

RealTime

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Writing to Vermeer

Writing to Vermeer
Spirit Time & Place
Robbery Waitress
on Bail/Heavy
Eat Your Young
Hesperion
The Ecstatic Bible
Pour Antigone
Birdbrain
Mizumachi
The Dance of Death
Cool Heat Urban Beat
Ochre & Dust

RealTime is a part of the 2000 Telstra Adelaide Festival as a live-in writing ensemble creating 4 editions (1 every 4 days) in print and on-line and on RealTimeVideo in the Festival Centre Foyer Cafe, responding to works, themes and debates here at the 2000 Festival. RealTime onsite was initiated at the 1996 Adelaide Festival, returning in 1998. Our team of artist-writers have been guests of LIFT 97 (London International of Theatre) as well as Brisbane's Asia-Pacific Triennial in 1999.

Here at Adelaide Festival 2000 already there's fervent debate about *Writing to Vermeer*, passionate outpourings for and against its beauty, curiosity about intelligibility, authorship, meaning. Responses are rapturous from those who stayed to wrestle with and were duly rewarded by Howard Barker's 7 hour *The Ecstatic Bible* in an Australian-British collaboration. The complexity of its issues have yet to be addressed, but its power is undoubted. Ishinha's *Mizumachi* offers engaging spectacle, *Ochre & Dust* speaks intimately and politically, Lucy Guerin explores the deep of sleep in *Heavy* and animates a newspaper story in *Robbery Waitress on Bail* with a languorous and seductive sensuality.

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Already works are generating an astonishing sense of history and place. In *Mizumachi* we watch a century unfold in the evolution of the city of Osaka. In *Writing to Vermeer* it's 1672 Delft. In *The Ecstatic Bible* it's a counter-history of European culture. In *Ochre & Dust* it's Maralinga, site of British nuclear blasts in the 50s on Indigenous lands. Mathilde Monnier creates a dual world populated by European and African dancers.

Clearly Robert Wilson and his *Dream Play* took a wrong turn and wound up in Perth. His fresians should be here with the other recurring symbols of the festival to date—pregnant bellies, water and cows in *The Ecstatic Bible*, *Writing to Vermeer* and *Mizumachi*. Certainly there's already strong evidence of Robyn Archer's theme of the new building on the old realised in *Vermeer* as classic paintings are reinterpreted through contemporary music, non-linear narrative and projections. Meanwhile Barker writes a radical new Bible. In *Mizumachi*, a contemporary realisation of history by a team of very young performers, the potency of Kabuki underlies some of the work's power. For some the festival hasn't "kicked in" yet. They're waiting for that festival "hit"—for others it's already upon us in the cumulative ecstasy of works that take us into strange places, and like *The Ecstatic Bible*, *Writing to Vermeer* and *Pour Antigone* offer new ways to think and experience.

Opera by immersion

Keith Gallasch

Writing to Vermeer

The Netherlands Opera

Festival Theatre, March 2

This vast reverie of an opera is driven by a small set of familiar tranquil paintings of domestic scenes (women reading, writing, pregnant,

occasionally looking out at us, ordered, calm), a set of fictional letters to the absent artist from his wife, his mother-in-law and a model (these are being writ large by hand as we enter the theatre, later they are projected and sung), and a set of reverie-rupturing, disastrous historical events that cut across the domestic world, eventually destroying it with an emotionally wrenching but plainly stated finality. This play of paintings, letters, the everyday and history generates an engrossing world, another culture another time, richly and precisely coloured, costumed and lit, directed with an artist's eye, written with restraint and composed with a glorious minimalist pulse (echoing visual recurrences and personal preoccupations) soon overlayed with and transformed into rich, romantic arcs and sweeps, converting simple handwritten observations into moments of sheer longing, love, anger and pain. The greater world interrupts the reverie from time to time with harsh electronics—explosions, wrenchings, the cracking of bones.

Everywhere there is multiplication. Projected paintings are realised on stage. One woman in yellow becomes 3 (Saskia the model), writing with her huge quill, travelling with her suitcase, falling. She is 3 women wading deeper into water. She is one huge screen image, a singing face. On another screen she stumbles and falls over and over. Nor is there the realism of one small household—the stage is a world of women (save when drawbridges lower and the world promenades through, or armies march in battle on screens), many women, backs arched in a dance of pregnant

discomfort, or fussing over a child who has swallowed varnish. Everywhere there is amplification. To show just how big and how consuming the everyday is, the moment of the child's drinking of the varnish is spectacle, no longer a simple detached hand-written text but a flood of liquid crashing onto the child's head, over a face we have grown familiar with in close-up in her party hat. She grins at us like a divine fool and her birthday is celebrated by many women with many cakes and candles, the multiplication and amplification of pleasure and relief that the one born is still alive. The 'historical' interruptions are big, brutal, intrusive...but they pass. They are not mentioned in letters, they are not sung, they are disturbing images and factual texts that scroll across the world, they are noise and crowds and blood, and finally a flood, as the Dutch sacrifice themselves, letting in the sea to keep out the French. The cumulative weight of these historical moments drowns the women isolated on their island stage. Water and other liquids accumulate as the opera unfolds into a grim apocalyptic rush of water down the steep rake and pours from above.

This is opera by immersion with its fluid interplay of sets of small narratives, the multiplication of characters (on stage, on screens) and the domestic milieu, the surge of water, of light, of music. Eye and ear sink into the everyday moment and revel in it. This fluidity (water, varnish, paint, milk, ink, menses and the blood of violence) recurs in the flow of screens—huge ones back and forward of the stage, smaller ones flying in and out. The forward scrim takes us close to a face while a

woman flies behind. Or porcelain shatters before us while in the distance a massive fire rages. On smaller screens there are paintings, details of paintings, film of a woman tumbling down stairs over and over, a pen scratching at a letter (the very sound that begins the opera).

I was immersed (and still am) in *Writing to Vermeer*. I re-read the libretto (invaluably reproduced in the program) and librettist Greenaway's note. I long for the CD. Like many others in the audience, I wish there'd been surtitles to help sustain the reverie. I wish too I'd known that the libretto was available to read. That aside, the Andriessen-Greenaway-Boddeke opera is no mere work of beauty. Nor is it simply gloriously sung and played. In its deepening multiplications and permutations, its brutal intersection of the eternal everyday and the cruelties of history, in its acceptance of all that flows (so curious to witness in a male vision, and so powerfully realised by director Saskia Boddeke) *Writing to Vermeer* is a unique and wondrous operatic experience.

