

RealTime *late edition*



The Theft of Sita

Sita triumphant **Keith Gallasch**

The Theft of Sita
Botanic Park, March 15

Am I turning into an arts version of Norman May? By midnight March 15 I felt like yelling "Gold! Gold! Gold! 2 Golds for Australia!" For over two weeks there has been considerable pressure on new Australian works to rival established overseas works or to at least reach the levels of expectation that Robyn Archer had shown in committing herself to them through commissions and programming. I saw *The Theft of Sita* (a collaboration between Australian and Indonesian artists led by Nigel Jamieson) and Elision ensemble's *Yuè Ling Jié* on the same night. For both, I sat beneath the stars in Adelaide parks. Both are ambitious music theatre works by significant Australian composers, both with strong, inventive directors. Both are richly cross cultural collaborations. Both seem to me, a few misgivings aside, destined for great success.

The setting for *The Theft of Sita* is in a triangle of three huge trees in Botanic Park framing the stage, and lit in such a way, whether intentional or not, as to quietly evoke an Indonesian rain forest. When the performance begins, the musicians play what sounds like a traditional Indonesian composition, but scored for trombone and other western instruments as well as eastern instruments without ever losing the sense of what they are working with. This is the beginning of a dramatic interplay between musical cultures. Sitting forward of them on the floor of the stage are a group of men and a woman, similarly costumed to the musicians in deep blues and traditional caps. One lights a fire, illuminating a screen that suddenly appears behind them and behind the orchestra, casting the shadows of these puppeteers and the first Wayang Kulit puppets that they will expertly manipulate for the rest of the performance. Shortly a small screen is hoisted between them and us, and soon, dropping the full width of the stage, a giant screen on which most of the action will take place.

This series of 'screenings' is a seductive passage into an ancient form, allowing the audience to take in the musicians and puppeteers, establishing the conventions for a western audience. The transparency of the forward screen also means that from time to time you can see the artists at work behind it, or a ghostly action takes place—a Suharto figure conjuring a glassy skyscraper. And occasionally it disappears and the small screen reappears for a specific episode, or a whole cut-out city appears, glowing across the stage. There is a sense of endless transformation and perpetual inventiveness that comes from the interplay and coalescence of musics, the shifting frames of the action, and especially the genius of the puppetry supported by computer and graphic animation. The puppetry too operates in traditional and modern forms, Wayang Kulit gods and clowns from *The Ramayana* side by side with surreal guitar-cows farting musical notes and rain-forest-devouring monsters collaged from factories, cranes and industrial jaws.

The detail and volume of action in the puppetry is sometimes astonishing, especially in the early sequence that delineates the world of Sita, Goddess of nature, spouse of the god Rama. In a simple projected cut-out shadow landscape, an hilarious version of the cycle of life is played out with creatures as small as a mosquito, a rabbit and then a duck deftly moving through a dangerous world of a rhinoceros, a sinuous tiger and an enormous crocodile. As well as representing Sita's ordered, if tough world it is also virtually a parody of TV nature documentaries, with various genital sniffings, rampant humpings, sometimes across species, and cartoony escapes.

One of the most stunning of scenes is the battle between Rawanna (a traditional puppet) and the mythical bird Jataya (a more complex, curiously 3-dimensional puppet) in the latter's failed attempt to rescue Sita.

One of the many pleasures of the *The Theft of Sita* is that Paul Grabowsky and I Wayan Gde Yudane's music exists in its own right but also marvellously as a dramatic score faultlessly synchronised with the on-screen action, often with an animated cartoon intensity and virtuosity. It's funny sometimes, explosive at others as we pass from the old world of *The Ramayana* to modern, industrial, polluted, dictatorial and then revolutionary modern Indonesian. *The Ramayana* though is never forgotten, its tale of Sita abducted by the evil Rawanna, the consequent battle and Sita's rescue is used allegorically to suggest the promise of democracy. and the return of a natural order—nature potentially rescued from developers. The seriousness of the issues is embodied in the projection of the work of Indonesian photographers capturing the recent political revolution, and metaphysically in the interpolated texts sung by Shelley Scown (sometimes lucidly and always beautifully but in her upper reaches quite unintelligibly).

Although the narrative force of *The Theft of Sita* slows and drops riskily away as the comic father and son supporters of Rama head to the modern city, and more broadly visual components take over (with heavy duty musical support), and although Sita and Rama become less and less interesting and minor to the plot (until the final battle with Rawanna), nonetheless, despite the

need for some serious editing, the work continues to engage. For all its seriousness *The Theft of Sita* is a work of good humour. One of the funniest scenes has father and son in a valley caught in the path of white water rafters, a golfer and, suddenly, a surfer ahead of a massive wave. Father and son help the local villagers deprived of water for irrigation (the water's needed for the rafters) by blocking the river—the black and white valley fills with colour as life is restored. This is an exceptional festival production filled with talent, adventurous music (I'm sure many of the audience would be surprised by it if they heard it outside of the performance), brilliant puppeteering (in the making and the performing) and fine direction.

