of convention and often quite rigidly made, they must find it confronting and confusing to work in this rather more open ended and yet intensive way.

DUMAS: Yes, I am asking them to see their lives implicated in the work. I ask them to identify how they have come to the information and beliefs they have about the body and dance; what kind of culture has caused them to think that they have to stand a particular way and not feel, for example. If you ask people to start thinking from the body outwards and to have a sense of the spine – this is much more a modern dance idea – you are asking them to dance their bodies, rather than to parade on top of their well turned-out legs. To dance with a sense of the spine, to dance the body, you have to *feel* with your body, and in order to feel you come up against all sorts of social conditioning. This is especially true for men, who have been taught that to show feeling is unmasculine.

DEMPSTER: You have directed a number of large group performance projects, the *Mackie Project* (1980) and *Distinguishing Features* (1983) amongst them. These projects were directed towards the education and training of dance artists and not the development of your own choreographic work per se. What kinds of issues or problems were you hoping to address through these programs?

DUMAS: When I looked at dance here with its limitations and lack of development I came to the conclusion that many of the problems were the result of the training available to people. With the Mackie project as well as giving people some insights into choreographic process I was trying to give experience which would encourage dancers to know that they have a value when they are not dancing. The way we learn to dance results in the idea that you are only a dancer when you are dancing, that is, when you are doing steps. Who are you when you're not doing chasee pas de bouree? Your worth as a dancer is evaluated in terms of your ability to do these technical things all the way through your training, and suddenly when you become a soloist or principal you're told that in fact it's something else. It's always something else, but that something else is never talked about or specified and it is assumed that this 'something' will just miraculously be there when it's required. But the actual process of getting to the point where you are required to exhibit this 'something else' almost kills any confidence that something else exists. You have been undermined all the way through about your own worth as a person, as a thinking person with opinions which have been physically wrought. In America I saw that people were encouraged in their endeavour to be artists. What they thought and how they felt mattered because that in effect was the substance of their art. As a dance artist, your body, your mind is the filter for experience, and in America the individual is acknowledged as the centre, the source of the art.

With the Mackie project I had also wanted to see whether American experience – the concepts and techniques that certain American artists had evolved to meet their culture – could be transferred here and what the consequence of this would be. I finally concluded that it wasn't entirely useful in that it produced rather peculiar aberrations in sensibility. People developed some facility and were able to refer to things – choreographic processes and concepts, new physical perceptions and skills – but without any real understanding of where these things had come from, how they had evolved, what preceded them and where they might lead.

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ON AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE AND *NO POINTS IN TIME* (1988)

DEMPSTER: What is your response to the criticism that has been levelled at you from time to time to the effect your work is overly influenced by American dance and is somehow 'un-Australian'?

DUMAS: When I show work in New York it is perceptibly different from the work that is happening there and yet when I return to Australia the same work is misconstrued as a mere borrowing of New York dance. The suspicion is that because I've worked with Twyla Tharp and Trisha Brown my work is just some pale imitation of theirs. To a New York audience it is absolutely evident that this is not the case; my past experience with those companies is not even commented upon. In Australia, with the absence of real reference points, the suspicion is always there.

Australian-ness, in the sense of overt Australian content and all the jingoistic stuff doesn't surface in my work. But I'm not any less 'Australian' for the fact that the questions I am asking are more subtle. The Australian experience is not a singular, homogeneous one.

DEMPSTER: Critic Andrea Borsay has described your recent work *No Points in Time* (1988) as 'an eloquent statement of cultural displacement'. A concern with questions of origin and literacy has emerged as a fairly persistent theme in our discussion today. It would seem to suggest that your interest in an examination of colonial experience, of what it means to live and work as an artist in Australia, is neither new nor specific to *No Points in Time*, but has been an integral part of much of your choreographic exploration. Seen in this light your work could be read as a cultural critique, an analysis of Australian experience.

DUMAS: In a sense that is inevitable; the dances reflect aspects of my life, of what has happened to me. It shows up as a symptom in the work I produce.

DEMPSTER: Is it merely a symptom of your condition, or Australia's condition for that matter? These questions have been quite consciously tackled as issues in certain of your dances, and in my view your work does represent a quite thorough cultural analysis. Because Australian society is not familiar with the language you are using the work is not generally received and discussed in these terms.

DUMAS: I might be tackling it, but it's still a symptom; I am still exhibiting symptoms of cultural dislocation and isolation. There's no way that I can avoid manifesting that. The most interesting thing for me is both to exhibit it and attempt to understand it. In the endeavour to understand why I feel this way about what I feel, I understand something about Australia, and about what it means to be an Australian and to live and work here.

DEMPSTER: Tell me about the title *No Points in Time*

DUMAS: I find the expression 'at this point in time' rather silly – I don't like it – so what I'm saying is that there are no points in time. My rejection of that expression is also linked to the idea of another concept of time – the thought that Australia is the oldest continent. It is a land that is relatively unwritten in European terms; 200 years of European experience is insignificant in a temporal sense.

The title was meant to evoke some of those things. There is also a bit of a play around 'pointes'. It's a rather tangential reference to a statement by Dame Peggy van Praagh: 'if it's not "en pointe" it's not real dance' – meaning, if it's not ballet, it's not worth considering.

DEMPSTER: Elements from different periods of your own history come into play in this work. I recognise material from an early work, *Blinky Bill* (1978), enfolded into the long duet between yourself and Jo McKendry. There's the duet for two men from *Giselle 2000* (1986), set against Jo's rendition of the 'bird-cage dance' – recognisable to any girl who has studied ballet in Australia as part of the first grade R.A.D. examination.

DUMAS: I keep working material and it cycles through two or three or four pieces, transformed and contextualised differently each time until it's finally dropped out of the repertoire.

DEMPSTER: With the scrims, frames and projected images another sense of time is introduced into the performance. What is the relationship between these different elements in *No Points in Time*– the live, the projected, the present, the past, the static, the moving? Had you intended them to be relatively independent of one another?

FACING PAGE: Russell Dumas and Jo McKendry in *No Points in Time* (1988). PHOTO: STEPHEN CUMMINS

DUMAS: The screens and projections were partly to do with the idea of veneers, and of surface – something that receives projections in both a literal and figurative sense. When I was a kid I went to the movies and mostly my access to art was through a visual medium. We had a rather disembodied connection to European and American culture. My experience of art wasn't to do with the spoken word but with what was written and what was represented visually, through pictures, through the movies. This is how things were communicated over distance. What I was wanting to do with the visual material was to echo that kind of experience. Using projected images to create a veneer, a false or transient sense of depth; the scrims suggest something that is superficial – present, but not very solid. The projections appeared at times to create depth but were shadowy, insubstantial. This material was also a metaphor for memory which can seem so substantial, so absolute, so sure and yet something can flicker and it changes dramatically.

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***CIRCULAR QUAY* (1984)**

DEMPSTER: You once described the work *Circular Quay* as a ploy. What did you mean by that?

DUMAS: The ploy is in the name; it was partly an attempt to counter a tendency amongst critics who would comment on seeing material reappear in my work: 'Oh we've seen this movement before'. Let's say I'd called a work name 'x'. They'd see a movement phrase from 'x' in the next work or maybe two years later and there was this reaction: 'oh we've seen that movement before'. The movement was distinctive and because it was distinctive they'd recognise it, whereas if it had been something from classical ballet, it would be like tipping a cup of water in the ocean.

When a choreographer uses something like ballet he might rearrange, modify or cut it up, but there is not a sense of great personal investment in the movement itself. There's a notion that a choreographer makes pieces like this, by combining a given movement vocabulary with theatrical ideas and concerns. But I am primarily concerned with movement, not the things that might surround it. I am interested in what movement itself means.

DEMPSTER : Was there a problem stemming from the fact that modern dance is associated with innovation, with the idea of 'the new', so that there was an expectation that each work you produced would feature lots of new movement content?

DUMAS: It was a problem specific to Australia. Other people working here were not concerned with the development of movement material as such. They were more concerned with dramatic or theatrical ideas or with the relationship between movement and music. So that the projection for a certain kind of innovation in movement content was all onto me. In the critics' eyes it was almost like an area that I owned and therefore if I wasn't continuing to develop and change and delight every few months, well then somehow I'd creatively dried up.

I got irritated by the sense that what I was doing was always subjected to that expectation; that I would constantly change, that each thing I did would be different from anything else I'd done, that what I was doing two months ago could somehow be radically unconnected from my present concerns. So I thought I'd turn the tables and call all the work I produced that year *Circular Quay*. I made two or three bodies of material which I showed in different manifestations, ranging from a trio to a large group work for sixteen dancers.

Making work is for me about asking questions. *Circular Quay* wasn't about invention of language so much as about using a language to ask questions. What I was saying, basically, was that I am an artist, I have integrated concerns, the questions giving rise to the present work come out of the past and out other questions and other experience. I wanted to make the point that what I am doing here is work. I'm not making separate 'pieces'; I'm not interested in dance in the typical narrative or mimetic form and I don't set out to illustrate some already known thing to an audience.

DEMPSTER: But at what point does that ongoing work become a 'piece', become presented as such?

DUMAS: Almost retrospectively. They become fixed as pieces, and called pieces because I make a video of them, because they happen at eight o'clock on a certain date.

DEMPSTER: Some of your works have quite evocative and distinctive titles, which would seem to suggest that the dances are about specific subjects and that your investigation is not purely a formal one.

DUMAS: The titles are a way of reflecting on and opening up other perspectives to the viewer. Some of the titles are evocative but they do not describe the work. They are related to the concerns that I've had during a given period; they circulate around them.

Circular Quay is a case in point. Circular Quay (Sydney) is a place of continuity and connection with European experience. It was the place the first fleet landed; it was the place that ocean liners came into and departed from. Quays generally are ports, points of departure, places of comings and goings, places where there is inherent movement. I was also thinking about the pervasiveness of ballet – the way that ballet had colonised Australia and how it continues to connect us to British and European experience.

DEMPSTER: So the title *Circular Quay* refers to the character of that whole year's work with its circulation of ideas and materials, the comings and goings of dancers and movement material. Beyond that it speaks of the place of the ballet in Australian dance and in your own past – it's a point of departure.

To represent the ballet as 'quay' implies connection and continuity, but paradoxically, it also suggests discontinuity, and dislocation from European cultural experience.

DUMAS: *Circular Quay* is a play around all those themes.

DEMPSTER: To return for a moment to the question of recycling and reworking material. The duet which concludes *Giselle 2000* reappears two years later in *No Points In Time*, and in this second context its meaning is much more diffuse, and ambiguous. In *Giselle 2000* the duet can be read, if one chooses to do so, as a comment upon the historical narrative – as a death at the hand of the Queen of The Wilis, if you like. Whereas when it occurs in *No Points in Time* it is much less open to narrative interpretation.

DUMAS: In a couple of pieces I have used this duet material, which I've come to call 'post-modern death'. It is just two men slowly descending into the floor. It wasn't intended to be illustrative of death per se. For me it was always a much more ambiguous, complex image. I saw it as a beautiful action in itself, and there is a kind of sensual pleasure associated with it and an element of voyeuristic pleasure. But it does also suggest death and decay.