Letters

Adelaide, March 2000

Dear "Peter"

In your cool retreat inside *The Guardian* has it escaped you that here on the ground we have been asphyxiating in 40 degree heat inside a city seething in opinion? It appears our little work has inflamed as much as it has ignited. Just today I had wind that sections of the crowd are hot and bothered by the absence of

surtitles from *Writing to Vermeer*. Surtitles! When those obsessive textual images left barely enough room for the actors, let alone Linda the cow! Opera is a foreign language it seems, even when sung in English. They cannot hear the words. They don't buy programs. If they do, they don't read them. I am afraid that you alone must carry the can for this—it's your artistic persona that preoccupies them here, whereas I am in danger of being disappeared like your lush, liquid libretto, my love, down the gurgler. And à propos our discussions on titillation and the male gaze etc, I am beginning to come to the view that beyond the sensual functions of dinner and bath no-one really wants to know about the dishes and the soap ring. Even in an opera without narrative it is the heroic march of masculine history, the death of the artist that consumes them, displays of operatic emotion that move them to tears—not the delicate turn of a table leg or the whispering skirt of the one who tends to the dripping tap, the weeping child, the spilled ink. And from my table here at the Fezbah drowning my sorrows in Coopers Ale, I'm wondering how, after all the work we have done together (with Louis and Reinbert and Michael and Emi and Klaus and Kees, not to mention the Susans and Michel, Mirjam, Shira et al), and despite all of your protestations to the contrary, it's come to be known as the "Peter Greenaway opera." If I hear it again, I will swallow varnish (or Adelaide water which is not altogether dissimilar).

Come back and know us.
We love you.

"Saskia"

A touch of (bloodied) paradise

Kirsten Krauth

State of Shock, Spirit Time & Place
Tandanya Company
National Aboriginal Cultural
Institute-Tandanya theatre, March 3

We don't need to imagine being in the North Queensland tropics. The whirring fanned greenhouse humidity beats us up and spews us out, gasping, onto hot cement. Three actors stand on the sparse stage and in theatre-as-education mode, give us background to the characters and a quote from Joh Bjelke Petersen that Queensland Aboriginal people live in "clover".

We don't need the introduction. On stage, a wooden chair with carved heart, camp bed, drum, old suitcase and crate, and Eddie, young, destructive enough to hold a knife to his veins, telling his 19 year old girlfriend Doreen how Vegemite is made. When Aboriginal people first saw white invaders, their skin dropped off in fear, and the whites scraped it off the ground to preserve for breakfast.

Doreen and Eddie, living on a reserve, have different dreams: Doreen, a house in Brisbane with a bath and washing machine and toilet paper; Eddie, tied to his land, dreams of oldfella trees and red horses with white socks bloodied from trampling people to death. Mr O'Connor, director of the Department of Aboriginal Improvement, dreams of Parliament at all costs, whacking a golf ball in colonial uniform of white shirt, pants and shiny brown boots, hoping for a "nice swing". Eddie, some-

time narrator, laughs at his aspirations, diminishing his authority and undermining his stance as authoritative figure. Traditional stereotypes are played with and reversed.

O'Connor is the drunk; abusive, hopeless with numbers, ineffectual, easily bargained with and swayed by the Aboriginal people he comes into contact with including Jenny Bob, 65, chairlady of the reserve who labels him a "New Australian." Her grandson Eddie is the philosopher, wild and on the grog, punching in the world and later in hospital, "a couple of flagons" of blood, a "whitefella inside me now."

Occasional work for him means digging holes: "I wanna dig deeper, deeper, until I disappear."

Trisha Morton-Thomas (memorable as the hardened middle sister in Rachel Perkins' film *Radiance*) battles tough conditions to touch us, hurtling through two roles in an overboiled soup of a venue. Tony Strachan's writing is at times repetitive and severe, headbutting the audience into submission. In particular the narrator spots, where the actors take turns in updating the other characters' lives, seem unnecessary, attempting a sense of resolution where none is needed. The predominantly Aboriginal audience laughs during moments of high dramatic tension when Eddie wields a knife during his regular bouts of violence. The whole audience laughs most at two words: safari suit. But it's incongruous because O'Connor isn't wearing one. This is the 70s, right?

A whole gamut of issues is played out and talked about—health conditions for Aboriginal people and the impact of glaucoma ("it's night

all the time now"), the destructive outcomes of the unnatural reserve environment, alcohol and domestic violence ("my people bleed and you can't even weep"), self mutilation, politics and integration ("how to vote...vote Labor...same thing")—but the well-intentioned endeavour to spread the word works as a barrier to any emotional connection with the characters. Except for one poetic scene: Eddie, caged in a cell-block, is visited by his grandma, who acts as spiritual guide, encouraging him to rise up with her like wild geese through swirling clouds, far above the gaol's confines, the reserve, to a bird's eye view, mapping his landscape and new territories, towards Surfers Paradise: "Why paradise?" "This is where white people go when they're dead."

Note: the production of Somewhere in the Darkness, originally scheduled as part of Spirit, Time and Place, was cancelled just prior to opening night.

Habitual grooves

Erin Brannigan

Heavy & Robbery Waitress on Bail
Lucy Guerin Company
Space Theatre, March 4

Lucy Guerin has movement habits that define her choreographic work. Well, they are highly cultivated habits and the rigour she applies to them transforms them. It's such a relief amongst the aspirations towards a neutral dancing body, the constant peeling off of techniques, habits, the possibility for recurrence, of a recognisable style. Guerin's rocking hips that often settle into a 'groove', her arms articulating down to splayed fingers, her

symmetry and angles often played out with feet planted in place are all there in both the works on this program. So is the sexuality that is more often than not drained out of contemporary dance like a pint of blood.

Not many shows can stand up in the 10pm slot at a festival like Adelaide's—I'd already seen 3 shows. Besides the obvious logic of the live DJ coming out later at night and the theme of sleep seguing into our own (via the Fringe's Spiegeltent), Guerin's fine detail and superfine company of dancers are capable of pulling focus in a way a 5pm show I saw was never going to. Guerin herself, Ros Warby, Rebecca Hilton, Trevor Patrick and Brett Daffy are worth staying up for.