A true feast

Keith Gallasch

Yuè Lìng Jié

Elision New Music Ensemble
River Torrens, March 15

The cool night air is filled with sweet, swirling incense from giant joss sticks. Vertical, pink fluorescent light tubes line the path to the ritual site of *Yuè Lìng Jié*—Moon Spirit Feasting—where we sit on a grassy slope peering into the night at a barge on the River Torrens with a darkened stage and waiting musicians dressed in yellow like temple attendants. A delicate, reflective, sometimes gently soaring Er-hu solo (played by Yan Jiemin and composed by A Bing), provides the meditative calm before *Yuè Lìng Jié* erupts into being and a triumphant first performance.

The fictional occasion is the Chinese Hungry Ghost Festival, "an annual month-long festival during which the Gates of Hell are opened and ghosts and spirits roam freely upon the earth" (program note). At the top of the slope, behind us, a table is elaborately set for a meal, and a fire burns in a large brass pot. The table and the stage below are where the ghosts of abandoned spirits—"with no descendants to look after or feed them"—will be entertained and feasted.

Before us a title appears on the black curtain—*Invocation*. White fluorescent lights framing the stage inside and out flicker. Behind us, above the table, a priest in yellow robes etched with other colours and rich beading, his wide hat and full sleeves embracing the night, appears to release the

spirits who are to be succoured—with an opera of magnificent excess. Soon, storytelling and spectacle flood from the tiny stage. Dorotka Sapinska's set (with director Michael Kantor's lighting) is framed by 2 flickering dragon poles and is entered via a path running down the slope linking the feast table to the stage, an avenue on which the Queen Mother of the West and the Monkey King travel, tumble and wrestle. Melissa Madden Gray and Orren Tanabe as this pair of competing narrators (and other characters) are magnificent, physically deft and vocally powerful, shifting from falsetto to guttural exclamation with ease and great humour, evoking both traditional Chinese opera and a show-biz contemporary, given extra edge by the Queen's glittering, high-heeled, red-wigged, high-feathered, leggy showgirl costume. Composer Liza Lim has excelled herself with a marvellous sense of theatricality (matched and amplified by Kantor's direction and Sapinska's design), evoking a world that is both funny and very scary (especially in the "Ghost-Feeding" scene), but also sad in the soaring beauty of Chang-O's final song, presumably about her isolation and immortality on the moon. Deborah Kayser plays Chang-O, the Moon Goddess, with commitment and a fine soaring voice, but also with deep growls and sharp snarls when required. She is, however, less intelligible than the other performers, her attention to consonants appears minimal—perhaps sometimes to do with the demands of the writing.

Chang-O's story rests inside the framework of the Hungry Ghost Festival; it is a wild, cosmological, sexy entertainment. She is a mythical figure who stole the Herb of Immortality from her husband, an heroic archer who had won it. She consumes it, flees her husband to the moon, and coughs up the herb casing, which turns into a rabbit with whom she shares her cold palace, before being turned into a toad. This opera draws on several versions of the story and takes plenty of liberties with it. It's not easy to follow with 2 narrators, doublings and the demands of the instrumental music on the voices. Even the clear voices of the Queen Mother of the West and the Monkey King get lost from time to time, most irritatingly during the 2 riddles they pose. Given the mix of English, colloquial Malay-English, Mandarin and Cantonese, surtitles seem a must and would surely be

used inventively by such a creative team. What we hear of Beth Yahp's libretto, witty, raw and ethereal, suggests that it deserves more of our attention than we are allowed.

That aside, *Yuè Lìng Jié* is always so inventive, so funny, frightening and sublimely excessive that it never loses our attention. Composer Lim, librettist Yahp and director Kantor have fused old East and new East, and East and West into a riveting hybrid whole.

There are many striking and sometimes provocative scenes as the plight of Chang-O unfolds. For example, she disappears into her huge rabbit companion, which then coughs up a red box (presumably containing the life force of Chang-O) into the hands of the priest who recites, as if driven, from a Daoist sex manual ("jade stems", "5 times in this time, 8 next...2 very deep" etc). Nearby a near naked woman (Gray again) performs the sexual response, rubbing herself against a green fluorescent light pole, pleasuring herself too with a masturbatory device and doing some odd things with ping pong balls. Although I'm not sure how to read this, it is most likely to do with Chang-O's repressed sexuality in her frozen moon state (shades of Janacek's opera *The Makropoulos Affair* with its female immortal and, in another way, the restless sexuality of the immortal Mrs Gollancz in *The Ecstatic Bible*). This sexual excess recurs when a ghost appears riding a huge tongue (earlier Chang-O's tongue had been pulled the length of the stage!). This frustrated spirit, clothed in transparent plastic, emits an otherworldly rustling (a piece of her costume torn off and crumpled and brushed against her head microphone) echoed by the whole orchestra in one of several heightened sonic moments. Another is the huge whistling that invades you with cicada-like intensity when Chang-O returns to the moon in the end.

There is too much to say and celebrate about Elision new music ensemble's *Yuè Lìng Jié* here, and doubtless more if I had a libretto to hand. What is clear is that *Yuè Lìng Jié* is a major work adding new dimensions musically, theatrically and culturally to Australian music theatre. Let's hope that it stays in the Elision repertoire and plays many more festivals.