When I was younger I didn't talk about death. As a child there is that fear that your parents might die. You don't mention death because to do so seems to be playing some kind of game with chance. If you don't articulate it, it won't happen, if you hold your breath you can stop the sun moving behind a cloud ... There are these little fragments from an imaginative, magic

realm which remain with me. They are not logical, not rational. In the past I was not interested in illustrating decay or death or even, for that matter, the idea of beautiful ... any of those myths, if you like. Gradually I have felt a shift whereby I now find it quite interesting to deal with those 'big narratives'. I don't have an overwhelming desire to deal with them, but there's no longer the feeling that they don't matter, or that they are foreign to me. They are still relevant.

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VENUES AND AUDIENCES

DEMPSTER: From the earliest days at the Woolloomooloo Police Boys' Club, Dance Exchange's concerts have been presented in unconventional venues such as gymnasiums, rehearsal studios, town halls and such like. Unlike some of your contemporaries you have not made the move over to plushier, more traditional theatre venues; you continue to present your work in informal, intimate and what might be thought of as rather marginal spaces. Your choice of performance venue must be determined by financial considerations to a degree but I assume that it is also an aesthetic choice on your part?

DUMAS: The whole notion of a 'poor theatre' has been very influential and the idea that 'less is more' always appealed to me. These kinds of spaces (the Cell Block, Performance Space etc.) do have their problems but in the final analysis the structures that surround performance do prescribe what can be said. When you come to a traditional theatre the expectation of a particular kind of experience is already established through the architecture and ambience of the building itself, with its foyers, box office, ushers and everything. It becomes harder and harder to go outside the expectation that is set up by that kind of venue. Your audience in that situation is primed in a particular way. Even if the work is attempting something different, if it's put into that kind of package it's already coloured.

DEMPSTER: Who is your audience? Who are you addressing?

DUMAS: I'd say that there would be limited interest in my work amongst the general dance audience in Australia. I'm not sure that I could define who my audience is, but I suspect it is people who are more lively, who have more questions of their culture. Often that would mean an arts audience, a visual arts audience, people more interested in critical debate.

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ON MODERNISM AND POST-MODERNISM

DEMPSTER: In your critical writing you have noted that one of modern dance's most significant contributions has been to establish and promote the idea of the individual choreographic artist. You also state that the modern dance choreographer is concerned with the development of an integrated mind/body expression; this expression is individual but also broadly written in the culture.

To represent the individual artist as origin, measure, and centre of the art of dance, would seem to be appropriate to the early moderns – certainly they chose to represent themselves in that way – but it wouldn't seem to me to be quite accurate to continue to represent the art and individual artists in that way today. It's a model which I associate with a particular era in modern dance – that of Graham and Humphrey – and I don't think later moderns – Cunningham, for example – would describe themselves in those terms.

DUMAS: Partly when I say things categorically like that it is in order to clarify a point, particularly in the Australian context where the distinction between ballet and the art of the modern dance choreographer has been insufficiently understood. But I don't really subscribe to the notion of the unique, special individual, the individual artist as origin. It was the way the art was spoken of in the past and then it seemed to be much more a statement of the integrity of the artist, an integrity which was perceived to be linked to his or her uniqueness. Today we have come to view these notions as mythological or distorting.

DEMPSTER: Where do you locate yourself within the modernist tradition in dance? Could the term post-modern be usefully applied to your work?

DUMAS: There are problems in using any term in an Australian context where we lack any real connection with the social and historical circumstances from which they arose and to which they refer. Some of the concerns in some of the dances that I make could be described as post-modernist, some of them are not. But it's not really an issue for me.

DEMPSTER: It is a label that is often attached, perhaps in some instances inappropriately, to your work. And certain of your choreographies especially those involving a deconstruction of tradition – I'm thinking of *Local Motion* (1985) and *Giselle 2000*– do sit very much within post-modernist debates.

DUMAS: Partly what interests me at the moment is working with an awareness of what is received, of what audience expectations are of dance. But I'm interested in shifting the ground rules around a bit, making gaps. In *Giselle 2000* for example, I wanted to make a work that was very difficult, that drew upon the stuff of the classical duet, of classicism, but that took it all slightly off, out of kilter. In fact that's where it's real difficulty lies and its real discomfort for the performer. Because it has that inbuilt discomfort the material is extremely hard. It's never

BELOW: *Mulambin Beach*, rehearsal (1983). PHOTO: STEPHEN CUMMINS

really possible to master and you can never really perform it with the authority it would traditionally be invested with.

With processes and strategies of deconstruction it's necessary to have a certain investment in the thing you are denying. It's partly that you have to affirm it, in a sense; you need to be able to speak the language of the practice you are questioning and reassessing in order to be comprehensible.

DEMPSTER: Another aspect of post-modernist compositional strategy which I'd like to discuss is the idea of bricolage – of collecting bits and pieces, drawing materials from diverse sources and periods. A number of your choreographies (*Rough Cuts, Local Motion, Giselle 2000*) reveal something like a principle of bricolage at work in the selection and organisation of materials. However your work does not display the eclecticism and tendency towards pastiche which has become so predominant a feature in New York post-modernism. In choreographing, as you have explained earlier in this interview, you do not begin with a central idea or unifying theme from and around which materials are generated and structured. Your choreographic process produces works which resist a unified focus. But there is an organic, kinaesthetic logic in your dancing and in performance which tends to modify any sense of structural discontinuity and fragmentation. The rigour of your rehearsal process – specifically the detailed attention given to movement – brings about great clarity and purity in the movement and this quality, ironically perhaps, given the critics' propensity to label your work "post modern," gives a sense of unity and integration, and often rich emotional resonance to the work.

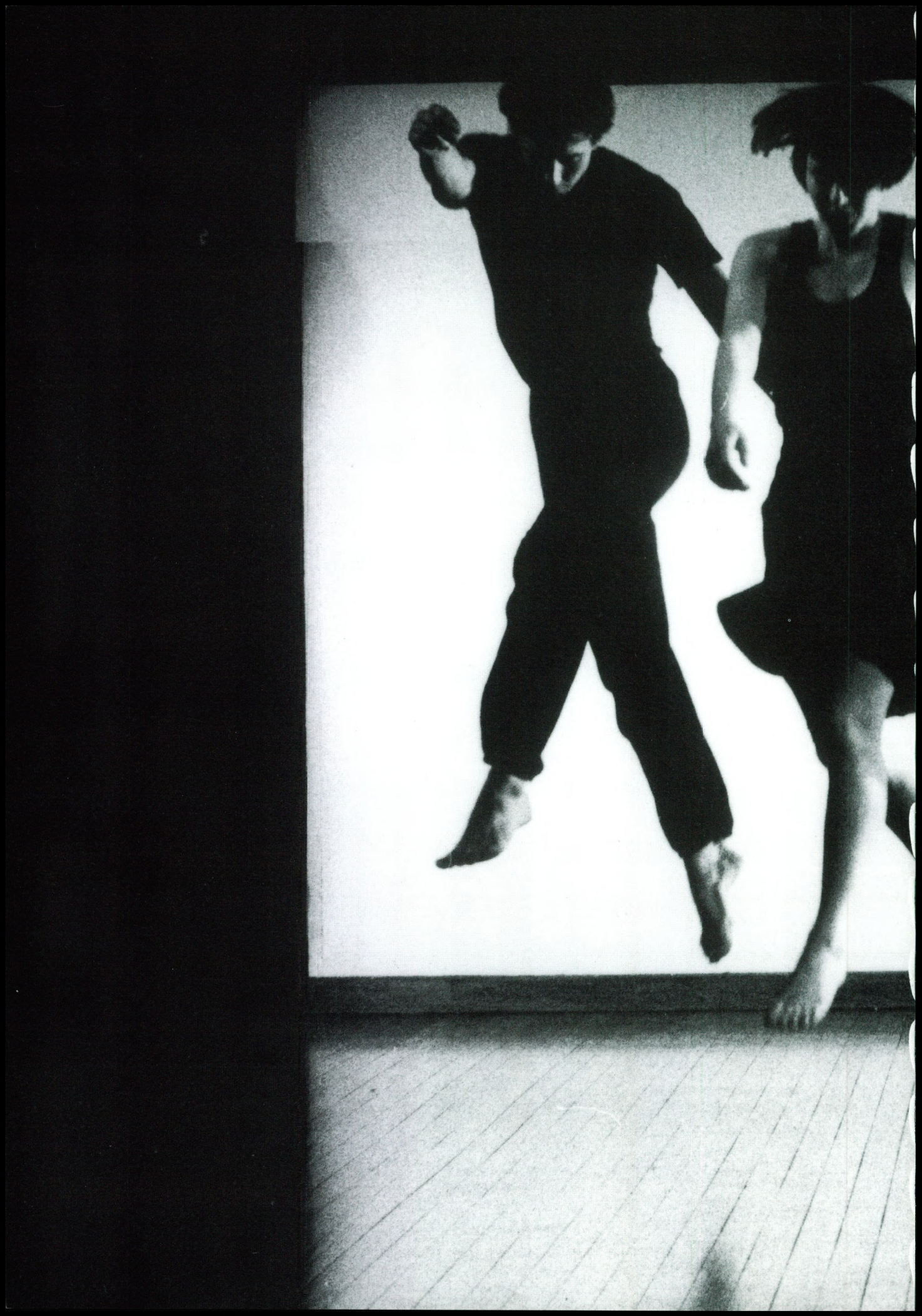
DUMAS: I think that some artists – whether it's luck, intuition, whatever – pick particular things for this process of bricolage which are resonant, which strike some chord with others. It's a question of the consciousness with which the artist comes to the work – and I would not discredit the notion of the unconscious artist by any means. It's an intuitive thing. The artist is of his time, what he is doing is guided by a trust in intuition, which is not at all the same thing as saying that he just took this, this and this. There is something which predisposes the choice.

Perhaps having lived through this range of different experiences I could make very careful selections of material according to its ability to evoke other times and other places. Perhaps I might succeed in achieving some kind of resonance through this calculated bricolage. But I'd find that very manipulative and the fact is I don't know exactly how the dances work; I don't presume to be able to do that consciously.

CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF RUSSELL DUMAS' CHOREOGRAPHIES

1972: *Trio* – Russell Dumas, Eva Karczag, Mike Vrooman; *Solo 1* – Eva Karczag. **1973**: *TV Channel 1* – Dance Company of NSW. **1974**: *Work in Progress* – Australian Dance Theatre. **1975**: *No Standing, Only Dancing* – Russell Dumas, Nanette Hassall. **1976**: *Standing, Walking, Running Dance* – Dance Exchange; *Mozart Duet* – Alida Chase, Russell Dumas; *Cram* – Dance Company of NSW; *Wriggles Incorporated* – Ballet Seminar, Townsville; *Little Duet* – Dance Exchange; *Phrases for the Chinese* – Dance Exchange. **1977**: *Red Paper Piece* (collaboration with Nanette Hassall) – Dance Exchange; *3 Duets* – Dance Exchange; *Ten Cents a Dance* – Dance Exchange; *Reciprocal Solos* – Dance Exchange. **1978**: *Counterbalance 11* – Dance Exchange; *Blinky Bill* – Dance Exchange. **1979**: *With a Feather Finish* (collaboration with Nanette Hassall) – Dance Exchange; *Beach 1, 11, & 111* – Dance Exchange. **1980**: *Rough Cuts* – Dance Exchange; *4321* – Dance Exchange; *Grids* – Dance Exchange. **1982**: *8 – 9* – Dance Exchange; *One for Nothing* – Dance Exchange. **1983**: *Mulambin Beach* – Dance Exchange; *Distinguishing Features* – Dance Exchange. **1984**: *Circular Quay* – Dance Exchange. **1985**: *Local Motion* – Dance Exchange; *Double Exposure* – (with guest artist Lisa Kraus) – Dance Exchange; *Local Motion Mix* – (with Lisa Kraus) – Dance Exchange. **1986**: *Small Appropriations* – Dance Exchange; *Giselle 2000* – Dance Exchange. **1987**: *Phrases for Sara/Dancing Sara's Phrases* – Dance Exchange; *Post-modern Cabaret* – (with Sue McClennan) – Dance Exchange. **1988**: *No Points in Time* – Dance Exchange; *Between Movement and Light* – Dance Exchange. **1989**: *Occasional Dances* – Dance Exchange; *Blue Palm, White Lies* – Dance Exchange.