Robbery Waitress on Bail has become crystal clear since the earlier version I saw at The Performance Space in 1997; 4 or 5 moments in the newspaper account of a crime (which inspired this work) have crystallised into distinct 'movements' since then. First the 2 women stand in isolated spotlights, feet planted, hips and arms swinging to set the tone of ennui that instigates the whole escapade. Then they join centre-stage in a dance of complicity, the signet dance from *Swan Lake* making an unexpected appearance. Limbs entwine, shadow each other, fingers point and connect the 2 in a schizophrenic manifestation of a detail from the story. Then they move across the floor, breaking out into a breadth of movement that becomes even more connected to the groove, Guerin riding close to sound artists Jad McAdam and Andrew Lancaster's

beautiful work. Then up against the wall, flashing knickers, no...more like working the crotch in a devastating image of defiance, desolation and sexual frustration.

Heavy is rich like a dream, wandering off in all directions in comparison to the first...most of the 'habits' remain. REM sleep patterns take over a hand, a torso, somnambulists fall prey to the physical and mental manipulations of others, dreams are planted in heads and sucked away, creeping figures with spindly Dracula hands and intentions—perfectly embodied by Trevor Patrick—conjure nightmares, dozy heads become a movement theme, Brett Daffy jerks through sleeping poses, actions repeat, slow down, return like recurring dreams...

And this is groovy too. Guerin's choreographic engagement with the amazing work of McAdam makes sense of the cool costumes, laboratory set, having the DJ play live—the music isn't slapped on top or below as a distant but loud point of reference. Guerin's connections to popular culture are convincing in an essential way. They are dancing to the music and the rest seems to fall into place.

Satellites of (non) love

Kirsten Krauth

Eat Your Young

Arena Theatre Company

Odeon Theatre, Norwood, March 2-6

A common concern expressed by theatre critics and practitioners is that a younger audience, in particular the 15 to 25 year olds, with lots of film, computer, online and

techy choices, tend to give performance a miss. Arena Theatre Company don't have this problem. The opening night was packed to the hilt with young people and there is no question that technology governs Arena's artistic vision. Content and style set up a useful conflict between the sinister applications of technology to everyday lives (in surveillance and medical reconstructions) versus the beauty and sophistication of mechanisms used within the performance. A circle around the performers both encloses and protects them while floor to ceiling film screens revolve around the characters, shooting, revealing, hiding, obliterating. Other characters appear and fade only on screen. At times the 2 screens face off in a showdown or overlap, a sensuous merging. The circle is outlined by a ring of broken crockery, which 6 year old Ava smashes and crunches underfoot, a reminder of (un)happier times, the fragility and brokenness of disconnected childhood. In his film *Trust*, Hal Hartley pushes the idea that a family is like a gun. Point it in the wrong direction and someone gets killed.

Eat Your Young projects future state care into a computerised world of experimentation where youth workers haven't changed that much. Buddy (Christopher Brown), Mary (Kate Denborough) and Ava (Emma Hawkins) have been abandoned by their parents and locked into a new, cheap, super efficient home, monitored (via implant and surveillance bugs), and medi(t)ated via a sexy whirring machine with peacock feathers which intones in Stephen Hawking

style. As with all technology, malfunctions occur, and Ava gains access to a porthole *Being-John-Malkovich*-style into the not so stable psyche of social worker Francis (Merfyn Owen). Owen and Hawkins (in her first professional role) give vulnerable and bleak performances, working well in tandem, with Hawkins' graceful small body melded with empathetic vision, giving real power to a 6 year old child's needs and wisdom.

The performance veers into sound art (a heady mix of techno, floor pumping bass, blip backbeats and computer code, opera and gibberish, spoken segments of experiences of abuse and neglect) and less satisfying dance (choreographed by Philip Adams), when the characters quiver and shake, overtaken by alien forms. Digital clips, taking characters where they (don't) want to go, in particular a kitschy fast motion action packed martial arts powwow, and gut-churning scenes of scientific experimentation with monkeys, integrate well with dynamics on stage, highlighting the characters' evolving sexual aggression, and grooving into deviated forms. The system is corrupt. As Ava says, it's a terrible thing to make machines breathe.

Once Ava has invaded the system, Childress (Margaret Cameron), the state's mothership, who once controlled her little satellites of non-love like a space cadet on valium, pleads "I can't get a feed." The family is patched together. The pseudo mother is dead, the 'actual' mother bumped off by the kids in a simulation. It is a filtered, diluted finish to a concentrated mix.

A perfect match

Diana Weekes

Tonos Humanos and Diferencas

Hesperion XX

Adelaide Town Hall, March 3

From name to fame, ensemble Hesperion XX—now XXI for the new millennium—constitutes a perfect fit. In the ancient world, 'Hesperia' meant Italy for the Greeks and Iberia for the Romans, so the name aptly reflects the group's investigations into the history of Western European and particularly Spanish music. Their fame is solidly based on high standards of instrumental performance and an impressive record of musical scholarship which continues to throw new light on repertoire, instrumental techniques and the stylistic practices of any given time and place. Husband and wife team Jordi Savall and Montserrat Figueras, founding and focal members of the group, work in such close collaboration with other musicians that their technical mastery and musical refinement appear to convert virtuosity into a collective comfort zone.

Spanish Songs and Instrumental Variations 1600 - 1750 presented a wide variety of musical moods, from the poignant modality of Lucas Ruiz de Ribayaz' *Spagnolettas* & *Tarantela* for solo harp and tambourine to the comic banality and metaphysical eccentricity of José Marin's secular songs. First up was a set of instrumental variations for viola da gamba and bass theorbo which clearly established Jordi Savall as a master of musical subtlety, quite apart from his technical brilliance. Rolf Lislevand on theorbo was equally impressive. Throughout the evening his musical

commitment and enthusiasm permeated each performance; improvisatory introductions and playouts were handled with consummate ease, verging on humour. Constant communication between the players ensured a lively musical rapport, while their demeanour on stage remained the epitome of understatement.

One might have thought at first that Montserrat Figueras had a problem with intonation, but her pitch deviation was so minimally consistent and so artfully resolved that one accepted it as an integral part of her vocal technique, based on the old idea of *rezitar cantando*. We know of course that Western music, after a long and arduous labour, eventually gave birth to harmony, which was later developed at the expense of the melodic and rhythmic sophistication associated with Eastern cultures. Montserrat Figueras presented the vocal line in such a way as to suggest that in 17th century Spain, this was by no means a *fait accompli*.