One gets to the next slightly

Linda Marie Walker

Fase

Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker & Rosas
Festival Theatre, March 14

Fase (Phase): four movements to the music of Steve Reich. A work 18 years old and performed only once at this festival by the choreographer, Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker, and Michèle Anne De Mey. A tense work, tiring to watch, in its nowhere-to-hide—precise repetitive small moves—style. Tiring because of its relentless repetition, its going over the same movement again and again, not to 'teach' you but to insist on its language—as Reich insists on the minimal (often hard) structure of his music. After a while you begin to doubt your understanding of what is exactly there, as one does after looking at a word for an extended time (said George).

The beauty and excitement of *Fase* is its making of 4 spatial scenes, as if space is produced incrementally, as if it is always (in the end) in the moving-body. There is little to look at, except the height and width of the stage, and light—and the difficult pleasure of bodies performing for the sake of dance—not for the telling of a story with dance. Dance for dance, the dance of dance.

The pleasure is dance itself, or a particular type of dance which 'builds' a world by geometric and sensual fragments. A spatial pleasure which opens up inside one, a presence which is personal and startling (as one returns from some stray thought to find the dancers still there, dancing in one's absence): "Taken to its extreme, the pleasure of space leans towards the poetics of the unconscious, to the edge of madness." (Bernard Tschumi)

The relationship between De Keersmaecker's choreography and the music is close without being illustrative or subservient. There's a similar strength, like a holding pattern, in both forms; they leave each other alone. This I liked, as it assisted the time (timing, as beat, rhythm) of the space-becoming (becoming an experience of strange-fates, of fateful-events). The body was machinic, yet couldn't become robotic, it stayed too human, slightly off-balance now and then, enough to draw one's attention to effort, work,

and 'now'. Within deliberate repetition is the dilemma of habit, or a naming of habit, as the effects of our own time alive surface, like a scent: is this how my living looks, arms flailing, head snapping, and sudden repose, like a tiny interlude of almost-sleep, then frantic action again (while sitting in a chair) doesn't matter, up, down, same constant arrival 'nowhere' (or slightly over there): arrival takes its time, a long time, and then it's over, all is changed. In real time, black stage, a few words projected large: 'VIOLIN PHASE', for instance.

Violin Phase, the third movement, is a solo work. A circle of light on the stage, the dancer's domain. A circling, lyrical, phase, which edged toward abandon, only to withdraw, and fade, a kind of promise which was never going to be fulfilled. The light constant, keeping movement safe.

The final phase: *Clapping Music*. The sound of hands beating together, and primarily danced by the feet. The feet clapping the floor, the bodies slowly moving toward the 2 suspended lights from the second phase (*Come Out*). Arriving there just in time for the end of the music. Phase 4 reaching back to remember phase 2 (which was all arms). These unannounced symmetries laying quietly beneath appearances, like grammar. There were others. Like the use of light as set—the stage fully lit for the first movement (and spot-lit to make the merged shadows sharp), then moving with the dancers to the front of the stage (and back again); the rectangle of light in phase 4 a counter to the circle in phase 3. The constant use of arms in the first 3 phases, completely subdued in phase 4. Making the body appear much more hinged (making balance look like falling, and bringing the arms to the fore retrospectively).

Arrangements, like words, are orders. We arrange words, produce habits. Often with repetition we are displaced, out of our element, uncomfortable—excessive repetition is a way to make an outside (when despair turns silent, we are not happier, it's just the beginning; noise is breathing, that sort of thing). Being out of one's element is to recall the fact of inhabiting, we see the outside, newly arranged, and we are juxtaposed, instead of harmonised. So, we are alone, peeled off from habit-world, outside the inside of a moment.

In some way *Fase* was dance on the outside of an imagined inside, and to see it we had to come outside too, adrift. And, it might be that there wasn't even an inside, imagined or real.

The 4 phases looked like this to me: *Piano Phase*. Dance For Plains (for the plains of Gerald Murnane: "And then word came that the plains had settled for peach."); *Come Out*. Dance For Waiting (for the men of Maurice Blanchot's infinite conversation: "This is a sentence of a somewhat enigmatic turn."); *Violin Phase*. Dance For Round Things (for the things of Jean-Luc Nancy: "One and one and one."); *Clapping Music*. Dance For Artists (for the music of John Cage: "One more idea and then I am through."). The End.

Neverending stories

Kirsten Krauth

BIG hART Works

Care Park, March 13

Odyssey

Opera Studio, March 15

BIG hART has been operating for 10 years, working with marginalised groups (young, Indigenous and aged citizens) with a focus on rural communities, to develop programs which "re-engage people with their communities, restore young lives, re-unite families and rekindle spirit." Each performance comes out of a series of workshops where participants write down their stories, using film, theatre, poetry, visual arts and music, to work through crises. Performances have included the Domestic Violence project in SW Tasmania, the Self Harm Prevention project which toured schools in the Riverina, and the show I have just seen which concentrates on "cruelty, beauty and isolation seen through young eyes." It is a heady journey, full of pain and despair, the finer details you are frightened to know, 2 and a half hours of unrelenting brutality.

