

# The First Run of Tim Darbyshire

At the February session of *First Run*, a bi-monthly dance salon held at Lucy Guerin's Batman Street studio, I was introduced to a remarkable piece of dance theatre by Tim Darbyshire. Fusing theatre, technology and dance imagery, the piece is part of an emerging solo work called *Buckets and Other Things*; the theme is work; more specifically the job, the menial job, the rung lowest in a careerist society; and more broadly, how our work-centric existence creates us and what kind of beast that is.



Tim Darbyshire in  
*Buckets and Other Things*

## STAGE

The first point to mention is Darbyshire's meticulous approach to movement: not a single action is done thoughtlessly or incidentally (noted with the benefit of hindsight). With procedural movement, he aligns ladders and mops on the floor to form three sides of a rectangle (the studio wall forms the fourth), sets and tests three microphones on the periphery, and places two buckets on invisible marks. Browknitted; concentrating eyes; booted footsteps resound with conviction; a few words are uttered to his technician who sits off side amidst loops of wires and a laptop. Our protagonist becomes clear: he is a cleaner, isolated and preoccupied.

The audience falls silent as Tim steps outside the laddered rectangle, facing the back downstage corner (or he would, except the Lucy Guerin studio has no stage. We are on one level, just a few meters from our protagonist, who stares into the corner formed by the studio's adjoining redbrick walls. Proximity is of vital importance to the visceral resonance of a piece like this. The feeling is raw, despite the instances of technology and slithering power cords). He takes down the straps on his overalls and pulls his t-shirt off. Naked-to-the-waist-and-overalls-bunching-around-his-boots provides a neat visual for the relation of the human body to work — but it hasn't even begun yet.

Placing a bucket over his head, the audience titters (humorous relief), and finally the performance has begun. Absurdity ebbs rapidly through thick silence. Our protagonist is already

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in freefall, but nobody notices until the ground looms close. Bucket donned, prepared and mindless; an allegory for beginning work — either the day's work, or a new 'role', it pierces to the heart of the de-humanising qualities of many a job. It captures how silly and absurd the manifold of ritual procedures associated with the beginning of work seems. Funny in their extraneousness to the individual at first, the job demands a serious face, and it isn't long before people don the buckets with sincerity and complicity. The bucket over the head, literally blinding and masking, provides a rich allegory for the burden of work that also mutes, pressurises, and disorients.

The assumption of work weighs heavily; pressure from the bucket pushes his head to the floor. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, before the audience's childlike, inquisitive gaze, he transforms. It is a hair-raisingly gruesome transformation, a visceral undergoing engineered through remarkable physical manipulation and powerful imagery. His bucket-head scrapes and rasps along the floor, in short, slow shunts, powered by all fours. The actions are deliberate, so slow, shivers run through each finger, palm, muscles raking up his forearms to the core of labour, chest, arms, back. All the while, floor microphones echo guttural vociferations from inside the bucket; distortions of voice become a soundtrack like the lispings of juddering industrial machinery. Slowly, it grunts and staggers towards the centre of the floor. The grossly strange form waits and heaves, indifferently.

Funny and absurd at the outset, the bucket-headed man-machine can no longer be a joke, because he is no longer human, and his condition is deeply un-funny, in fact.

From this point, the performance is driving and relentless, and it seems as if no one has the power to stop it, not even our performer, whose metamorphosis is entire, all discretion has fallen wayside, replaced by the cold absence of control. Standing with buckets half-filled with marbles and balls in either hand, he begins to swing them like low, synchronised pendulums, with knees bent, revolving in incremental shuffling

steps, like the central pillar of a drill. The audience is acutely aware of what the escalating momentum must result in — it will happen, it must happen, according to science. The microphones amplify the sound of marbles crashing together with each swing of the buckets. The new soundtrack is entirely objectified; no trace of humanity is left.

The inevitable happens: the marbles and balls drop from the buckets, crashing and bouncing on the floor, throwing the entire scene into chaos. Down into the cosmic spray of marbles he goes, writhing and contorting, the bucket has come free and his eyes roll back, for an unforgivably long time this goes on. A period distinctly longer than is comfortably watchable; it is not a glimpse, not an outline, but a saturating picture. I am reminded of a passage belonging to *The Devils*:

It reminds me of a man who is suffering from an acute pain and is tossing about in bed trying to find a position to relieve his pain even for a moment. And not even to relieve his pain, but to change it, if only for a moment, for another kind of suffering. In a situation like that there can be, of course, no question of the position being either beautiful or rational.

Possibilities for the beautiful and rational have long since been bled from the conditions of work, however Darbyshire's work suggests consequences that transcend the individual. His allusions to the atomised cosmos goes beyond ethical deficit in the individual and in society, to suggest ominous things, things that are pertinent to the existence of society at all — speaking to me of climate change, and our relationship to the environment. The interminable writhing about amongst the collapsed system is the last condition. Man is beyond dispossession, and it is a dark and dire depiction, rather than merely poignant as suggested by Tim's description: "it is silly, it is sad". **FR**

**Tim Darbyshire** hails from Australia. In 1992 he joined his father in a mid-life crisis by participating in a rock musical about a schizophrenic woman. He then lived in Melbourne where he made many a coffee and learned how to pour a beer. Aside from this he worked on his premiere independent performance creation entitled *Room Service*. He found himself still engaged in contemporary dance as a DanceWEBBER (Impulstanz 2006) and at Centre Nationale de Danse Contemporaine (France), where he adopted various methods of creation and practice by working with choreographers Vera Mantero, Emmanuelle Huyhn and Shelley Senter amongst others. Recently he has been working in France, Portugal and Norway within the collaborative framework of Sweet and Tender Collaborations. He has been developing a solo work entitled *Buckets and Other Things* as well as working as a performer for a new creation by David Wampach and Meg Stuarts re-creation of *Running*.