Meanwhile Pedro Aestival, the percussionist, is simply unforgettable. Watching his hands on the skin of the renaissance drum, he might have been playing a Chopin Nocturne, such was the elegance and subtlety of his approach. Discreet finger-licking allowed delicate scrubbing across the surface and his use of sticks, always in conjunction with various parts of the hand, produced an amazing variety of tone and timbre. His dainty fingering of the tambourine, his precision with the claves and even his stylish use of a tiny bell were all choreographed to perfection, and the range of dynamics was nothing short of startling.

After interval the *Jacamars* by Antenna de Saint Cru featured Adele González-Campa on castanets with Rolf Lislevand on guitar in a performance which can only be described as overtly sensual. The vitality of their interaction was enhanced by subtle body language which instinctively mirrored the inner structure of the work, and heightened the musical tension of this definitive interpretation.

It is regrettable that for a festival event of this calibre, we had to make do with a \$10 program full of typographical errors, translations forced into rhyme (thus obscuring the otherwise straightforward and earthy texts) and a hall too dark to follow the words easily. All this aside, the man behind the music of *Tous les matins du monde*, and his ensemble Hesperion XXI, are living proof that there is no substitute for the quality of a musical performance informed by scholarship and delivered with passion.

Accomplished Madness

Helen Grace

Las Folias

Hesperion XX

Adelaide Town Hall, March 4

Hesperion XX's concert of *Las Folias* ("mad" songs) demonstrated again that no empire ever declined with as much panache as the Spanish. No more perfect performance of this music could be imagined—Jordi Savall's virtuoso viola da gamba, Rolf Lislevand's guitar and theorbo, Arianna Savall's harp, Pedro Estevan's percussion and Adela Gonzalez-Campa's castanets so minimally deployed. In *Folias Britannicas* Jordi Savall extends the viola da gamba's range to sound

like Lancashire pipes. The very idea of the baroque was invented in 17th century Spain but its resonances can still be heard in this music and its links with European and Moorish rhythms and sounds, now more familiar to us from fusion and world music. A festival highlight.

New proverbs of heaven and hell

Keith Gallasch

The Ecstatic Bible

Brink Productions

& The Wrestling Room

Scott Theatre, March 3

Ecstasy was one of the themes of Barrie Kosky's 1996 Adelaide Festival, embodied in the Whirling Dervishes and the music of Scriabin among others. Howard Barker's *The Ecstatic Bible* would have been at home in that festival (as much as it is in this), providing another dimension to the theme, one less spiritually transcendent but no less revelatory. The delirium sometimes associated with ecstasy is in part generated here by the duration of the work (8 hours including over an hour of intervals) and is compounded by the sheer strangeness (and the subversive familiarity) of the world Barker and his collaborators conjure, and which an audience brave enough to persevere comes to treasure. This is a world of astonishing reversals, inversions, losses and passions, alarming synchronicities and rare moments of grace amidst war and persecution. The ecstatic state induced is an almost dreamlike acceptance of an alien world such that soon the world you are used to simply doesn't look, feel, mean the same, a distance opens, a deep breath is taken, you begin again.



Howard Barker

In a program note, co-director Tim Maddock (working with the writer-director Howard Barker) describes the play as "a provocation to the Bible, an alternative history of civilisation, a play on the forms of wanting, of fear, of possession, of love. It is a new genealogy of morality, a description of the primal become civil, fear become faith, desire a criminal act and hatred a product of futile longings." This sounds like William Blake's great project, so it is not surprising to find in the program a list of state-

ments headed "The Ecstatic Bible Has No Commandments Only Propositions." Like Blake's *Proverbs of Heaven and Hell*, these 10 apparently simple propositions can quickly stand you on your head, or stay with you as you puzzle at their dialectic:

The Random brings death and ecstasy in equal measure.

Accident bestows greatness on Man.

The greatest accident is Desire.

In Europe the landscape resembles the body. Is that because it is made of the body?

The Woman without Will creates in the Moral Man an extinguishable infatuation.

And it is these and the other propositions that are embodied and worried at in this epic work, addressed directly and indirectly, but not in any programmatic sense, as Barker's world unfolds before us, brutally material, curiously intangible, in kinship with worlds created by Blake, Greenaway, the poet-novelist Iain Sinclair and others, part of a peculiarly nameless, British tradition, a kind of earthed-surrealism, magical, bleak, sometimes Gnostic, and deeply subversive.

The first palpable embodiment of this is in designer Mary Moore's magnificent set reaching out into the auditorium—vast walls and floor of timber over rock, the rudiment of civilisation over the fundament of the earth. The rock is littered before us at the base of a sloping floor. Rock is revealed again high above the floor, behind huge sliding timber walls, the planking running the same way as the floor. This rock wall is littered with smaller rock and pebbles, the effect is vertiginous. Here is no land and sky, no earth and heaven, just earth to earth, and a slippery wooden slope. Cutting across is a walkway, and a narrow ramp runs down one side; the world enters, exits and passes by, as lone travellers, the mad, refugees, violent crowds. A thin channel runs the length of the floor, sometimes still, sometimes running with water or blood. The directors and performers take every advantage of the transformability of the set to suggest a great passage of time and a multitude of places. In this space, a history is created, one I

cannot begin to describe, save to say it is a history of generations and of Mrs Gollancz and a Priest who live immortally across those generations.

Like a creation myth, the play begins with the woman pregnant. A violin-playing vagrant rapes her and slashes her husband's throat. Everyone thinks she did it, especially the Priest, and like Wedekind's Lulu (Mrs Gollancz is surely a Lulu for the new millennium), her apparent complacency gets her labelled evil: "He made love to me. In exchange he cut my husband's throat." From now on she is an object of many desires, male, female, and the Priest's, for over a 100 years as she begets generations of children and leaves husbands and lovers in her wake. In the final scenes of the play, the Priest finally admits to his desire for her, his love, his passion to see her naked, even to have a child with her (but finally she declares herself barren: "Pity", he says). She undresses but he cannot bear to watch—he has his head covered: "Now I want the form of the wanting. That's another thing." He is satisfied, however, because he "heard everything" of her undressing. Desire, however murky and complicated, is in the open.