Care Park in Moore Street is set up with beds for homeless people to sleep on, a bridge between the audience and performers. As you walk in, digital camera operators track you down, filming your faces, zooming in close when you know it, and when you don't, later relaying your image on a number of large screens so you are confronted by yourself. It is an awkward moment. The non-homeless. The theatre type. People listening always look more

self-conscious than people talking. A kid with a long boom mike runs around, shoving it over people's shoulders as they speak. At one point, performers sketch portraits of us and hand them out. This sense that you are the one under surveillance happens throughout the performance. Young people on the streets know this feeling all too well.

Odyssey is also a restoration, of migrant identity and place, where Andreas Litras revels in being in front of a large Greek audience, taking them on an in-between cultures journey that is joyous and beautifully written and embodied, full of tiny details as well as epic tales of mythology. He asks a woman in the audience to press a white button, controlling the slide show which perfectly evokes his parents' immigration to Australia. White weddings. Flares and camels. Milk bar parties. Fish'n'chips with newspaper wrapping. He repeats the question, "Are you Greek?" to audience members, taking delight in the repartee which he provokes. In the taxi ride home the narrative continues, as our young Greek cabbie Sam talks of the land he owns in the village where his family is from, his passion for Greek history and myth, and how in Greece people work like dogs for 6 months and then party for the rest. He doesn't want to see *Odyssey*. He'd "rather just go to Greece."

In *BIG hART* a boy runs on bricks. Thin legs beating time. Punishing sounds. What is he running from? As he runs, bricks are removed until he is near the floor, and then added; he becomes elevated. He runs for over half an hour, never faltering, and is gradually replaced by others, my favourite the guy who has a quick drag when he thinks no-one is looking. The *BIG hART* set is about construction, structure and support. On a layer of sand Aboriginal and Chinese dancers move through time, then the performers start building, placing bricks, walls to enclose or a house of cards, fraught but holding. A variety of narratives are introduced—"And another time, a girl..."—which snapshot the beautifully realised, lush 16mm films of the performers' lives, re-enactments so effective they initially work as documentary. The opening film has the most impact: an unforgettable black and white image of a girl drawing lines down her face (a sad portrait in contrast with La Ribot's scribbles), tracks of the ants she can feel running around inside her body. She holds a knife to her skin, unable to

make the cut, saying she's scared that if she lets them out, they'll never stop.

BIG hART revolves around portraits. Each performer has a realist painting that they present to the audience (face to face), and interact with, scrubbing out their own face or placing the canvas down gently or tossing it aside. It is a revealing moment about representation. Which do you pick? The way young people present themselves or the way others see them, encompassing a range of stereotypes the media and politicians pick up and run with: dole bludgers, gang members, junkies, violent, uncontrollable, lazy, hopeless. Projected statistics dispel these myths, in a language young people can understand—each year in Australia a high school's population of kids commits suicide—and this is just the beginning.

We were never meant to be. You and me. Shelly Atkins' exquisite vocals and massive voice underlie a sense of disconnection throughout the performance, a reaching out for family, despite the abuse. This is given another slant by a bedtime story read aloud, *The Story of Ping*, a duck looking for a place where he belongs. The stories relayed are horrific: the boy who's given a bullet to wear around his neck, a gift from his father, the violent legacy of a man who slams his wife's hands in the door; the girl who watches her father strangle her mother with a swing chain in the motel playground, her life saved only by the motel manager grabbing her before she is hanged; the girl who loves her boxing champion Dad and desperately wants him back (he has died from a stroke) despite his regular beatings of her mother and siblings. Then there are the grand-scale, caring, fragile moments: the boy whose mother wanted a baby girl and, when her daughter died shortly after childbirth, had a nervous breakdown and was unable to care for her children. This boy rarely saw his mother but the tenderness with which he describes the relationship he could have had with his sister, and his adult understanding of his mother's needs, envelops me, as he flicks through his carefully tended photo album.

Kerry Armstrong, in one of a number of cameos, takes to the stage to audition for the Role of the Mother. In a series of to-camera script sessions, she reads and re-reads the same text, a mother trying to stop her daughter running away, investing the words with little enthusiasm or emo-

tion. The performers critique her. She argues she can't make a connection and is helped by appalling soundtracks manufacturing pathos, including a live rendition by Robyn Archer. It is a clever way to highlight the difficulty of empathising with experiences not your own, and it's only when the young people on stage start to get angry, demanding her emotional response, that she gets it, to deliver a performance worthy of them. Yesterday I saw two toddlers outside the Festival Centre straying close to the road. The bus came. A woman screamed, running 20 metres to grab her straying kids, yelling that she was going to miss the bus; she hadn't noticed they were gone. She scooped them up, started running, stumbled and fell over, knocking them on the ground. Rather than checking if they were okay, or rubbing their heads, she screamed and whacked them for making her miss the bus. Perhaps auditioning for parenthood is a necessary thing.