ABOVE AND FOLLOWING PAGES: *Occasional Dances*, (1989). PHOTO: STEPHEN CUMMINS



RICHARD MURPHET

An interview with

Lyndal Jones

June 1989

IN THIS INTERVIEW Lyndal Jones discusses her interdisciplinary approach to performance, with particular reference to her most recent work PIPE DREAMING. *PIPE DREAMING, the second last of Jones' 10 work* PREDICTION PIECES *series, was presented at the the Union Theatre, Adelaide, and the Victorian Arts Centre, in early 1989. The work was developed with and performed by actors David Latham, Richard Murphet and Judith Stratford, visual artist Lindy Lee, choreographer Nanette Hassall and the Danceworks company, with music by Richard Vella.*

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AN INTERDISCIPLINARY FORM

MURPHET: Why do you choose to work across the disciplines? Is it because the kinds of ideas that you are interested in exploring demand the use of a variety of disciplines or is it a fascination in working formally across the disciplines which leads you to explore particular ideas?

JONES: It is always much more pragmatic. I was asked a number of years ago by Nan Hassall to make a dance and I knew it would be the China piece, but when it actually came to it I was very, very interested in working with Chekhov. I can't say why but they clearly had to be in the same piece. So clearly there had to be actors. So it was a dance piece that expanded.

MURPHET: But why Chekhov? Why did you want to include Chekhov in the dance?

JONES: About three years ago I discovered that when I was making work I had these impulses to include certain material, and I could never analyse why this material was going in but I started

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Lyndal Jones studied Arts at Monash University, and movement in England, the US and Australia (especially Feldenkrais Technique). She taught at the VCA School of Drama for many years before beginning an independent art practice in 1988. In 1984 she received a Visual Arts Fellowship to carry out cultural research in Japan and China. Works from her 10 year series *Prediction Pieces*, and a previous 5 year series (*At Home*) have been shown in Melbourne, Sydney, Los Angeles, New York, Tokyo, London and Edinburgh, in art galleries and theatres.

All photographs accompanying this article: *Pipe Dreaming*

to trust it and I would just leave it there and then start to allow the relationship to be revealed to me. The first time it was really clear was in a piece that I made a number of years ago, a piece called *Short Travel.* It was a performance that was part of a Sculpture Show at Latrobe University. I knew that I wanted to tell two stories, and I told the two stories on two separate videos. One story was about the particular room in which the audience sat and watched the videos, and that was a room in which I had once taken a movement course. In that course there was some analysis of the way people moved and we would all stand up in our underwear and move around the room and people would talk about what they saw. One woman got into it a bit and she walked and then she ran and then she leapt a little bit and then she fell on the ground. So that was one of the stories. For some reason I wanted to tell another story and it was about a woman I met on a train going from Berkeley to San Francisco the previous year. I thought that everyone in America was right wing but for some reason I kept meeting left wing people, not only left wing people but communists, and this woman, she had a back-pack, and she talked very loudly and no-one on the train wanted to know her and so I told that story. The two stories started to interrelate and there were two of us who started to perform those stories out on a traffic island and we would each move from being one person to the other. But the thing that I realised about it after I read a review of it was that here I was doing a piece at La Trobe University and one of the pieces was about coming back from Berkeley University, one of the great world universities, and I had never actually put those two facts together and I started to be very excited about it. And so when you say, "Why Chekhov?" I just take bigger leaps doing it now and I let the connections be revealed to me. What always excited me about the Chekhov piece that was in the play was its talk about the new forms of art and Chekhov's ambivalent relationship towards the revolution, and the love of those pre-revolutionary characters. But finally if you are looking for the proscenium arch theatre that everyone does now, they all base it on Chekhov, and no-one does it better. And so for all those kinds of

reasons, I like Chekhov.

MURPHET: When you have these impulsive flashes which come to you about pieces of work do they tend to be flashes that jump across the tracks from one medium to another?

JONES: Well I think the ideas are there and I look for the finest way in which to bring those ideas about. Because I have access to a number of art forms it's natural for me to look for their expression in a variety of art forms within the one piece. One of the things I also have an enormous respect for is the virtuosity of people within the different art forms, and I would never ask a dancer to do lumps of Chekhov because I love the kind of skills that an actor brings to bear on that.

MURPHET: As well as trying to find the right art form for the expression of particular ideas you seem to like to have different art forms rubbing off against one another, whether it be dance and drama, or drama and music, or art and dance or whatever.

JONES: Well my personal preference is for it to be heavily visual, but my background in movement and my length of time working with actors at the V.C.A. (Victorian College of Arts) mean that those other forms very easily get a look in. I will give you an example: the next piece for instance is about this particular scientist Stephen Hawking. I want to incorporate my Feldenkrais work again and of course the scientist Stephen Hawking is in a wheelchair. That becomes immediately very interesting to the performance, so there has to be performers working in wheelchairs. And the next thing of course is well, what about people who live in wheelchairs, what kind of performance could I make with a group of people like that? But there is something for me that is really magical about science. It is just so far from my ability to understand it. And so I make a very simple step and say why shouldn't there be a magician in it, and the magician immediately becomes indispensable. Now I know nothing about

magicians and I go out and actually find out how they work. And what I learn from working with these people will reveal what will make the piece.

MURPHET: That is why you have a lot of difficulty with performers who expect you to know the piece completely before you start working on it with them.

JONES: Yes, I once went to an astrologer – in fact it was to do with *Pipe Dreaming* because it is about prediction. And the astrologer said that one of the difficulties I had because I jumped tracks is that it is very hard for people to understand what is going on and not everybody's trust will hold out for the full length of time that is required. It does ask an enormous amount of people. It is not as if I am withholding stuff; I just do not have the answers. They are actually revealed in the work.

MURPHET: The use of expertise to lead to an unknown sets up a really interesting tension and I think part of the difficulty that people have is that they get set in a particular mind trap while they are watching it and then find that the mind trap does not allow them to understand what is going on.

JONES: Yes, and in fact my question is whether I have asked too much of people who have strong interests in certain disciplines, whether the piece is too lateral. I mean they are the things that interest me the most in theatre. I am not interested in a story of A leads to B leads to C leads to D. I do not believe that we lead our lives that way. And I am not saying that people do not have those resources,but I agree with you; I think that when people are expecting a certain discipline, expecting to see something particular, they do not know how to shift their thinking.

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FORM AND CONTENT

MURPHET: One of the things that interests me about *Pipe Dreaming* and being in it is that what you are actually able to do is to use the forms of the media to tell your story. For instance, drama, centred in the word, is able to fulfill, more than any other art form, that particular, pre-revolutionary stage which finally gets opened up in the physicality of the revolution that dance can pre-eminently show. So that you could almost have lifted out any of the direct content and, without people knowing what was going on, got the same sort of shift. One of the things you have always said is that there is no difference between form and content.

JONES: What I have now come to is that the notions of form and content are useful but they begin defining how you go about making your work. It was only very recently that I realised that I did not make that division. One cannot have a formless content and neither can one have a contentless form. These terms seem semantic, but I think it is at this very philosophical level that new art is made. Until you actually make those shifts, realise that you are working at a very deep level differently, then the work tends to look the same all the time – so the form-content division is a particular way of thinking that keeps us making the kind of art that we always do.

MURPHET: I talked to Lindy Lee about her place within *Pipe Dreaming*. Her description of the piece I found very interesting and it gave me a sense of where the discipline of art was placed within the piece. You can see the piece in dramatic or dance terms as having a linearity. It begins with drama and moves through to dance. For Lindy because she is an artist she saw all that on the same canvas. And so what the audience is left with at the end is a canvas which includes all of those elements and although there was a kind of chronology to the evening there is not a chronology in terms of subordination of any one of the parts. They all exist on the same canvas. What you have at the end when she brings on the painting is all the elements up there

as if they were placed on the one canvas, the canvas of the stage. So given that context for the art what role does the music have within the piece?

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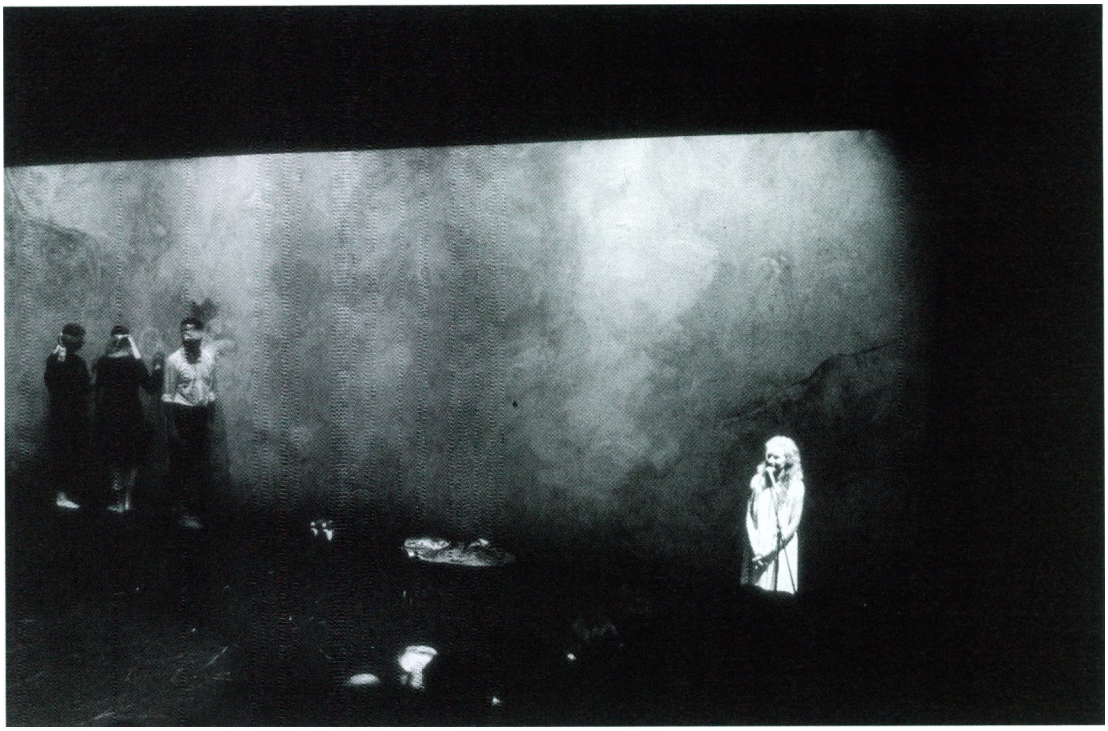
THE ROLE OF MUSIC....