These immortals are exhausted; "We are immortal and god knows what we did to deserve it." The world they knew is changed. Mrs Gollancz regrets the passing of a man whose only goal in life was to unearth her sacred bones—he had long ago heard (wrongly) of her death. She says of him that he was a god and that she loved his "exquisite indifference." And we recall an exchange between

this man and those who have tried to change the world violently. He can in good conscience repudiate their actions, this former criminal. Like one of the other characters, a murderer who finds himself parenting an abandoned child and declares, pleased and astonished: "I was a pimp and a murderer." But goodness never guarantees good outcomes—the baby grows up to be a chronic suicider and another of Mrs Gollancz's partners...by then we are yearning for a genealogical chart as new characters enter, new generations of strong, sometimes murderous women, as degrees of incest take shape. The Priest, beaten and threatened again, mutters "I must learn to kill," but it is a girl who has to do it for his and others' survival.

Mrs Gollancz' story is entailed in the proposition: "The Woman without Will creates in the Moral Man an extinguishable infatuation." It sounds oddly like something right out of Schopenhauer and something you might want to quarrel with. That aside, the Priest wants to blame Gollancz for the evils of the world: "All of this is Mrs Gollancz", he bellows at the play's end even while confessing his love—"Without you I am inert." She never intended to create suffering, she says, intention is uninteresting; the unintentional is what she did, echoing the astonishing strains of cause and effect that crisscross through this violent world. Yet, for all this primal force, choice and responsibility also play their demanding role; the murderer declares of the abandoned baby: "Our child chose us!"

This radical Bible is populated with immortals and other powerful fig-

ures (and their lovers and victims) who act with Old Testament and Classical Greek mythology temper—vain, reckless, endlessly desiring, full of blunt purpose. They appear to die, they revive, miracles are performed, terrible crimes are perpetrated, parents lose children who return as strangers, never known or acknowledged. This is not a monotheistic Bible, rather a polytheism of moral tests and possibilities, and despite the presence of priests, religious faith is not a central concern, rather everything that religion would have us put aside or sublimate, rather the beginnings of religion in those repressions, of civilisations and their discontents.

It is impossible to do justice to the scale of this work, to the many overlapping stories and generations of characters. It is grim, full of frightening synchronicities and inevitabilities (which Mrs Gollancz sometimes foresees) as well as many moments of wild humour. This sometimes disparate work is held together not only by its thematic intensity and the return of characters thought dead or missing, by lines of descent, but also by the immortality of Mrs Gollancz and the Priest, and brilliant and tenacious performances from all the players. The ease with which they handle Barker's rich language and intense psychological demands is testament to the benefits of continuous work with the writer's plays by both companies. Mary Moore's design, Michael Smetanin's sinuous score (played live by a small ensemble of cello, oboe, percussion) with its nervous melancholy and ironic jauntiness,

and the endlessly inventive Barker-Maddock direction make for one of the great festival experiences. You have to surrender yourself to this work, knowing not every moment will have meaning, that the accumulation of moments will eventually add up, that like listening to a great symphony there will be passages that will wash over you, pass you untouched, but that you will find your place again, and that it will become a kind of ecstasy, entry to a world you wouldn't want to live in, but which thrills and stays with and haunts you, because it demands you think and feel anew.

The opposites of dance

Erin Brannigan

Pour Antigone

Mathilde Monnier

Playhouse, March 3

Monnier's *Pour Antigone* drops us into a strange in-between world. Primarily, we are between cultures and their ways of moving—the swinging and pulsing rhythms of African dance and the comparatively fastidious body-of-units of postmodern dance. But more immediately than that, it is the theatrical space that seems to allow for the possibility of such a meeting; a place framed by corrugated iron panels that conceal and reveal, diffused light bouncing off the suspended white sail that recreates the quality of phases of the day, undefined landscapes, continents, opening the stage space out through a light that is constantly changing. It seems as if anything can happen here and possibly will.

The discrete ways of moving find common ground in the light-space created, the contemporary performance space. That sounds like something big is happening...it felt like it was...one world provided the context and another, mainly this other, provided a means. *Pour Antigone* opens with 2 African women sitting at diagonally opposite ends of the strange, open, minimal performance space, a hard focus isolating the performers whose singing and dancing I wanted to be amongst, feeling a compulsion to relieve them somehow.

African aesthetics and form continue to dominate sound, movement, colour, voice—I looked for it too, as you look for the thing that makes a difference, is different from what you expect, this time, from contemporary dance.

Percussionist Zani Diabaté is an influential presence and scuttles around the stage, down to my corner, making eye contact with me that hits me like his bullet-beats on the drums that make me blink. The African women's crunching bodies beat with the same effect, necks and spines cracking back and forth, hair and arms flying. Their post-modern counterparts create neat patterns—heel, heel, step, step with echoes of the flying arms and heads on top, now in phrases modified, repeated, varied, 'built-up'...

This is all so beautifully and improbably pulled together. Where one moment the Africans fill a square of light that barely contains them and are pushed out by the rigid and tight progression of the

'others'; later the men join together in full flight, hurling themselves off the floor where they lie flat, throwing each other around.

The Sophoclean tragedy peeps through; toy soldiers cut across the chaos only to become Diabaté's percussive toys; a man in a shroud moves across stage as if fighting the effects of rigor mortis, teetering on bound toes in spasmodic arches—an aberration of movement amongst the flow on stage. But then again, every new activity arrives unannounced in this strange light-space—the high leaps of the man in the too-small-suit who is driven to dance by Diabaté's skills, the man in the skirt who man-handles the other, the upside-down girl who mumbles in the negative in response to the tall man carrying her, the girl in red slipping through the action unseen.

On the great philosopher NIKE

Gail Priest

Birdbrain (a work in progress)

Australian Dance Theatre

& Garry Stewart

Balcony Theatre, March 2

Shirtologie

Jerome Bel

The Club, March 3

Who is Tommy Hilfiger? What does he think? Who does he vote for? Has he read Nietzsche? Is he kind to kids and animals? Why are millions of people around the world paying good money to walk around promoting him? Is it possible that this is stage 1 in a plan for world domination or just that there are a lot of people who don't ever

think about the meanings and implications of the words that are stretched across their breasts? In response to late 20th century branding fever, 2 works in this festival use the T-shirt as a focal medium.