BIG hART works and *Odyssey* are about the importance of tracing personal histories in constructing a sense of community, and a place called home, for young people, for immigrants, for the disenfranchised. Andreas, years after turning away from his background in the Australian landscape, returns to Greece where he is continually referred to as 'the Australian'; he is soon able to learn and acknowledge where he fits in. The performers in *BIG hART*—Kim Bush, Chris Callow, Leanne Curry, Renae Dreyton, Lewis Ellis, Emma Farndale, Aaron Fox, Miranda Grigg-Makepeace, Phillip Grios, Pamela Hayden, Bob Keen, Michael Martin, Paul Mead, Jason Schatz, Melanie Smith, Karen Sturges, Aili Sun, Jamie Tustian, Zheng Xiao Wei—share their often desolate lives and work together to create an edgy and moving experience. Festival goers should alter their course to see both performances.

Complex layering

Zsuzsanna Soboslay

Drumming

Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker & Rosas

Festival Theatre, March 14

I search for images of complex sensual intensity: a ten-layer chess game, perhaps, checkmate the King with a pawn three storeys down. Or, Jupiter circled by her

nine moons, each rotating at different speeds; Jupiter herself rotating at yet another speed around the sun.

A yard of crickets chirping out of synch.

A room full of ticking clocks, each winding a different beat through time. Imagine! the sound of time, both pushing and stalling, in this room, as if each citizen in New York knew what people in Sydney felt, even while they slept. Add a street sweeper in Seville, his broom hiccuping on cobblestone. This is a kind of world-listening, like the angels in *Wings of Desire* hearing the thoughts of readers in the library.

I have a strange condition no doctor can describe. If I sit in proximity to someone's body, I can hear their organs chugging, their lungs respiring, veins bubbling, stomachs twisting, skin composing, decomposing, all in different rhythms, and at the same time. It is quite exquisite, like hearing a microcosmic music of the spheres. It helps if there's a good deal of external quiet—no one hard machinic rhythm hammering its insistence against my skin. The other things that help are 1) sleeping under stars, 2) listening to Subramanian [roll on Saturday night!], or 3) hearing Steve Reich. Reich's music utilises complex polyrhythms, and a technique called *fasing*—i.e., x number of notes in a unit, played by y number of instruments, one of which subtly increases its speed, creating a kind of crunching, scratching, or itching, quite pleasant in itself, like a simultaneous eating of hard and soft fruits. Soon, it turns over into synch again, but one note ahead, as if it's turned a wheel. In this, there is created a kind of spiral, a winding out that still somehow remains within. This is teasing, surprising, and somehow comforting, creating a translucency that my body can open into, alongside which it can perceive its own mechanics—a mirror in music to its complexity.

"[The dance's] spatial pattern does not evolve from the music," but from an "agglomeration of different logical systems"

Helmut Ploebst, describing *Drumming*

There seems no intention for the dance in *Drumming* to follow the structure of Reich's piece. This seems logical if you set out to achieve a "prototype for contemporary creativity" that lets "incompatible hypotheses" [Ploebst again] run at odds

with each other. The problem for me here is that my body receives these hypotheses in different ways, as well, and the strain of this prevents me sitting in the work.

Drumming as music teases the kind of body-fasing I've described above [and because my eyes are wired to my body-beat, they too start to look in that mode]; *Drumming* as dance asks me to look at the patterns cutting and inverting and layering in a more hard-edged way. I can see the spirals, parallels and logarithmic dissections made by the dancers; I also feel their exuberance and joy. But my eyes are given no rest from receiving the unanimity of their rhythm. There are 4 in imitation, cut across by 3. There is another circumscribing the whole group with an arcing run—but in exactly the same tempo [internal tempo, not just the fall of the feet] in which the others dance. This constancy makes me look in a way I find quite conventional compared to how I look at most other postmodern dance—perhaps even approaching Lucinda Childs, but with more pelvis, flirt-eyes and sass.

I remember hearing on radio once, a curator describing the value Indigenous Australians give to their paintings as measurable by "the quality of retinal fluttering" elicited by the work. My body understood the organicity of this response.

Drumming's oppositions leave me no such fluttering. Perhaps, after 10 viewings and re-wirings, I might have a different response.

Flying high

Diana Weekes

Happy Birthday Kurt and Aaron
Adelaide Town Hall, March 15

Happy Birthday Kurt & Aaron was wonderful programming, inspirational in fact. A one-off concert featuring *The Lindbergh Flight* (Brecht/Weill) and *The Second Hurricane* (Denby/Copland), it was entertaining from beginning to end and hugely successful. Not only did we get to hear two substantial and unusual works; we rediscovered how, when you give young people a go, you get high quality performances of a very special kind. The sheer energy level engendered by their enthusiasm was tantamount to tactile. And that's memorable in a concert hall.

The ASO (reduced to 40) was wholeheartedly committed to the occasion, their

ensemble tight and the sound well balanced under the direction of young Finnish conductor Hannu Lintu who (facing the audience) managed to stay fully in control of all his forces, his beat just a hair's breadth ahead. The descriptive orchestral interlude in the *Lindbergh Flight* (Chapter 14) provided a wonderful opportunity to revel in Weill's inimitable musical language with its wry humour and writhing tonality, the idiosyncratic texture revealing his fingerprints from one surprising bar to the next.

