

Tuesday, October 21, 2008

MIAF: Corridor

Festival diary #8: Sunday

Corridor choreographed by Lucy Guerin. Set design by Donald Holt, lighting design by Keith Tucker, costumes by Paula Levis, paper coats by Susie Gerraty, sound design by Haco. With Sara Black, Antony Hamilton, Kirstie McCracken, Byron Perry, Harriet Ritchie and Lee Serle. Lucy Guerin Inc @ the North Melbourne Meat Market until October 25.

The more I watch contemporary dance, the more it seems to me the closest performing art to poetry. It might seem an obvious connection, but it's quite a complex thought, which I'll do my best to unpack in a few brief, well chosen words.

Like novels or short stories, theatre finds its poetic through narrative. The narrative might be displaced or distorted or multiple, or it might be absolutely linear; but however it appears, narrative is a tendency that the form must wrestle with, either to reject or to accept, to reveal or to distort. Poetry, on the other hand, need not deal with narrative at all: a poem might be an epic story like *Paradise Lost*, or it might be a vivid glimpse of a moment, as in Ezra Pound's *In a Station of the Metro*. It's up to the poet, a decision that can be freely asserted because of the nature of poetry itself.



What is primary in both poetry and dance is its materiality. Just as poetry foregrounds the sensuous and rhythmic qualities of language, so dance celebrates the sensuous and rhythmic qualities of gesture. Neither needs to be more than the dynamic and immediate movement of exchange between reader and page, singer and listener, audience and performer, and for each this

contract is more easily grasped than in theatre or in novels, where the tending towards narrative and explication must be resisted with active violence.

In *Corridor*, Lucy Guerin makes this connection absolutely explicit by bringing language into dance. It's a preoccupation she's brought subtextually to other works - *Aether*, *Love Me* - but here she directly engages with the didactic function of words, their shaping and direction of reality. *Corridor* is a fascinating exploration of the contingencies of communication and the evolution of meaning. In this dance, as in poetry, there is a constant war between the legislative impulses of words and the incorrigible subversiveness of bodily experience and communication.

In particular, Guerin is concerned with instructions, the act of choreography itself - an instruction to a dancer to move in a particular way - expanding into larger questions about the instructions that saturate our daily lives with imperatives that deflect our behaviour. The dancers respond to directions that emerge from a variety of media - spoken instructions, iPods, mobile phones, words written on screens or paper. They vary from the possible (touch your head, twirl your finger, act as if something has bitten your neck) to the impossible (float, stop global warming, make sure no old person in the world feels lonely).

The dance occurs in the gaps between the possible and impossible. As promised by the title, the set is a long corridor, with the audience seated in a single row on each side facing each other on the narrow space. At either end are mirrored walls. If there is no place to hide for the audience, there is none for the dancers, either: they pass us close enough to touch, giving the performance a particular sense of intimacy, standing on the margin between the public and private.

It begins with one of the most effective transitions into performance I've seen. The dancers are seated anonymously among the audience, and people are still coming into the theatre and finding their seats. Suddenly, three people up from where I am sitting, a mobile phone rings and someone answers it. A man (Antony Hamilton) stands up, crouched around his mobile, and walks off from his chair in that bubble of privacy that mobile phones create, a strange obliviousness to the fact that they are in public space.

The muted rustle of irritation this causes in the audience is suddenly rebuked when you see that another dancer is doing the same thing, and then another, and understanding dawns that this is the beginning of the performance. The dancers roam up and down the corridor, each having inscrutable conversations. The lights dim and the dance begins to evolve.

The text itself - at least, that which is audible - is present as much for its sonic and dynamic qualities as its meanings. When Lee Serle issues spoken instructions to the dancers, for instance, his voice is distorted, so sometimes it is difficult to understand him. Sometimes it becomes, like the dance itself, something like pure form, as abstract and open to differing vectors of interpretation as the movement itself. Sometimes it is straight, direct and unambiguous, something that can only be brought under pressure by the dance itself. The question of intention is always in suspension.

Guerin builds meaning slyly, from one gesture to the next. Each sequence emerges from the banal or everyday to reach towards

the mysterious, creating arcana of desire that can seem neurotic or despairing, or desperate grapples of eroticism, or simply the joy of danced flight. There's a disturbing sequence, for example, where Byron Perry is trapped by the other five dancers, who are running in martial formation up and down the strip, and Perry can neither merge with their rhythm nor escape it, and throws himself violently about the stage, muttering half audible, broken sentences. Or another where all six dancers are suddenly a group, dancing in a harmony that evolves seamlessly out of the various conflicts on stage. Or a comic duet comprised of minor pain - a hurt finger, vomiting - in which the involuntary, non-verbal body takes precedence.

It's a dense, intensely absorbing experience which demonstrates Guerin's command of space and focus and the skills of her dancers (especially the compulsively watchable Kirstie McCracken). Because of the shape of the stage, it is impossible to focus in one place; you are forced to choose what to watch, and are constantly becoming aware of shifts that are already in evolution. This slight disorientation is reinforced by Haco's extraordinary sound design, a mixture of ambient sound - foyer chatter, spruikers at a market - and music. The sound craftily shifts direction all the time; sometimes it's wholly environmental, coming from all directions at once, and often, rather disconcertingly, it seems to be emerging from the floor.

Perhaps what made *Corridor* most enjoyable was the play in it, how play escapes the fatalities of language, creating its own laws and order and beauty. The physically various bodies of these six very different dancers become battlefields of meaning and resistance, the dance constantly escaping from the limiting definitions of words. This struggle towards flight or liberation or simple gut-level physical disobedience makes *Corridor* a singularly joyous experience, a celebration of the innate subversiveness of the human body.

Picture: publicity shot for *Corridor*. Photo: Jeff Busby

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