Shirtologie is a work that is being performed at The Club on the Festival Plaza. Following the exuberant Warumpi Band, French choreographer Jerome Bel stands centre stage, head down, wearing around 20 T-shirts which he silently removes one by one, showing us the logos written on them. It takes a while to work out the common thread. They are all T-shirts with numbers, and he is counting down. Missing a few numbers, he makes the most of what he's got, bending over to make a 9 into 6. It's about as minimal as you can get. He finally gets down to his naked torso, exciting the club punters no end, only to put a T-shirt back on which depicts the internal organs of the body. In his second piece, he is miked, wearing a shirt with an excerpt of the score of a popular classic which he sings to us note by note. Obeying the shirt's command to 'Dance or die' he sings the tune again and dances for us. The next shirt commands 'Replay' (to vehement dissention from some of the crowd), the next 'Shut up and Dance' prompting the silent dancing version. It is a work that is so simple yet so incisive. And to see it performed in a club atmosphere gives it an extra charge.

The use of the T-shirt as a medium for meaning is also utilised in Garry Stewart & ADT's *Birdbrain*. In an attempt to deconstruct *Swan Lake*, the dancers wear a multitude of

white T-shirts with character names and plot points—'corps', 'swan', 'Odette', 'Siegfried', 'romance', 'impending doom', that are supposed to orient you within the work. The device has some gently ironic moments—two dancers enter with T-shirts saying 'peasant joy' or 'the story so far'—and though it does assist in breaking down the thematics of the piece it is sometimes a bit too obvious, too twee, especially in the drowning scene.

The strength of *Birdbrain* lies in its multimedia and performative moments. Just as I was beginning to despair that multimedia could only ever be used as a projected backdrop, Tim Gruchy provided one of the finest moments of truly integrated multimedia. Through the projection of a ballerina in a typical *Swan Lake* costume and pose, we see two of the male dancers performing fencing moves. One of the fencers is defeated and as he begins to die, the projection starts to zoom in on the ballerina's eye until the magnified white of the image blots out the dying dancer and we spy the victor through the part of the screen that is the black of the eye. This device creates a fabulous sense of movement and depth unattainable through dance or video in isolation.

The performative moments in *Birdbrain* allow for some respite from the frenetically mechanistic style of the dancing. The super bendy Craig Proctor scoots across the stage, one leg permanently behind his head, and performs meditative yogic poses of breathtaking strength and flexibility. An elegant male dancer dressed as an Edwardian school teacher shoots arrows across the room into a huge

heart covered in white feathers. The beauty is in the simplicity—the weight transferences of the archer mirrored by his attendants, the wry grin on the archer's face, little tufts of feathers detaching and floating through the air. Amongst the slam bam convulsive choreography and the effectively relentless if not a little monotextural sound of Jad Mcadam, these moments create a deeper and subtler level of meaning than slogans on T-shirts can offer. It would be great to see moments like this expanded, allowing for more integration of dance and theatre.

A theory: perhaps all the hoo-ha about technology and the information age is misguided, perhaps the greatest tool for communication is as analogue as a bit of polycotton blend and an overlocker. The greater meanings behind the Tommy Hilfiger slogan may elude us, but NIKE distils centuries of Zen into 3 little words to inspire the universe, 'Just do it!' Maybe an even more encompassing philosophy that can assist us as we view the anomalies of life and art is the one posited by Teresa Crea (in Playworks' *Writing Around Corners* forum, March 4) justifying the use of technology in theatre making—"It just is." I'd buy that T-shirt.

Art in the age of mechanical production

Peter Eckersall

Mizumachi

Ishinha

Torrens Parade Ground, March 2

At the first weekend of the Adelaide Festival one sees a preoccupation with water and/in set design as a performance modality in its own right. Louis Andriessen and Peter

Greenaway's *Writing to Vermeer*, Theatre Kantanka's *The Eye* and Ishinha's *Mizumachi* (Water City) are three examples of works opening the festival that exhibit massive technical and mechanical feats of production. A whole visual dynamics of stage design and mechanisms that would make Piscator proud are on display and actors' bodies and narrative are straining to keep up with the pace.

One reading of Ishinha's epic scale history of early modern Osaka, as seen through the eyes of recent immigrant labourers from the Ryukyu Islands (Okinawa) and Korea, is of a theatre wherein the dystopian aesthetics of industrial capitalism (symbolic of a political critique of modernity) are the primary organising elements of production.

Ishinha was established by Matsumoto Yukichi and others in 1970; since the 1980s they have specialised in large scale outdoor works featuring huge constructions, human powered stage machinery and large casts of young performers. *Mizumachi* is no exception. A huge pool of water built on the Torrens Parade Ground contains 3 and sometimes 4 paths along which modules containing shanty towns, belching industrial smoke stacks, and barges are pushed by a bevy of worker-like actors and technicians. The opening scene depicts an Industrial exposition held in Osaka in 1905 where some booths contained 'real' people seemingly transported from their everyday life into the anthropological theatrics of early modern voyeuristic museum and exhibition culture. The scale of the Adelaide performance takes its

cue from these environmental replications. The supposed euphoria of Japanese modernity, symbolised by Japan's victory in the Russo-Japan war of 1903-5 which the exhibition celebrates, is contrasted in the next scene with the daily lives of immigrant labourers in the water-town. These are young men and women (*Shonen* and *Shojo*) carting coal and other industrial consumables, living and working on the fringes of capitalism's ascendancy.

Also in this scene the character of Takeru is introduced; the young man who rescues Kana when she falls into the Osaka canal. This is a supernatural or mythological reference. In the ancient chronicles of Japan, the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shiki* Takeru is a prince dispossessed by his father the emperor, who is jealous of his son's increasing power. As with many celebrated figures from Japanese classical history, Takeru is a melancholy anti-hero exemplifying what classical Japanese scholar Ivan Morris calls "the nobility of failure". Takeru died alone in the Eastern provinces of Japan. This perhaps suggests a commentary on Japan's decline from industrial capitalism into military colonialism, the ultimate failure of Japan's colonisation project in the East. In *Mizumachi*, Takeru seems to be an ambivalent figure; a kind of hero helping those in need but unaware of Japan's spiral into the Armageddon-like images of war and catastrophe that dominate the landscape of many of the later scenes.