As for the choir, clarity of diction and vocal homogeneity (hallmarks of the Adelaide Chamber Singers' style) were singularly evident in their delivery of the unaccompanied chorus (Chapter 10). Even though it all was rather corny in English translation (probably a bit like hearing the *Messiah* in Spanish), it was a fun piece. Tenor David Hamilton made a very convincing Lindbergh and James Aubrey's narration was just over-the-top enough to keep it all on the right flight path.

For the second half all the performers exchanged their formal black for a splendid textural variety of casual blues—light, dark, plain and patterned—which instantly created a strong ambience of colourful co-operation. Copland's *The Second Hurricane* was written in 1936 as a play opera for high school students, and although Edwin Denby's libretto has little literary merit, the music confidently prefigures much of what Copland had to say in later years. Hats off to the Brighton Secondary School Concert Choir. Not only was it a large and stunningly clean sound, but their disciplined demeanour on stage presented a totally united front, thoroughly appropriate in terms of the dramatic action.

The "6 excited American kids about to have an adventure", played by students from the Flinders Drama Centre, were very cleverly directed by Jules Holledge. They took centre stage by maximum utilization of the available space (including the hall itself) and created individual roles without having to hog the limelight for any length of time. They were all convincing in character and consistent in traditional music hall style, presenting true reflections of human weakness and moral fortitude in the face of impending disaster. The costumes were great, and the whole performance simply proved that if you

want to stage an unusual work of even slightly dubious quality, the only solution is 110% commitment to total mastery of the material.

A subtle mindfield Gail Priest

Voices

Theatergroep Hollandia Royalty Theatre, March 15

The Royalty Theatre has a derelict quality that seems to appeal to monologists. In 1998 we saw Deborah Warner's interpretation of TS Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The site draped with plastic covers due to renovations, generated an appropriate sense of despair. This festival we see *Voices* by Theatergroep Hollandia, which has a history of site-specific works, but also approaches theatre space as site. The Royalty Theatre is perfect for this. The flowing red curtains and dusty chandeliers seem in denial amidst the ancient and incredibly uncomfortable and noisy seats. The place has a decaying opulence that complements the whiff of putrescence coming off the corporate tycoons actor Jeroen Willems plays for us.

Voices is a monologue for 5 characters using texts written by Pier Paolo Pasolini and the chairman of Shell International, Cor Herkströter. The first 4 characters are Pasolini's. The play opens with a mousy man, napkin tucked into his shirt, looking at us uncomfortably. He wants to impart, but is not quite sure where to start. He starts with nothing. He speaks of those who are born believing nothing, and those who believe in something who must come to a state of enlightenment, and disappointment later in life when they discover there is nothing. This speech eases into the intellectual territory we will inhabit for the next hour and a half. He stands and moves to the seat next to him, pulls his head into his shoulders and appears to grow 3 stone heavier, gulping down goblets of water and grunting, he has turned into the second character. He speaks of his smile, his best asset—it's a smile of complicity, of guilt, of knowledge. He is a man made fat with power siphoned from those around him, a man who presses flesh and stands on the toes of weaker men to gain a few more inches. He is completely aware of his actions and their ramifications and he is unapologetic.

The third character appears to be a kind of

underling to these others. Willems changes his shoes to shiny red patent leather moccasins and commences an almost incomprehensible speech about corporate structures using a plethora of acronyms, whilst playing with a pair of pantyhose. This character is a fox, waiting for openings and slipping through fast before anyone has noticed.

The fourth and most entertaining character is a woman—or is it a man playing a woman? I find this ambiguity perplexing. Willems is grotesque, mincing and preening like a bad drag queen. As one feels impelled to make narrative I decide he is a transvestite whore, supplied for the perverse entertainment of the tycoons. S/he tells a complex parable about good and evil; power and the methods of obtaining it. Evil is a transitory state between good and good, a means to an end. This conclusion becomes even more disturbing as it is followed by the text taken from the speech made by the Director of Shell. All grotesquerie is discarded, and Willems realistically plays a rational, businessman. We cannot read evil in his demeanour, only in his words. He talks about the ethical dilemmas of multinational corporations who belong to no government or state, about the uselessness of universal morals, and of how the ethical and moral imperative of a multinational is to make profit. They are chilling words, made more so because we know that they are real. Pasolini's text is written with artifice in mind, and a heavy hand of irony, but Cor Herkströter fervently believes what he's saying.

While being interviewed by ABC's Annette Shun Wah at the Festival Club, Willems discusses the construction of *Voices*. He says they are extracts of Pasolini that don't create a narrative, but rather a situation. It is Willems' skill that must make the piece a 'performance.' And he gives a fine performance, flowing through the characters with precision. Just before the Shell CEO speech he morphs through all the previous incarnations. It is not a showy display, but more an exercise in subtlety and nuance, a raised shoulder here, a squint there. Perhaps it is to exemplify that no one man makes a multinational; many little tyrants playing many different power games creates a corporate entity.

In the final scene the first character we met throws a glass of water in his own

face. This surprises me. It is the only piece of 'action' in the work. Is it an insult to his intellectualism, and Nietzschean spiritualism? Or is it a representative wake-up call to snap out of complacency* and take on the despots with whom we have spent the evening.

* When spell checking complacency my computer offered me compliancy.