JONES: The disciplines in which I feel I have enough expertise to ask philosophical questions are dance, drama and art, not music. The thing that I would say about the music though is that it operates within a field of sound and silence. The music is one aspect of the sound arena. John Cage was an influential person for the people who influenced me about sound, and so the music for me includes the gun firing, the bells, the voices and the silence, the feet on the floor – it includes that whole tapestry. I knew that the music needed to refer to the revolutionary movement and the growth towards the China element within the piece. In the past I have used found sources of music, one of the chief ones being a number of pieces of Debussy that were made into the film sound track of Hitchcock's film *Rebecca*. I used to think it was wonderful, it was so melodramatic. So what I did was tape the film and cut out all the bits where there were words, using a combination of music and sounds like car doors slamming and feet shuffling and I have included that in my last two shows. In *Prediction Piece 7* there were two forms of music, one was those bits that were taped from the T.V. broadcast of *Rebecca* and the other was a pianist playing Debussy. On the T.V. show it is fully orchestrated but it is very poor quality and this was contrasted with the first generation sound of the pianist playing the pieces of Debussy. And I knew that for this piece, for *Pipe Dreaming* I needed to work with more complexity with the sound and music. It needed a level of complexity that I was not able to generate and that is when I contacted Richard Vella. I had an original outline of the piece of *Pipe Dreaming* and I gave that to Richard and we sat down and we listened to



every piece of music that he had ever made. Apart from a similar interest that he and I had in structuring sound, Richard made the music for the play *Madam Mao* and so we shared an experience in popular Chinese music. We talked a lot and he would go away and work and then he would come back and seem happy and then next time come back and be miserable because the gaps were so big and he was making stuff in this absolute vacuum. He would ask me questions about the piece and in answering them I would be making the piece. I would give the answers with all my confidence but I would never have thought of it before they came out of my mouth.

MURPHET: So the piece formed in your mind as the music got created?

JONES: Yes, they formed each other. I had told him about my fascination with Debussy and he had heard this previously in my other shows and he let me listen to a piece that he had made for a show called *Salonika.* It had Debussy type chords and he suggested that he use that. And then we listened to bits from *Madam Mao* and we used some sections that he had composed for that. I was pleased to do that because we were doing the same thing with the music as I had done with the Chekhov. We were using bits and pieces of our culture. There were bits from *Salonika* which is a British play that took place in Greece and the music was very very European with all the Debussy type chords. In the script I had written places where music might occur. I had written things like "Debussy-type music occurs here." or "Chinese music occurs here." I told him he did not need to take any notice of that, he could make music wherever he thought it appropriate. But when it finally happened he had actually made stuff for exactly those spots. So that structured what we did. He put his foot down a couple of times. Progression of the music was one that for him designated a whole kind of cycle. I could not hear his cycle and I wanted to reverse a couple of pieces. He would not allow that.

MURPHET: Was there a tension when he actually came to place his music with the dance. Did that create a difficulty, a problem?

JONES: No, it is just that the music was so extraordinarily difficult and it was a matter of all of us, the dancers, myself and him, trying to find the counts. I had been going mad in my lounge room listening to the music and trying to work out the counts, it would go 4/ 4/, 4/ 4/, 5/ something, 11/ something, 18/ something. It became impossible to actually count the bars. The acoustics in the large rehearsal hall we worked in were so bad that anything over two feet away from the speakers, even high quality speakers, sounded like mud, which meant that the dancers found it very difficult to pick up the counts. This is why the rehearsal of the dance pieces was so slow. The combination of the sound system and the space and the difficulty of the music meant that the dancers and I were going berserk.

MURPHET: So how did the music work for you in the performance?

JONES: Well it is its own voice. It is not used as a background. It is not a support system. I was quite happy for there to be times when the sound occurred with nothing else happening around it, for it to have its own life.

MURPHET: From within the piece the music felt like it was the spirit of change. I think it was to do with the fact that the music was there as the energy which created the shift. It became the thing which interrupted the Chekhov scenes and created the context in which the dancers could dance so it became in a way the shifting force.

JONES: Well that is an interesting way of looking at it. That is how Richard wrote it and the fact that it was there first meant that it was there as a spine. From the day rehearsals started I had most

of the music tapes and that is an interesting power for a composer. I do not know whether Richard ever realised that because unfortunately he never saw the piece.

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THE TASK OF DIRECTING

MURPHET: How did you feel about your position as the director in the piece? Obviously as the person who wrote this particular piece you would have to have been the person who directed it. It would have been hard to separate those two roles.

JONES: Well I cannot imagine the separation at all. Because the material is too personal. I can see that the point of me sitting there with a blindfold on is, in a way, me giving over to the actors but it is also one of visually declaring my relationship with the material and for me that statement is very important. And so is the business of directing what I write. I do not understand the act of writing and then giving it over to someone else to direct. It is not a judgmental thing, it is just that I cannot wrap my head around it. I would say that is what makes me a visual artist because I consider myself a craftsperson and I craft this piece and take it to the next stage and finally bring it to performance.

MURPHET: This piece had its prelude in a piece that took place in a gallery, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, and that was much more of a visual art piece.

JONES: Yes, well the project was so big that that was a way to handle the ideas. There was no way that I could have at the beginning of this year designed and conceived the basic structure of it and rehearsed. So again that was a pragmatic position. I was offered the space to work in particular galleries and I utilised the chance within a visual art form to work with a central idea that would finally come to light within the performance of *Pipe Dreaming*. The beginning idea in this piece was the wall, the wall as a language event rather than just a physical one. I was really always fascinated by the fact that we used those verbal references to the wall so much: "the writing is on the wall", "backs against the wall", "up against a wall" and all of those are references to revolution. They are about someone about to be shot. I was interested in examining those phrases, and to examine them I needed a wall and of course that is where the blindfold came in too. Someone standing with a blindfold on. So that was the driving image and that really had to be examined. I am not interested in setting up a situation whereby what I am saying to people is "the writing is on the wall" as in "life is fatalistic". I am actually trying to find ways of opening that language out. So the fact that there were slides which included the phrase, "the writing is on the wall", meant that whenever a performer walked across the wall, the writing came off the wall. And *that* in a piece this big would hardly have been noticed. But it was an essential enabling possibility for me in the visual art works.

MURPHET: So when you put down your writer's hat and put on your director's hat, and you start working with actors, and you run up against a problem in rehearsal, do you try and solve that problem by changing your script, or do you try and solve it by finding a way of getting the actors through the problem, in order to realise the script? If you were working with a given script like *Hamlet*, obviously you would keep the script the same and work on the actors. The danger on working on your own script perhaps is that you would be more likely to change your script, thinking that the problem lies in the script rather than the actors.

JONES: Well there are lots of parts in my life that I am not very confident in. But my confidence in my writing lies in the fact that I think that actual words are only part of the embodiment of

the idea. And therefore they are a function rather than being the central driving force. So I do not worry too much about them. If it means that in rehearsal people cannot quite get it with those words, then we try other ways. But I usually do not change them. I am more interested in the how of the performing, in how the actor can actually find a way of realising those words. And if you are spending a lot of time changing the words to get it right, you are not actually interested in the how of the performing and nor are you asking people to wrestle with moving somewhere other than where they are comfortable with being. Sometimes it is revealed to me that the words are clumsy and I will say "oh drop it" because it is not worth fighting to try and make those particular words work. But normally I just leave the words and see what we do because in the wrestling normally all the interesting stuff happens. When I write the words I know that they can be said, I know one way that they can be said; I am not interested in them particularly being said that way, but I do know that they can be said. So if an actor says to me, "that is impossible", I can say, "well no, no its not impossible I have heard someone say those words, of course they can be said, but I am more interested in how you might say them".

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THE PERFORMANCE AS THEATRE TEXT

MURPHET: What would you do if someone saw the play and they came along to you afterward and said "look I would be interested in doing this play with my theatre company and directing," not asking you to direct it. Would you allow them to do it?

JONES: Well someone actually did that with the last piece. Not in relationship to a theatre production but a film and I conveniently lost the script. I mean I would be interested in a way to see what would happen if it was turned into a film, but I also feel – well, why don't they make something which is important to them, which speaks for them. Its not that I see my scripts as precious things and keep them hidden away, but that a lot of the potency of them is the fact that the people who are performing them are speaking for themselves. That's me and all of the performers. To get someone else to do them means that it becomes just another play and there are already millions of those. That idea doesn't particularly interest me.

I would worry about the use of the visual aspect. The three sensory modes of communication that I see operating, are the visual, the kinaesthetic and the auditory. It's through those three modes of communication that we receive meaning and that we make things. In Australian theatre the visual mode is often so poorly done and so under-represented, so falsely supportive of the work, that the piece could be lopsided. It could be like someone smiling and having all their front teeth missing.

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FOLLOWING PAGES: ***Pipe Dreaming***

WARREN BURT / ANNE THOMPSON

Fair Exchanges

3DIS Computer/Dance/Music Project

HEAR THE DANCE, SEE THE MUSIC – *'Fair Exchanges' was a collaborative large scale dance/music work made between October 1988 and March 1989 by Ros Bandt, Warren Burt, Shona Innes, Sylvia Staehli and Jane Refshauge, using Simon Veitch's 3DIS computer vision control system. Earlier, in February 1988, Shona Innes and Warren Burt had made 3 very short dances using the system as a demonstration of its capabilities for Veitch's company, Perceptive Systems, and the Channel 7 TV program Beyond 2000.* From this work, it was decided that the system had enough potential that serious works of art could be made with it, and an application was made to the Performing Arts Board of the Australia Council for funding to develop a larger scale work with the system. Funding was approved, and work on the project began in late October at Extensions studio in Carlton, with performance at St. Martins Theatre in South Yarra from March 15-18, 1989, aided by further funding from the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation and Diabetes Australia.*

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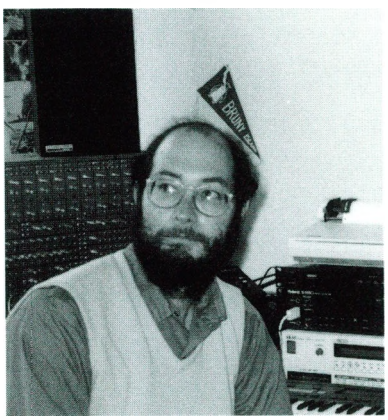
1 WARREN BURT

3DIS (Three Dimensional Interactive Space) is a generalised computer vision system which analyses information from different kinds of inputs and makes decisions and controls other machines on the basis of the information it receives. For our purposes, the input devices were four small television cameras (each about the size of two matchboxes), and the output devices were musical synthesizers and samplers. The operation of the system is based on extremely simple principles. The users of the system look at a live picture from one or more of the cameras, processed by the



computer. With a computer control device called a mouse, they indicate on the TV screen which particular area of the screen they wish the computer to be aware of. The computer then calculates, 30 times a second, the average brightness level of that particular area. If the area indicated was, for example, a black vase, and a pale-skinned person put their hand on the vase, the computer would register a great decrease in light level. What it would do now would be up to the users. They could, as one possible option, indicate via the program to the computer that each time the brightness of the vase changed even a little bit, the computer should send a signal to a synthesizer to play, for example, a high Bb with a piano-like tone. Or, the changes in brightness might control the changing speed of a prerecorded melody. In fact, any signal possible with MIDI (the industry standard for sending musical information between computers, synthesizers and other musical devices), can be sent by 3DIS, so that virtually any mapping of changing light levels into musical information will eventually be possible with the system.