Jan Jan Opera is the self styled performance aesthetic of *Mizumachi*, a style that can be traced to Ishinha's 1991 production of *Jan Jan Opera: Shonengai* (Jan Jan Opera: young

ishinha's *Mizumachi*

men). This is not a traditional Japanese performance aesthetic. As the highly regarded Japanese critics Senda Akihiko and Ozasa Yoshio noted in the Playworks seminar presentation at the festival, Jan Jan Opera is unique. A combination of Osaka dialect and dialect mixed-in from other regions forms the basis of a kind of patois, cleverly compared to rap music by Ozasa (which is a popular subcultural form of expression among young Japanese). Matusmoto's texts are in any case quite abstract, often comprising lists of objects, place names or commodities associated with a particular era, location or event. These are rhythmically scored and spoken in chorus. Repetitious and mechanical choreography is also characteristic of the form, as is a kind of industrial strength mutant characterisation. In *Mizumachi* nightmarish over-

ripe pregnant girls, crowds of drunken gangs with sake bottles wrapped around their heads, and decayed pseudo-Victorians promenading replay in my mind as a kind of mutant Takarakuza.

The final scenes of *Mizumachi* depict Japan's destruction and post-war reconstruction. Unlike Sondheim's bathetic and paranoid concluding song 'Next' in his *Pacific Overtures*, however, there is nothing driving or relentless about Japan's post-war progression in this piece. Rather an ambience of melancholy permeates the by now waterlogged mechanics of the set. In the final scene, the stage is suddenly still and Takeru stands alone, holding a model battleship, looking back at the past. Fleeting images of characters from the previous scenes float before him. This is an empty

and vacuous nostalgia. Perhaps it is a moment and a history lost to the disruptive and incomplete project of modernity.

Paranoid dancing

Keith Gallasch

Dance of Death

State Theatre South Australia/Bell

Shakespeare Company

Royalty Theatre, March 1

The heat is on. My first festival outing. I go to see some dirty dancing—a famous theatrical stoush, obscene though without obscenities. An ugly dance of calculated insults, petty threats, crude philosophising and sundry cruelties executed with casual finesse by a long-married couple—an army captain and his wife, a former actress—living in the tower of a small Baltic fortress island. Mutual paranoia is amplified by their social isolation on

the island and in the wider world—they have turned against their children, against each other's families, against the community. But Edgar and Alice do have each other, and the fundamental asymmetry of their relationship has solidified into ritual, a dance of rhetorical gesturing for partners, for the most part, of equal strength. He leads. She leads. You slip into their rhythms as you become familiar with the tactics, the recurrent jabs and thrusts, vicious claims and counter-claims, sudden withdrawals and deft topic shifts. This is more than a dance, it is a contest, but although one of them might win a bout, it's only ever a provisional victory, for there can be no winner in this Inferno of self-righteousness, only the joint maintenance of a pathology.

Like the protagonists of Howard Barker's *The Ecstatic Bible*, this pair seem doomed to be locked into a cruel immortality—"It was our destiny to torment each other."

However, in Strindberg's narrative their condition is reaching critical mass—servants have quit, there is no food, Edgar is seriously unwell and, with a barrage of cruel lies, he drives Alice into infidelity with an old friend, and almost demolishes what is left of his career. He destroys the rhythms of the dance. It falls apart—the shared hatred and cruelty is no longer rhetorical. Edgar has gone too far this time. However, in their rejection of Kurt (William Zappa cowed in a striking stage image like Blake's Nebuchadnezzar, his hard-won sense of goodness eradicated), Edgar and Alice reunite, alert to their condition ("Have we tormented each other enough?"). But, as they shuffle about, in a slow dance of embrace, they seem doomed to perpetuate their condition because they do not

understand anything but its symptoms. Worse, it's Edgar who gets the last word, Edgar who first partnered the young Alice into this dance of the living dead, Edgar who so pompously and blindly declares his ability to blot out the past, to forgive, Edgar whose death will be the only way to end this dance. The attacks of torpor, the stroke-like seizures he suffers already point in that direction although they are countered by manic dances with his sabre (with Alice on tambour—a pity she's not on piano playing *The Dance of the Boyars* as Strindberg directed, though these things are not always manageable).

Roger Pulvers directed a memorable, larger-than-life Sam Shephard trilogy for the 1982 Adelaide Festival. It attracted large audiences and generated debate about how to do Shephard. Its deliberate rhythms, calculated verbal delivery and expressionist edge in design and ambience were something I'd hoped to see invested in Strindberg, after all *The Dance of Death* and *A Dream Play* were written a mere year apart.

However, this *Dance of Death* is, for the most part, languorously naturalistic, short on the heightening that should make it dance. Edgar and Alice are simply too comfortable with each other, the rhythms and strategies of their mutual entrapment barely addressed, the moments of dancing on the edge insufficiently choreographed. John Bell is perfectly cast as the marvellously obtuse, strutting Edgar who has the capacity to really frighten—the emotional vampire Strindberg saw him as. But his Alice (Anna Volska), however finely played, is not his match, not his true partner, the dancing never gets dirty.

Friedrich Dürrenmatt gutted *The Dance of Death* in his *Play Strindberg*, "a comedy about bourgeois marriage tragedies", making it an altogether different play, but reinscribing on the stage the savagery and the pathos (rather than the 'tragedy') of the original—something you hope for from any production of this rarely seen work, even if it requires taking liberties. Pulvers' strategy appears to be to move by degrees from a straightforward naturalism into a subjective and expressionist nightmare. The first sign is a kind of scenic overlap when characters enter a scene to hear offensive things said about them (that we usually assume they don't hear), and then step into the action. It amplifies the sense of paranoia. Arrivals are increasingly signalled by what sounds like something kicked over and rattling across the floor—we hear it, the characters onstage don't. It's a curious kind of Alienation Effect that signals Entrance and Episode, the work's formality nervily underlined at the same time as the hysteria increases. When Edgar returns from a jaunt, instead of simply appearing ghost-like, as everyone does through the weave of Jenny Tait's tower wall (thin weighted strips, sometimes criss-crossed with a web of imprisoning lighting), a tall, quite unexpected column of golden light opens up to reveal him in full military dress, a vision of power, a prelude to the appalling power he is about to unleash. When Kurt embraces Alice, he steps behind the strips, as if reaching through a wall to touch her breasts; she cries out, the light jerks to yellow, Kurt lunges across the stage and, hands either side of his head, is locked into a Munch tableau. Shortly, abject at Alice's feet, he unnerves us with his bewildered

and shamed Nebuchadnezzar stare. The potency of these images and devices is considerable, but they are so at odds with the (under)playing of the ritual life of Edgar and Alice and Kurt's absorption into it, and its rupturing, that the wholeness of Pulvers' vision is in doubt. It's an awkward dance.