The (unbearable) lightness of being

Elizabeth Drake

les lieux de là

Mathilde Monnier Company
Playhouse, March 9-12

les lieux de la (parts over there) is the third work from Mathilde Monnier at the festival. It is the first work I see in Adelaide and probably the one I will return to, when back in Melbourne.

The work, we are told, addresses the concept of place. The place(s) we occupy within a space. A movable and fluid sense of place. Places over there. People (bodies) are being carried from one place to another. They are in transit. Sometimes they are struggling. They are taking us with them. We enter new territory, carried there by the disruption of fixed place, which is what this carrying does. One woman carries another. She is (being) transported, she remains horizontal. It is an actual journey, not imaginary.

The music of Heiner Goebbels begins with the electric guitar. The musician (Alexander Meyer) occupies a place defined by the instruments he has assembled. These instruments also provide the vocabulary with which Goebbels can compose. They are derived in some way from the guitar. There are four metal rods, which provide manual fine-tuning of the effects unit. The light aluminium tripod, a newly designed instrument, is bowed to tremulous effect and the sound transmitted via contact microphones. There are two horizontal zither type instruments, which Meyer drops to the floor to play. His movement is soft, entirely due to the tasks he must perform. The music(ian) extends the instruments into the space.

The music is composed around ostinato patterns, the first a simple pulse. The metallic drip of water after rain. Pre-recorded lines are fed in seamlessly from

the back desk. A quote from Jimmie Hendrix is first played live over the pulse, then it is overlayed, leaving the musician free to improvise. There is a moment when he goes to lift the accordion. This moment is extended, and time stops still. I wondered about the impact on Monnier of the death of Viola Farba. The notes are dissonant and sustained.

The tiny dancer with the shaved head holds her pose, leg high in the air, long enough for it to be for ever. She examines the precariousness of her position. The others are together on the floor, moving in slow motion. There is possibly one microphone amplifying the sound of their movements on the floor. One of the dancers sits up and moves his hands in rhythm, like a conductor. It comes from the same impulse as the music but is in a different rhythm. The man in the blue beanie sings/screams a single drawn out note. Later he will speak beautifully. Intimate gestures which could turn nasty.

The work begins in stillness. The two dancers are there, still, very close. Then he pushes her over and leaps to another place. They fall apart. The music holds both possibilities. The metallic drip holds the stillness, while the interjections of the guitar activate the sudden movements. These actions are not synchronised. There is sudden movement from the guitar while the dancers are still. The dancers are sliding, gliding backwards across the floor. It is impossible to determine who is leading who. So too it is with the music and the dance. They share the same impulse but are not synchronous. The rhythmic, lilting step of the dancer has taken over from the steady pulse of the music. she occupies the same position. This is not juxtaposition (as I observed in De Keersmaeker's *Drumming*) this is an exchange. The music operates in the space within the parameters of an exchange. The new libidinal economy.

The new textual landscape

Sue Thomas

Verve: the other writing
CACSA, March 3-26

The theme of this year's festival has been the Old and the New, and *Verve: The Other Writing* has demonstrated extremely well that online work can and does contain elements of both. *Verve* has used its website and mailing list to extend its message

beyond the grounded geography of the festival buildings to writers and artists worldwide. It is very likely that Adelaide does not yet fully realise its own significance in the development of online writing, but when the first histories of web-specific writing come to be written this city will be shown to have played a major role in marking out a new textual landscape. And what's more, not only is it home to many of the major artists working in the field today, but it has also been generous in its invitations to others working in this area to come and share ideas. The last festival played host to Colorado-based writer Mark Amerika, and the University of Florida's Gregory Ulmer has been involved with the Electronic Writing & Research Ensemble and contributed to Lux. This year it has been trAce's turn to jump into the mix. And a fascinating mix it is too

The trAce Online Writing Community is in contact with some 2000 writers working on the web, and most of them are physically separate. Until recently the most significant community for connecting computers and literature comprised the people working in hypertext around Brown University, Rhode Island, USA. But they were for the most part offline hypertext writers, working on disk and CD-ROM. In terms of the web, there are many people working together online, but to my knowledge there is no group working in web-specific writing which actually meets regularly in the flesh as well—except in Adelaide. And interestingly, almost all of them are from the visual arts, all producing work for and from contemporary art spaces.

trAce has been connecting with Australian web-artists and writers for 5 years so when I arrived here I already had a head full of names which were very well-known to me. What I didn't have, as a foreigner with no real sense of the geography of this huge continent, was an understanding of where all these people came from. It soon became clear that the answer to this question was, on the whole, Adelaide, Adelaide and Adelaide. And if they didn't originate from Adelaide, they had close ties with the people working here. Why should that be?