Each area one isolates out from the view of the TV cameras is called a 'gang' and with the present system, one can have up to 99 separate areas like this. Each 'gang' may be active on up to four cameras, so that if two or more cameras look at the same space from different angles, one could define space from multiple perspectives, resulting in a truly three dimensional definition of space. With this system, one can define an entire space consisting of areas with separate musical functions, creating a conceptual equivalent of 'keyboards' which consist not of physical objects, but of invisible but sensitive shapes in space. This development is part of the massive redefinition of the concept of 'keyboard' that has been occuring throughout the musical instrument field in the past decade. Briefly, a 'keyboard' today can be thought of as any collection of control devices (which may or may not be switches, or even traditional 'keys') which can trigger off any musical events in any way. All sorts of devices have been developed recently, from devices which ape traditional musical functions (MIDI wind instruments, guitar controllers, and percussion pads) to those based on new concepts (gloves with many small mercury switches in them, each of which produces a computer signal based on the orientation of the hands in space). 3DIS stands out among these systems as being the most versatile, and the one least attached to the concept of physical contact with an object producing musical information.

This makes it both ideally suited to dancer control and yet simultaneously makes it conceptually one of the most difficult of new controllers to come to terms with. In addition, although the concept of dancers working with technology is not a particularly new one (Oskar Schlemmer's Bauhaus dances, the work of Australians Phillipa Cullen and Greg Schiemer, the work of American composer Joseph Pinzaronne, and the Merce Cunningham/Gordon Mumma *Re-run* are all examples which spring immediately to mind), this particular application of technology forced both dancers and musicians to re-evaluate their traditional roles. Traditionally, all musicians, except perhaps unamplified solo singers have relied on some sort of external technology to make their music. Even such a simple device as a drum can have an enormously complex technology behind it. (For an example of Native American musical instrument technology see "Making a Cree Drum," by Albert Davis and Tina Pearson in *Musicworks* No. 37, Winter 1987, Toronto). In the end, musicians are largely dependent on their body-external tools. Dancers, on the other hand, though usually surrounded in performance by all the sophisticated technology of the modern theatre, are not actually dependent on any body-external tools or props, unless they consciously choose to use them.

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*These dances are described in Warren Burt's article, "The 3DIS System," in *Sounds Australian* No 19, available from the Australian Music Centre, PO Box 49 Broadway NSW 2007.

In the end, the solo body, unadorned, is the basic stuff of which dance is made.

For this project, those conditions would not necessarily apply. If the dancer's movements were actually responsible for the sound, the dancer's function vis-a-vis music had changed. In essence, the dancer now was the musician. And the composer, who might usually give very precise instructions (notation) for performers to interpret (through that's not the usual way either Ros or I compose) was here faced with a different task: that of defining a system of spaces and sounds in conjunction with a dancer in such a way that both sequences of movement and the resulting sounds might have some sort of artistic potential.

In addition to making work which developed the latent artistic potential of this new technological system, we conceived, from the outset, of the project also having social and political briefs. Too often, technology is thought of an exclusive 'male' preserve, a 'hard' area of knowledge placed dialectically in opposition to 'soft', 'female' areas of work, such as dance. The logic used by computer programming is a paradigm of the hierarchical, sequential, positivist logic so typical of patriarchal power systems. In this project, we wanted to do more than simply give women already involved in experimental thinking about the arts access to this technology; we wanted for the work process itself to be co-operative; for the dealing with the system and the making of each work to be done by the group in communal, non-aggressive, non-hierarchical ways. We wanted to have the project, and the 3DIS system, function as liberating environments and tools, rather than as constraining ones. This process proved to be very difficult. We spent fully as much time dealing with the social dynamics of our group as we did in dealing with the technology or in making art with it. The social, technological and artistic processes were all new here, and we found that slowly we were able to approach each other, the technology, and the making of the works in a way consistent with our ideological goals. Many of the tensions we felt during the project were the direct result of placing a non-hierarchical consensus-based structure into contact with institutions (the business world and its demands for a kind of publicity we felt inappropriate to our work, the technical demands of a traditionally constituted theatre space, etc.).

The problem the 3DIS system raises most immediately is one which is central to much post-modern dance: the relationship between sound and movement. As implied above, in using this system, composers could not think in purely sonic terms, and choreographers could not think in purely kinesthetic ones. Rather, we found it necessary to surrender the integrity of our specialist art forms in order to evolve a working method that would address both our needs and the capabilities of the system in a more holistic manner.

This also, of course, creates problems for the viewer. If the rules are changed for us, they are also changed for the viewer. The work demands to be perceived differently from either silent dance work or work where music is used as either accompaniment or decoration.

Each of the pieces was developed to explore both a different relationship of sound and movement and to explore a different way of using the 3DIS system. In *awaywithwords*, the opening work, ten 'gangs' were placed at the edges of the space in two groups of five. Each gang triggered off a recording of a different single word. These words were chosen from a vocabulary of words mostly common to both dance and computer languages, with a few words thrown in that were common to neither. The dance began with a silent duet between Shona and Sylvia. They crossed the space until they crossed the gangs and triggered off the words. At this point their dancing changed. They used the words as triggers, or instructions,for improvising movement. In some cases, the relations to the words were quite direct and humorous. In others, they were more oblique. A series of duets and quartets followed, with Ros and myself also triggering off the words with our movements. In this way, we hoped to establish the contrast between musicians' (untrained) movement, which was almost always

directly concerned with making sound, and dancers' movement, which might or might not be directed, in this case, to sound production.

For Percy Grainger and Burnett Cross, the second work, had a direct historical basis. The Australian composer Percy Grainger spent much of the last 30 years of his life, from 1931-1961, developing instruments to play his 'free music', a music consisting of gliding tones and beatless rhythms. He was aided in this quest by the then young scientist Burnett Cross. One of the instruments they built in the early 1950s was called the 'reed-box tone-tool', a collection of pump organ reeds, tuned to 36 notes to the octave, and played by revolving a large paper roll into which they had cut patterns, just like a player piano roll. With this machine, they could at least simulate the glides that Grainger was interested in hearing. Their later experiments led them to develop a prototype of the voltage-controlled synthesizer, but we felt the reed-box concept left open possibilities they had not explored, and so the 3DIS system was set up to provide an S-shaped invisible 'keyboard' stretched across the dance floor playing just two octaves of Grainger's 36 tone scale, using the sampled sounds of the actual 'reed-box' itself, now on display at the Grainger Museum. The dancers' movements along and across this 'keyboard', played music directly related to the Grainger-Cross 'gliding-tone' work. In some cases, movement material came directly out of dealing with the nature of sound production. For example, Sylvia observed that more than one person moving along the S-shaped path to produce the counterpoint of glides Grainger wanted invariably meant that meetings and partings would occur. Meetings and partings, so much a part of behaviour in formal Edwardian England, were therefore incorporated as a major motif in the piece. In other cases, movement came out of a desire to subvert the system, such as the silent waltz (away from the sound producing path) done by Shona and Jane, which is immediately followed by the same waltz in the opposite direction, (now along the sound making path), which produces a music of brief glides and abbreviated musical gestures. In this piece, the struggle was to find movements which produced interesting music faithful to the Grainger/Cross investigations which also made sense both dramatically and as part of an absurdist narrative.

In *Inside/ Out*, the areas of space around Jane, the solo dancer, were set up so that drum-kit sounds were played. In effect, she was surrounded by an invisible drum-kit suspended in space. It was here that the limitations of the system were most apparent. One of the problems of working with invisible areas of space as sound triggers in comparison with making music with physical objects is the lack of kinesthetic feedback. Even the most insensitive synthesizer or organ keyboard allows one to feel physical contact when a sound is produced. In the case of percussion instruments, the feedback is even more pronounced, as the physical nature of playing the instrument defines much of the player's movement. In *Inside/Out* the contradictions inherent in triggering percussive sounds with non-percussive gestures were explored, making a dance/music which used the seeming contradictions and limitations of the system. This was especially clear in the last section when the sound was suddenly switched off in the busiest part of the piece, leaving Jane to bring the energy level of the piece down, using gestures she had developed to make sound, gestures which now suddenly functioned quite differently as movement.

In the first three pieces, the 3DIS system was used in a very simple way, with one gesture in one area producing one predictable musical or verbal event. In the last three pieces, other ways of using the system were explored. *Free Trade Zones*, a solo for Sylvia, was a political piece.

A text was printed in the program. This text was not an ornament – it was an essential part of the piece. The piece was not just a dance/music composition, but was intended to be viewed by an audience that had knowledge of the text. The perception of the dance was to be conditioned by the text- it formed the essential political and moral environment within

which the dance/music occurred. The text:

Labour costs in Hong Kong and Taiwan, the new bases for Atari production, have been estimated at one fifth the wages earned by non-union American employees.

Female migrants and urban working class women are channelled into labour intensive jobs in foreign industries. These international high-tech corporations treat the majority of their labour force (female production workers) as a labour reserve whom they employ as disposable temporaries, poorly paid and given no social security. Fresh single women from the countryside provide a constant flow of replacements.

The third most dangerous industry, in terms of exposure to cancer-causing substances, is electronics. Throughout the production process electronics workers in the Philippines are exposed to acids, solvents and gases which have various physically damaging effects, causing, for example, eye defects, cancer, lung disease, and liver and kidney troubles.

In one soldering job, every girl gets sick from the smells after a year of work, but the company forbids transferring to another work unit...Often, women displaced from assembly plants are forced to seek work in hotels and brothels.

As members of a Western society, we are all involved in a consumptive lifestyle which exploits others. We must be aware of the flaws in our tools, which contradict our efforts at positive change.

– BASED ON WRITINGS OF AIHWA ONG AND SISTER MARY SOLEDAD PERPINAN

Seven areas were defined, each of which played a recording of a quotation from a performance by a master world musician. Music from China, Upper Volta, Laos, Japan and Zaire was used. Sylvia's movement around the space produced a mixing and overlapping of these loops of musical quotations.

However, a random time-delay was built into the triggering-on of each sound, and the sensitivity of the areas was set very low, so that there was as great a chance that a sound would only begin some time after Sylvia had gone through its area, or even that she would turn on, and then turn off, a sound, before any actual sound had been heard, as there was that a sound would turn on when she actually went through the gang. This created an unpredictable mix of fragments of third world music where the presence of the dancer created the probability of a particular music happening, but not, perhaps, its actuality. It effectively divorced the locating of an individual sound at an individual point in space triggered off by an individual movement. Only if one knew the functioning of the system very well was it possible to follow the logic of Sylvia's movements.