Break-neck b-boy action

Kirsten Krauth

Cool Heat, Urban Beat

Rennie Harris PureMovement, Herbin "Tamango" Van Cayseele, Urban Tap Her Majesty's Theatre, March 3

A well oiled audience walks into the theatre to the funky fat beats and sublime scratch-scratch-scratching of DJ Mizery, playing James-Brown-Aretha-Kool before launching into *Cool Heat Urban Beat*, an irrepressible celebration of African/American and Latin rhythms, smooth moves and street style, in combo with Brazilian percussion, tap, body-defying head spins and a slapdash of vaudeville. More a string of standoffs and showdowns than an integrated performance work, *Cool Heat* manages a fusion of usually disparate dance and instrumental elements with charismatic performers turning themselves inside-out and working outside-in to an uncharacteristically raucous and responsive crowd.

Mr Yellow walks onto the stage and stands in a tray of sand. He bends and grabs handfuls, letting it run through his splayed fingers. He slowly moves his shoes, grinding, like eating dirt, gristling, crunching like broken glass, hard as gravel, an auditory delight as explosive as biting into a Violent Crumble bar. I'd be happy watching and listening to his feet for the remaining hour and a half...

Mr Blue walks onto the stage in a headdress and mask, rasta dreds. He hands over an instrument.

Didgeridoo. A man in red shirt with long sleeves dangling and beads strangling, hovers and lurches, tapping, off kilter, feet so fast his head, and mine, rush to catch up. Live DJ blends with elaborate percussion, the musician in an installation of swinging gold and drums, a corner stage of his own. Different styles ebb and flow, samba turns to mambo, diverted to sampled funk, rerouted to Brazilian drumming...

Mr Red walks onto the stage in a black bowler hat. He moves in right angles, flipping his hat and toes, body moving as if the music is unexpected; rhythm from the inside out. He runs full pelt for a train but he's on the same spot. Who's that in the leather and tassels? Mr Black: part Village People, part martial artist. Self applause and body percussion—disconnected, ahhs, sighs, moans, beeps—his witty and lined face like a Ken Loach hero...

Mr Green walks onto the stage, part of a contemporary corroboree, attitude is everything, finger behind the ear, demanding audience applause. Slow curving handstands and keepings off from the floor, twirling on tops of heads and sliding upsidedown, urban cowboys playing the field and cuban grrrls letting loose, awkward teenage limbs and Fat Albert stoops and slouches.

A well oiled audience walks out of the theatre. We've been given a box of Smarties and eaten them all in one go. Colours swirl in my mouth, textures twirl on my tongue. Sampling is art. Taste it.

Not yet but soon

Virginia Baxter

Ochre & Dust

Auditorium, Art Gallery of SA, Saturday March 4

At the conclusion of *Ochre and Dust*, artist and food writer Dorinda Hafner, sitting next to me, observes that African children are sent to sleep with stories that scare the pants off them so they won't get out of bed while Caucasians are lulled safely into becalmed sleep. Aboriginal children, we decide, must enter their dreamworld with strong reminders of place.

We know this from the opening moments of *Ochre and Dust* when one of the women relates a story of kinship told to children, using gum leaves spread out in the sand—"the young girls sleep here, these 2 leaves are a married couple, a mob of young blokes, here are the old men..." So begins this "performance" by Nura Ward and Nelly Patterson within an "installation" by Fiona Foley—a striking stage incorporating a large central mound of red earth upon which Nura and Nelly mostly sit and tell their stories. Alongside is a scatter of shiny white bone-like sculptures and behind them a set of 5 elliptical screens projecting Heidrun Löhr's atmospheric photographs of the central desert (many in black and white subvert the postcard familiarity of locations like Uluru). The power of the women's story of enforced departure and fragmentation in the community of Maralinga holds us in thrall with its spare telling in Pitjantjatjara language. The women speak in turn ("I'll let this lady speak now") tapping lightly at the earth with spindly sticks. They speak softly and seriously and sing



Ochre & Dust

Nelly Patterson and Aku Kadogo photo: Heidrun Löhr

with sadness about a community disabled by one thieving act that saw families split, relocated in country for which they had no language.

I feel privileged in the company of these powerful women—one a senior law woman, the other a health worker. The stories are “translated” by Aboriginal education worker Ruth Anangka who uses her cheekily engaging presence to create a smooth, conversational flow. In this process we miss the precision of the women’s speech some of which appears verbatim in the program: “I am teaching all the children story. Big story. Big culture. I tell him true!” says Nelly Patterson. This

absence is more than filled by the rare opportunity to hear the mouth music of Pitjantjatjara.

Aku Kadogo has directed this piece but more particularly she and her collaborators have undertaken to follow a line of association with these women over time. This particular stage of the collaboration seems to have been comparatively short—only a matter of weeks, all of them following their noses to see where the idea would take them. “We turned the Pitjantjatjara word ‘kurwaripa’ (not yet but soon) into our motto” says Aku. As with a lot of contemporary performance, labelling the work presents particular challenges. Is this

a “performance” or a “gift” (as one colleague observed). And venues seem inadequate to deal with the requirements of some forms. It feels odd to experience the intimacy of this telling from the straight-backed distance of raked auditorium seating. There’s a muffled mmm sound in the audience reflecting a desire to be closer. Maybe it’s time for more artists to turn their hands to architecture. At the beginning of *Ochre and Dust*, Ruth Anangka asks us to close our eyes as the women make their entrance. It’s such a vast improvement on the stage blackout, I wondered if we put our minds to it, what else we might be able to dream up.



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Editors: Keith Gallasch,
Virginia Baxter
Assitant Editor: Kirsten Krauth
Layout: Gail Priest
Online Editor: Kirsten Krauth
Video Production: Damon Girbon

We welcome your responses.
email: opencity@rtimearts.com
mob: 0410 664 549

RealTime
(02) 9283 2723
PO Box A2246
Sydney South NSW 1235
opencity@rtimearts.com

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