It seems there are a number of reasons, not least the presence of ANAT right here in the city. The Australian Network for Art & Technology, under Amanda McDonald Crowley's inspiring and guiding hand, has done an excellent job of

enabling web-specific work all across the continent. Although it's a national organisation, its presence in Adelaide does seem to provide an extra injection of confident energy into the arts community here. And there are other individuals Adelaide is very fortunate to have: Linda Marie Walker has been highly influential not only in her own work but also in her collaborative projects—first Parallel, and then with Jyanni Steffenson founding EWRE (the Electronic Writing & Research Ensemble). Both provided international platforms for new media. The development of EWRE is now the responsibility of Teri Hoskin, whose *Noon Quilt* (in partnership with trAce) brought the world community together online, and Adelaide was in there too, with work from many artists in South Australia. The early cyber-feminist group VNS Matrix, who originated in Adelaide in 1992, comprised 4 female artists including Francesca da Rimini whose workshops and demonstrations have energised writers all around the world. She certainly inspired me when I first encountered her in England in 1995, and her talk at Nottingham Trent University about her site *Doll Yoko* (with audio developed by Adelaide's Michael Grimm) inspired a number of UK writers to move onto the web and experiment. Jenny Waite was joint winner with The Unknown of the trAce/Alt-X International Hypertext Competition, and Melinda Rackham (NSW but with close Adelaide connections) recently won the prestigious Faulding Multimedia Award for electronic writing for *Carrier*.

There is not space here to mention the many achievements of these and other artists and writers who have been connected with Adelaide. They include Josephine Starrs, Julianne Pierce & Jason Sweeney (Adelaide); Terri-ann White, Karen Melzack & Josephine Wilson (Perth); Virginia Barrett & Linda Carroli (Brisbane); Mez (Mary-Anne Breeze of Woollongong); and Linda Dement & Rosie Cross (Sydney). But one thing is clear: when the historians of cyber-literature surf into Adelaide to talk to its many web-specific writers and find out what makes them tick, there's a question they are bound to ask and it's one I don't have the answer to: why are almost all of them women?

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The feeling in the room Virginia Baxter

Beyond the Pale
 Art Gallery of South Australia

The Ghost Wife
 Odeon Theatre, March 15

As the inevitability of an ending to the festival begins to dawn, memories jostle to surface. Today two rooms emerge. The first is gallery 1 of the *Beyond the Pale* exhibition which I entered when I first arrived in Adelaide's sweltering heat. Gordon Hookey screams his anger and frustration into this small room, cursing the government, howling at racists, offering us a punching bag with a drooling John Howard flanked by policemen. I consider a king hit but move instead to the headsets where there's more rage, earfuls of invective. I wonder if the woman next to me is hearing what I'm hearing. Outside the earphones, the room is silent except for a low voice coming from a speaker on the opposite wall, part of Rea's *Don't shoot till you see the whites of their eyes*. Here is a line of digital photographs of the artist and a kitsch image taken from a postcard of a man called One Pound Jimmy, the father of renowned Papunya artist Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri. Their multiplied images are overlaid by target markers. On plinths in front of each of the images, are hollow glass casts of heads, one taken from a bookend, the other the artist's own. From the speakers, Rea's voice conveys in fragments, the effect of deaths in her family, in her community. It is a heartbreaking voice, exhausted with sadness. In the same room are Darren Siwes' surreal photographs of his suited self standing in various locations around Adelaide—an all-night garage, a monument, a heritage building. He looks into the lens, silent, merging with place, connected but partly invisible. Siwes is a painter working here with cibachrome prints. Among other artists who inspire him is Jeffrey Smart. His powerful portraits have some of the same mysterious quality, the hint of strange narrative but none of Smart's sunny glare. Instead they dwell in the shiny dark. I find it difficult to leave this room. Its effect is overpowering. I wonder whether it's lack of generosity

on the Gallery's part or the curator's own decision to place so many emotionally disturbing works in one room. Ken Thaiday Snr's *Hammerhead Shark Headdress* points the way to other worlds of Indigenous experience, more subtly contemplative or joyously celebratory. I dress myself in imaginary chicken feathers and black bamboo and eventually break the room's hold but its outrage, and sadness refuse to leave me.

At the other end of town is another haunting room—the slatted timber hut that is home to the Ghost Wife, a white woman terrified of the dark, of being left alone. Instead of the stoic icon of the outback, here is a woman for whom the bush is all spiders, the floor snakes, the night black horses. Left alone by her punishing husband she drowns in despair and we watch in horror as she's harassed by a violent incarnation of the itinerant, usually a benign figure in Australian mythology. In one of the most disturbing scenes the woman enacts a ghastly fatalism, singing her fear in repeated hysterical phrases. Then, of course, it happens. The man returns, rapes the woman and chases her into the threatening night, in the process dismantling the house. In the final scene the husband returns to confront the devastation and the wife returns as a ghost to haunt him. The chill of Jonathan Mills' powerful chamber opera seeps into my skin. As I watch the unfolding I will the wife to take hold of her fear and wrestle with it. But Dorothy Porter's libretto refuses to budge. Instead, like a woman in thrall the wife repeats her painful mantras—horses, spiders, creeping dark. (At one of the festival forums, Jonathan Mills reported that Dorothy Porter was suffering painful toothache as she wrote some of these scenes.) After the murder, I imagine a fearsome ghost. At least the final image will be hers, I decide. As she sings to her desolate husband that she will live there with him forever, her arms will stretch to envelope the room. Again, the character refuses my imagining. Inevitability shuts the door on the room which is now mostly air. The woman's ghostly figure remains huddled and the triumphant final gesture I have carefully conjured is lost in a blackout, taken too quickly by the dark.