Mungo was conceived from the beginning as a piece which dealt with the system in a more oblique, or "poetic" way. The main sound in the piece, in fact, was not produced by either the dancers' movements or 3DIS at all. It was a recording of a wind-driven aeolian harp, an original sound sculpture made in Red Cliffs, Victoria, by Ros Bandt and Steve Naylor. This recording formed the sonic 'bed' for the rest of the piece, a journey through time and space inspired by the interior landscape of the ancient dry salt Lake Mungo, NSW. The gangs contained sounds assembled from natural and fossilized materials such as rocks, shell wind-chimes, snail shells, quandongs and the like. The placement of the gangs was traditional (one gang in one place produces one sound), but the ways they were used was not. For example, both Sylvia and Jane had solos in the gang that produced the shell wind-chime sounds at different times in the piece. In each case, the solo was completely different in character, although the sounds produced were similiar. The idea here was to blur the edges and the character of the gestures that produced the sound as much as possible. Another example was Shona's solo in the stone wind-chime gang. While she was performing that, Jane was

ABOVE: ***Fair Exchanges*** **PHOTO REPRODUCED COURTESY OF THE AGE**

producing snailshell sounds in her gang, but Shona would respond to Jane's sounds, and dance to them, while continuing to produce her own sound. In this way, a richer relationship than the normal one was set up between sound and movement.

In addition, the theatrical lighting was constantly changing. Since the 3DIS system is triggered off by changes in light level, this meant that in addition to the dancers' movements, many of the sounds would be triggered off at 'random' times, whenever the rate of the changing light levels exceeded the present thresholds. This created a system where the dancers' movements were only part of the activity creating the sounds, and tended to focus attention away from the utilitarian nature of their sound producing gestures. Each dancer created their own movement sequence/identity independently. These independent sequences were then brought together and tailored to fit the work. A polyphony of choreographic identities was thus created, contributing another layer of complexity to a very slow, and richly multi-layered environment.

Random, the final piece, was the most extreme use of the system. In this piece, random fluctuations of light levels played a texture of music boxes, water samples and bird calls. The presence of performers increased the probability of sound happening, but did not directly trigger it. This freed the dancers from the necessity of making gestures which triggered

sound, but still made their presence necessary for the overall effect. The feeling here was one of liberation. After a program of works where precise positioning of the body was very important, a final work where one could move freely provided a great sense of release.

This was further accentuated by the nature of the movement itself, freely improvised swinging on three suspended ropes. Various choreographic strategies for this piece were tried and discarded. It was found that only improvisation, with all its pitfalls and dangers, could produce the feelings of release and freedom this piece seemed to call for. Another element of the piece were the costumes by Sharon Muir, which were made with a semi-random drip-screening process. The luminous colouring of the silk used for these was enhanced by the lighting changes (which also affected the mix of sounds the system was producing), which turned the blue and green patternings into phosphorescent shades of silver.

The 3DIS system here functioned as one voice in a three voice improvisation texture. I played keyboard synthesizer, and Ros played Casio Digital Horn, a new electronic wind instrument (yet another new kind of musical controller) with quite a nice tone. Here, dancers, musicians, designers, lighting personnel and the electronic system were all freed to produce independent activities which nonetheless influenced each other, creating a counterpoint of activity. It is this kind of use of the 3DIS system that, it seems to me, offers the most possibilities for the future, in that it opens the way for dancers to move about with their accustomed freedom, but allows that freedom to influence the musical course of events. Future uses of the system I would be interested in would have 3DIS used as control input into a program that composes musical events in real-time, so that the dancers' positions influenced the logic or the structure of the piece, but not its moment to moment details. This kind of work would, it seems to me, take the work we have already done in this project to another level of sophistication, one that I would be most eager to explore.

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2 ANNE THOMPSON

An edited interview with Shona Innes, Jane Refshauge and Sylvia Staehli

THOMPSON: What relationships to sound or uses of sound have you explored in past work? What relationships to or uses of sound emerged to be of interest to you in this project?

INNES: For a while I have been faced with the dilemma of wanting to work with music but not wanting the dance to be dictated by it. In my early choreographic work where the movement was set I most often danced *to* the music. The music and the idea for a dance piece came together. The movement expression followed. Gradually I began to experience this way of working with sound as too prescriptive. As I began working from a kinetic impulse, with a kinetic focus, I stopped using sound. It seemed impossible to use sound without losing the integrity of the movement quality and sequencing I was finding. This shift occurred around the time I was working with Russell Dumas. In order to be totally committed to the movement that needed to happen there could be no outside interference or input. This was a time of internal focus - no audience, no mirrors, or music, no dance partners. The silence became very alive and became the kind of sound context required for me to find where my movement was coming from and where it wanted to go.

As this became clearer, over a period of a year or two, I began to return to my interest in music. This seemed possible only after I had found my dance. The music I chose then provided a context for the dance. Still I was unable to work with other dancers, costumes or audience awareness. Dancing, at this time, was moving with a clear connection to the source of moving. Sound supported and/or highlighted some aspect of the dance. The dances were improvisations and this is still the way I am most happy performing dance. In time I was able to maintain the integrity of the movement and listen to the music almost at the same time. I began to be able to slide between following the movement and following the sound in performance. Now when I use music in improvisations I play with oscillating between a movement focus and a sound focus. I work at this oscillation becoming quicker and quicker until both the sound and the movement are equally the focus. I build the context in which I dance – establish the internal foci, then add sound and then consider the physical environment.

In this project I was interested in placing myself in relation to sound and in shaping and moulding the sound environment through moving. Because the system did not respond to changes in movement quality, (the sound came on or went off) I worked rhythmically. I played with triggering the sound in ways that I found rhythmically interesting. The time spent between gangs was important in terms of the dancing. In this time I could play with dynamic and qualitative changes in the movement. When I wanted to trigger sound my focus shifted from these aspects to body part and whole body position in space.

I am still interested in working with a computer system which is responsive to human movement and which registers this response as sound; in controlling/influencing the sound environment by the way I move. A system of this sort could become a responsive musical partner, a form of biofeedback.

STAEHLI: Like many other contemporary dancers and choreographers the exploration of the relationship of sound to movement has been an ongoing focus for me. Each new dance piece that I've made has explored a different relationship between sound and movement. I've used taped sound collages created independently from the same idea which generated the movement to create juxtaposition of rhythmically disconnected and sometimes contrasting elements. Other pieces have been made and performed in silence, using image-based, visual, functional, and emotional motivations for the movement. In one section of a dance I used the rhythmic and tonal qualities of spoken language (only audible to me as played through head-phones) to move to. I have also enjoyed performing with live musicians where the interaction was conversational and responsive – where an idea, motif or quality might be initiated by either dancer or musician, and developed within certain structural limitations. Generally, I've established flexible structures to allow the sound and the movement the liberty of separate logics of progression.

In this project, the music was 'played' by the movement, and the resulting sound in turn affected the moving. What was novel was that the music a was articulated in spatial zones. Floor pattern became the starting point for he moving. That is to say that the movement became a reaching out towards a sound, or, travelling along and between sound events. It was an unusual experience. We were making movement choices in order to compose sound. Not being a composer I found this relationship very challenging - to have to 'listen' physically and musically simultaneously. A difficulty I experienced was that movement quality did not affect sound quality in any way. Interestingly, the sound in a sense was subservient to the movement, and yet as dancers, our main focus in performance was on composing.

REFSHAUGE: I've danced in silence mostly - working from a visual imagery or movements derived from feeling. When I danced with Deborah Hay in her company the musicians workshopped the choreographic images she presented along-side the dancers, and then found musical expression for that imagery. Both the music and the movement were responses to the same images.

I am not an experienced choreographer but when I do choreography my work has tended to have a strong theatrical focus. I work with non-linear narratives - images clashing against each other, juxtapositions from a variety of sources. This way of working was introduced to me by Valerie Kirwan when I was involved choreographically with her production of 'The Art of Lobster Whistling'. In it there was an interplay between theatrical action and dance. In creating the soundscape for this play it seemed to me Valerie experimented with nonsense and combinations of sounds and language strung together in meaning units. She also transferred sound from object to body to voice. The sound production would generate movement. When I previously worked with Warren Burt I used a combination of these two approaches to produce a sound/movement relationship.

I found working with the 3DIS system frustrating because sound composition was limited to turning pre-selected sound on and off. Whether you walked up and down in a pedestrian fashion or danced an intricate movement phrase the sound generated would be the same. I found the movement of the musicians in the space determined by 3DIS more interesting to watch choreographically than that of the dancers because the musicians moved from their ears. They moved in space according to a compositional impulse. They endeavoured to create what they wanted to hear by moving through the space to 'play' 3DIS. You could see them hear a sound possibility and move in order to realize it and then you'd hear what you saw them perceive. I found that very exciting. I could experiment with sound but musical composition was a different story! I found it difficult to establish what my impulse to move was. It took me a long time to be able to surrender my own desires in relation to moving and begin to hear sounds and allow those sounds to move me through space. Even then I'd often judge the resulting choreography and feel uncomfortable with it. I had to work from sonic and kinesthetic sources simultaneously before movement with the system made sense to me.

THOMPSON: Did working with a visual field triggering the sound lead you to dance with stronger spatial intent?

INNES: The project made me conscious of space in two ways. Working with other people in a space defined a space and the 3DIS system made me conscious of my kinesphere. It was necessary to know where the centre was in relation to the gangs. Was the gang arm's reach away or just out of arm's reach? It was very difficult to carry this sense of spatial relationship to the gangs into working with other people. I found it difficult to engage with other performers because I was focussed on achieving a musical response which was unpredictable. I expected that the system would expand my sense of space but it did not. It forced my attention to remain confined to my kinesphere.

When you played in the space and were not seeking to create a musical composition, working with the system heightened proprioceptive awareness (where your bits were in relation to other bits). This is what excited me about the system initially but this interest could not be developed because of the primitive nature of the system at the time.

STAEHLI: The system brought the boundary between self and space into focus – where does my body finish and the gang begin? The gangs both defined and confined the movement in space. I felt limited by the responsibility of having to compose the sound - not the content but the

rhythm and flow of the established content - but I enjoyed the challenge of finding moves that would resolve the spatial demands in a musically and visually satisfying way.

REFSHAUGE: Working with the system made me aware of how unrefined my kinesthetic sense was. The system required precise spatial accuracy when 'hitting a gang' in order to produce the music. It was incredibly difficult to hit the same spatial placement twice in a movement sequence. The system was so sensitive that it became unpredictable. The system worked from sensitivity to light and so if light was reflected from a belt buckle or you wore different coloured clothes to the day the music was programmed the sound might not be triggered when previously it had been. I found that arcs and 'flailing' movements maximized my chance of hitting a gang on cue.

After the project was finished, Shona and I had a chance to play with the system when it was programmed to be responsive to sound frequency, pitch, volume and so on. Moving with this programming of 3DIS was terrific; it required the skill of a dancer to move in very subtle spatial pathways. This experience made sense of the project to me: made sense of using dancers to compose sound.

I think the musicians approached the project with the thought, 'Great! The dancers are going to be the musicians in this process'; and the dancers approached the project with the thought 'Great'! the musicians are going to be the choreographers in this process'. This simply wasn't possible. The dancers needed to both choreograph and compose. However, because of the sensitivity of the system, it wasn't possible to play a specific musical composition. With *Inside/Out*, the piece I choreographed based on a drum kit programmed in a grid around me, I listened to a lot of drumming until I found a drum sound that I could inhabit as a dancer. The musical composition was translated into a movement rhythm. Then an exciting thing happened for me in working with this piece. My body began making sound composition decisions. To do this I had to know in my body the exact placement of the 27 gangs and the sound that resulted from triggering each gang. The programme had to be memorized by my muscles. It took 3 months to programme these 27 gangs to set the sound I wanted for a 5 minute piece. In the end I felt able to meet the demands of improvised composition with this work.

THOMPSON: Why didn't you choreograph a dance that triggered a specific musical composition? Why did you work with purely improvised dancing, given that improvised sound composition was difficult for you?

STAEHLI: The chances of achieving a pre-set sound score were very slim as it was impossible to eliminate the lighting variables which made the system's response unpredictable. We worked with open compositional form because we couldn't articulate sound production in a reliable and specific way. However, two of the pieces, *Mungo* and *Percy*, were mostly choreographed. In *Random* we chose to make a virtue of the system's unpredictability.

THOMPSON (to Staehli): What was your attitude to and involvment in technology prior to participating in this project? Did working in this project affect your thinking about technology and/or interest in it?

STAEHLI: I originally trained as a computer programmer but I have always been somewhat suspicious of technology and it's place in our society. I find the whole notion of progress for progress' sake questionable. The 3DIS project involved understanding the system and developing 'games' to play with it. The technology was a fact and we had the responsibility of justifying that fact. It had not been developed from our needs. However I am interested

in how technology can extend our experience and would like to work further with the system (were it less expensive and more accessible) so as to better understand its limitations and potential uses.

THOMPSON: Technology is traditionally an assumed 'invisible' element in dance performance (lighting and recorded sound). Have you ever focussed on the relationship between technology and the human performer in your work?

STAEHLI: I have, in the past, used technology (film, video, lighting, tapes, and computer generated music) in my work, but I have only once articulated my relationship to it as content in a performance. "And Now For The News In Briefs" was concerned with the manipulation of information, and therefore of meaning, by the use of technology. The piece involved a 'technician' wearing head-sets and shifting " bits of technology" around the performance space while the dancer continued to perform as though only she were visible - a kind of conspiracy of silence.

REFSHAUGE: Once I began to work with the 3DIS system I began to develop an intuition about further possibilities regarding programming although I am not literate in computer language and could not program the computer myself. I think we, the dancers, articulated the possibilities of the computer beyond what had been articulated prior to the project.

It required patience to work with such sophisticated technology in the early stages of production. Sometimes it took hours to program the computer to try out a fairly simple idea, sometimes the computer broke down and we had to wait days for parts or we lost programs because of a malfunction.

INNES: I didn't find the system at all intimidating. I'm interested in how the chips work, how the hardware works. I have since learned some fundamental concepts about how these things work but I would have liked to have had this understanding in place prior to the project. If I could have comprehended how the system made sound, I could then have related this knowledge to how I make movement happen. I am interested in technology because it is an expression of our experience, a version of reality.

I wanted to do a piece which illustrated the workings of the system but it never got off the ground because I didn't have enough information. I was interested in 'breaking the system open' because I do think a lot of people are intimidated by technology.

STAEHLI: I came to the 3DIS project wanting to raise the question asked in the text of *Free Trade Zones* – the fact of the exploitation of the Third World labour market for the production of technology. What are the real costs of our 'playing' with sophisticated gadgetry? To me this is a crucial question and I would have liked to articulate more clearly the socio-political implications of technology in the performance. But our lack of experience with the system forced the technology to become the major focus of the project and other issues to became secondary.

REFSHAUGE: I think we all wanted to focus on the social and political issues arise from considering the computer industry. For me the making of political theatre is very problematic – I couldn't locate a way to make a political statement through performance that didn't come across as being didactic. The project was about something else for me. It was an interface system; it was the performance of the interface of five artists coming to terms with each other and 3DIS.

INNES: Other questions hit me. When I considered that other industries such as the textiles industry exploit third world labour, the presentation of the computer industry in this light

no longer became a simple action.

The project for me was a process of working with others with very different motivations for making art and modes of expressing themselves from mine. My ability to ask artistic questions in the project was restricted by my lack of knowledge of the technology. For me, understanding the fundamental nature of what you are working with is artistic food - questions like 'What is sound? How do I perceive sound? What does sound have in common with moving? How does sound move? What is a computer? What does this computer do? What was Simon thinking of when he made the system?' I am asking these questions now. I didn't then. I was too occupied with group dynamics, finding a way to begin and keep working together.

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ANN NUGENT

Meryl Tankard

– an impression

VIEWING A MERYL TANKARD PRODUCTION has the same effect on me as does viewing Monet's haystacks. In both I become aware of the surface; in Monet's case, of the paint built up stroke by stroke; in Tankard's, by the images repeated and elaborated. Both Monet's and Tankard's creations invade the senses, abrade the mind and arouse the soul. I find it impossible to view the work of either dispassionately.

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THE IMPRESSIONIST PAINTERS shared an obsession with light and colour. However each painter's work is highly individual. Tankard's work is strikingly individual but unlike the Impressionists, Meryl Tankard disclaims any theoretical basis for her work. She does not align herself with any particular movement in dance theatre. She claims she works intuitively and that her goal is to communicate feeling through dance. More often

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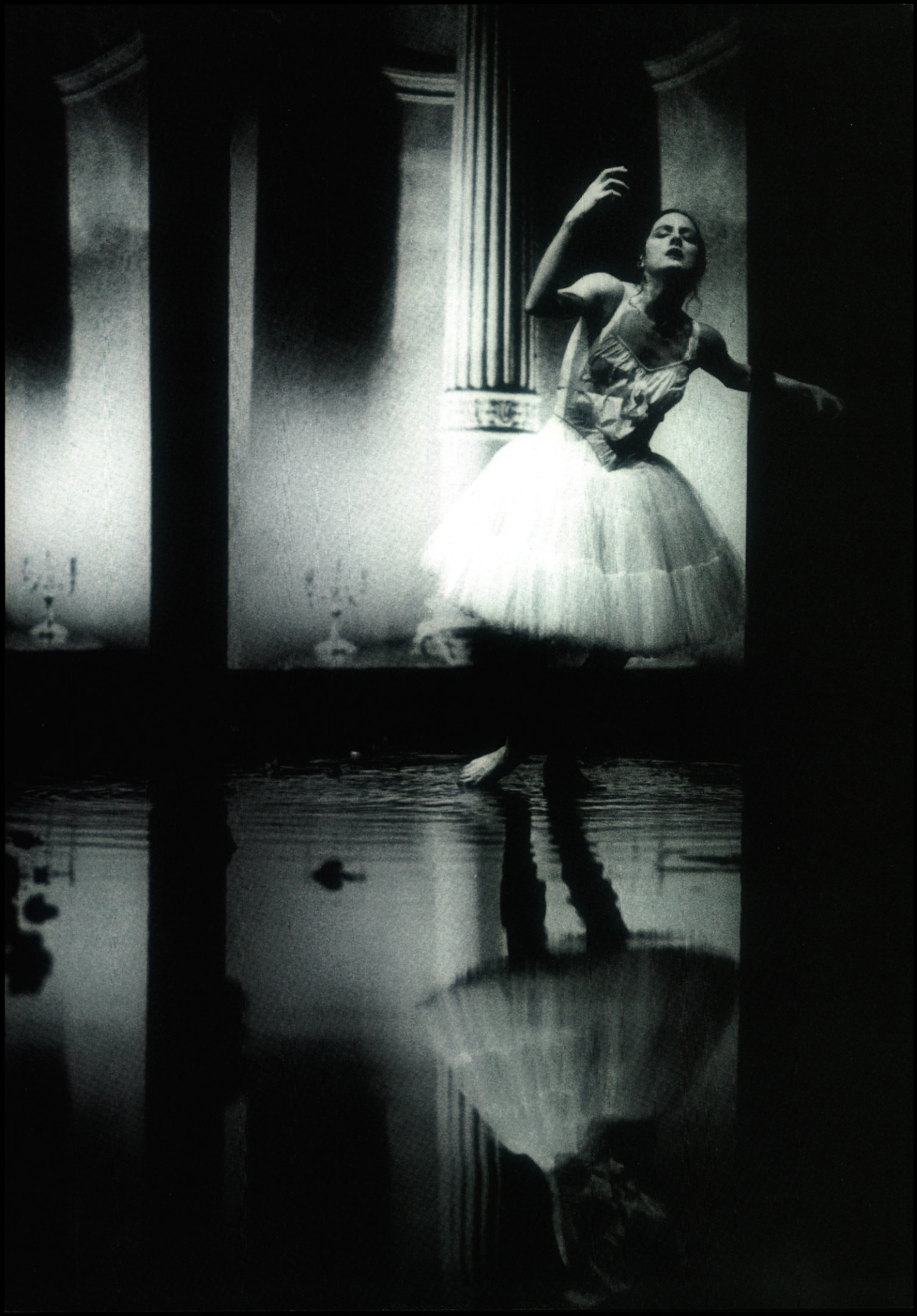
MERYL TANKARD IN *TWO FEET*, 1988
PHOTOS: REGIS LANSAC



MERYL TANKARD IN PINA BAUSCH DANCE THEATRE *KONTAKOPF*, 1978
PHOTO: REGIS LANSAC

than not the inspiration for a new piece springs from a personal experience.

Tankard does not start with a story or a plan, rather she starts with an idea or a feeling and builds material. She layers images until there is a coherent whole in much the same way as an Impressionist applies paint to canvas. In Tankard's view the meaning that people take from her work is up to them. She is more adamant about what does *not* inform her work, of what she has left behind in her quest for her own individual voice, than any generating principles. The first leaving was from classical ballet.

In 1972 Meryl Tankard completed her training at the Australian Ballet School and was in the corps de ballet for three years. "But" she says, "there is a limit to the interpretation that one can bring to a Wili in *Giselle*." Tankard holidayed in Europe and on the recommendation of a friend went to Wuppertal to

see work by Pina Bausch. Excited by what she saw, she auditioned and was accepted on the spot. Tankard says she only learnt later that that was not the usual mode of entry to Bausch's company.

Between Tankard and Bausch there seems to have been an immediate mutual recognition of artist for artist. Tankard's meeting with Pina Bausch was the first turning point in her adult dancing career. Today, looking back, she says that she learnt from Bausch to follow what you feel and to know that you are the only judge of the integrity of your own work. Strangely, perhaps being shy, Bausch and Tankard did not talk much. "I learnt by watching," Tankard said, "Pina never explained." Tankard's ideas eventually became a significant force in the Bausch company.

***ECHO POINT*, 1989**
(FIRST PERFORMED 1984)
PHOTO: REGIS LANSAC

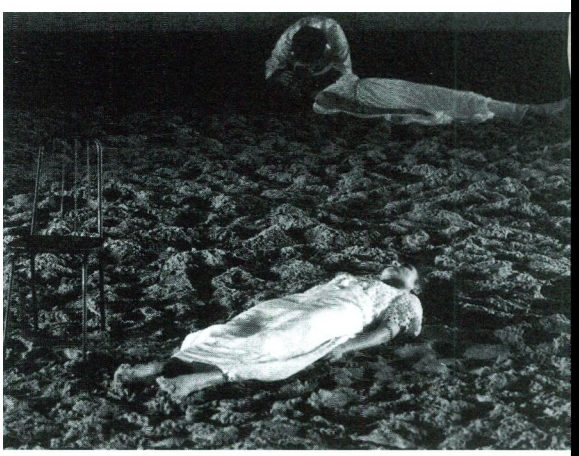
Tankard contrasts the Bausch experience with a more recent one at Jacob's Pillow, Massachusetts. Tankard was one of the choreographers sponsored by the Australia Council to attend this Festival. "It was all post-modern," she said afterwards. At this point I came a little closer to understanding the origins of Tankard's dance – she rejects dance that is surface only. No matter how cerebral the subject matter, or how attractive the surface, for Tankard dance must have feeling, it must have soul, its own inner power.

After six years with the Pina Bausch Company, Meryl Tankard returned to Australia, wanting to be home in the Australian sunshine and impelled by the desire to create her own work. Her first piece on her return was *Echo Point*, performed at the Off Broadway Theatre, Sydney in 1984, and recently revived for Canberra audiences. *Echo Point* is pure Tank-

ABOVE, AND BELOW RIGHT
***ECHO POINT*, 1989**
PHOTOS: REGIS LANSAC

ard – the feel of sun-worshipping – Sydney after the European years. And there is memory of the parties of the sixties, the mini-skirts and of boys and girls out to impress. *Echo Point* breaks in the centre; the first part is light and innocent, while the second is darker with undercurrents of the loss of that innocence.

Echo Point also has a strong, autobiographically derived, emotional force. An enigmatic, uniformed figure traverses the back of the stage, in shade, at the beginning and end of the production. The figure is Tankard's father who was building a dance studio for her in Newcastle when he died. I am not suggesting that Tankard's work is no more than an elaboration of the narrative of her own life. That is not so. But in her work, experience, memory and feeling contribute to a remarkable whole, a creation in which form and content are inextricably linked, in which it is impossible to sepa-



rate the dancer from the dance.

When she was working on *Echo Point*, Meryl Tankard met Regis Lansac, a photographer, who was to provide, after Pina Bausch, a second strong influence on her work.

***TWO FEET*, 1988**
PHOTO: REGIS LANSAC

The rich fruits of their collaboration can be seen in *TwoFeet*, a one-woman work, commissioned for Expo '88 in Brisbane and which had a booked-out season at the Spiral Centre in Tokyo in August this year. In *Two Feet* Tankard contrasts the dance career of Mepsie (her younger self) and Olga Spessivtzeva, a Russian prima ballerina on a tour to Australia who suffers a mental collapse. Life and art interpenetrate, as Olga famed for her dancing of the mad scene in Giselle, breaks down on stage and in her own madness is unable to recapture the steps that had made her famous. For the mad "mad" scene Tankard has the stage flooded with water. Back projections by Regis Lansac show the poignant face of Olga both as the real-life famous ballerina and the mad Giselle in the world of art. Tankard makes a strong statement of her dance philosophy in the piece and she does so with her customary humour. The 'good' fairy, dressed in pink, dances on stage and scatters her beneficience in the form of masses of red roses. In a wonderful reversal of such saccharine sentimentality, the same 'good' fairy flees the stage under a barrage of the same red roses being hurled at her like spears. The scene, funny as it is, is a dramatic statement of Tankard's rejection of the overly romanticised idiom of classical ballet.

With *Two Feet*, one sees the visual results of the creative symbiosis between Tankard and Lansac. Lansac's projections capture the spirit of the dance and provide technically brilliant effects; for example by a slight of light, Tankard, as Olga, passes

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***VX18504*, 1989**
PHOTOS: REGIS LANSAC

in and out of cracks of an ancient, brick wall. Olga's traversing is repeated in the piece, to and fro. At another time Olga is caught in classical poses in ovals of light, creating the effect of photographs in an old album. Rarely does Olga enter centre stage. This is Mepsie's territory. Mepsie is seen moving from her pupae state as a five-year old mastering the intricacies of The Shrimping Dance, through the Eisteddford, beyond the Torture Barre to her emergence as a fully developed dancer in Blue Divertissement performed to Handel's *Largo* from *Xerxes*. Thus, there is repetition in Tankard's choreography, but no waste.

VX 18504, her first work created in Canberra, which premiered at the Canberra Theatre in April 1989, was inspired by a visit to the War Memorial and from weeding her backyard garden – an imaginative swing from the heroic to the domestic. At the War Memorial she was struck by the images of ordinary

men and women going to war, and of the survivors slipping back into ordinary civilian life as her own father had done, rarely mentioning the horror or the trauma of their experiences. Later, weeding the garden, she lighted on the action of body and arm bent as if in reaping. Tankard uses that motion as a motif in *VX*.

Tankard draws her vocabulary of dance from everyday movements – polishing medals, pulling weeds – simple, even mundane, actions. In her movement pieces these actions are transmuted into highly expressive gestures without losing the traces of their origin in real life. Her repetition of the movement motif is not unlike the elaboration of a theme or the shift of key in a musical composition. In at least two of her creations the movement motif remains constant as the mood changes.

In *VX*, the performers moved from being distant figures in snapshots in the family photo album, to close-ups and finally to the speed of fast moving film. While the human figures take the

foreground, the random madness of the "out of control" background is continued: just as the interesting part of the family photograph is not in the figures but in the detail that is revealed in the background. This random detail included three chooks scratching on stage and an old slab and rail fence. Once again, Tankard achieved a style of work which I have termed "expressive realism."

Tankard's use of photography reached an apotheosis in *Banshee*, a short piece designed for the exhibition of Irish Gold and Silver held at the Asutralian National Gallery in May 1989. In *Banshee*, Tankard draws more on abstract images than autobiographical lines. The dancers, indeed the whole of the performance space, are swathed in the colour and light patterning from a series of slides designed by Regis Lansac. Lansac used images from Irish illuminated manuscripts to create the photographic images. In the original production Colin Offord, using a range of instruments including shells, Asian flutes and his Great Island Mouthtbow (his own invention), performed environmental music on stage. The effect was like being caught in a kaleidoscope of sound and light. Movement was miminal. The dancers, swathed in spiral coils of hand-made paper costumes designed by Dorothy Herel, stood on plinths like ancient icons. *Banshee* is an abstract piece in which visuals, sound and movement are patterned almost as words are patterned in poetry. Viewing the piece was like entering a dim, primeval past and emerging in a post-holocaust stillness. I believe that *Banshee* is heralding another strand in Tankard's work. A new phrase in which more abstract visual images will become predominant.

Tankard is currently developing a new piece, *Hexen*, as a companion piece for *Banshee*. *Hexen* has been inspired by the work of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. Kahlo painted self-portraits, or perhaps it would be more precise to say portraits of her inner states. Tankard has seized upon Kahlo's startling visual images,

FACING PAGE *BANSHEE*, 1989

PHOTOS: REGIS LANSAC

very different from the sinuous curves of *Banshee.* and intends to perform *Hexen*, herself.

When I ask myself what it is that I find distinctive in a Tankard work, several answers come to mind. I appreciate the ironical vein in Tankard's work. Should one laugh or should one cry? The audience is never really sure and it is this nuance, this ambiguity which makes a Tankard piece so interesting, so rich. Another satisfying aspect of her work is that she goes back to natural form for her vocabulary but this is very different from naturalism. Tankard uses simple movement in highly sophisticated ways and this adds an intellectual pleasure to visual and aesthetic delight. Thus while anti-sentimental, her work is a fully formed creation artistically and emotionally. Finally, I love the unabashed Australian-ness, (an antidote to ockerism) in Tankard's work.

Because Tankard draws her dance from contemporary images, the here-and-now, and her here-and-now is her native Australia, she avoids cliche and creates an Australian idiom. The Australian-ness does not seem to result from any conscious, ideological premise on Tankard's part. However, it does speak of the integrity valued in the Bausch years, the ability to face both inner and outer reality when creating new work. Australia's dance will be richer for her explorations.

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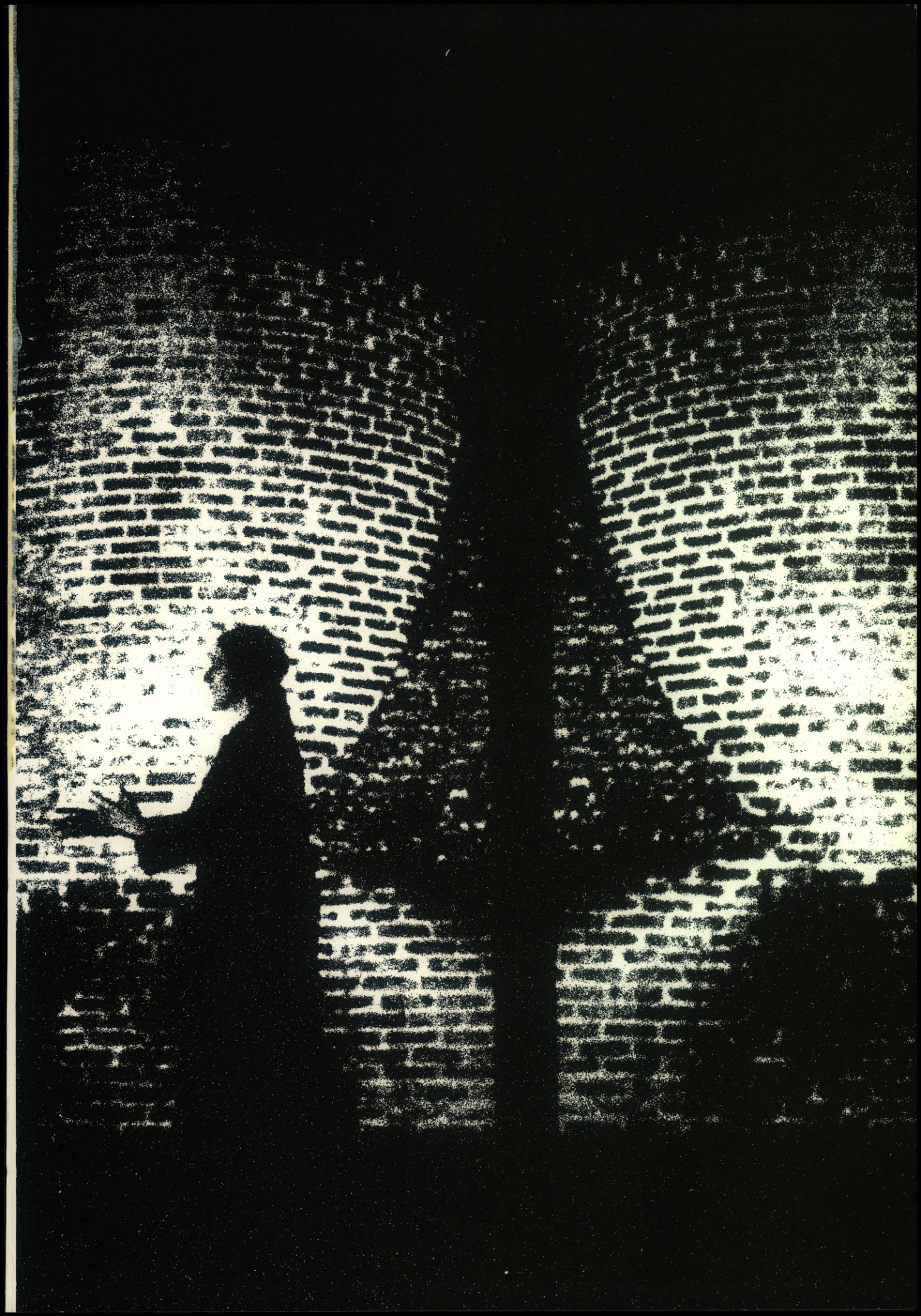
FACING PAGE: *BANSHEE*, 1989

PHOTO: REGIS LANSAC



Writings
on
Dance