

# DANCE AUSTRALIA



## IT'S DANCING IN MUNGO

JILL SYKES chronicles an extraordinary project which joined Japanese butoh with the Australian outback in a strange but beautiful marriage of contrasts.

At Lake Mungo, in far west NSW, there is land and there is sky. A crescent of sand dunes and a low rise of native pines barely disturb the 360 degree horizon. There are no clouds and the sun drenches the landscape in white light.

Their outdoor stage is shared with

flies, bull ants, prickles, saltbush and battling daisies, a skylark that hovers and sings. The breathless heat is suddenly disturbed by a rush of wind which raises puffs of dust and rustles the grasses.

The quiet, incisive voice of Tess de Quincey mingles specific directions as to place and position with vivid descriptions designed to spark mood and motivation: "Something like a tight field of butterflies... Galah wings... Kangaroo bums... Use your body, think with your body eyes."

Nearly, lighting designer Geoff Cobham is laying astonishing lengths of flex through the saltbush as he sets up performance lights — an absurd theatrical intrusion on the natural environment.

And yet, when the moment comes for the premiere of *Body Weather's Square of Infinity* the following night, there is a surprising equanimity between the presentation of stylised movement and the surroundings. The most jarring element seems to be us, the audience, who have come hundreds of country kilometres to this pinpoint on the map which seems to be in some geographic and chronological limbo.

Mungo National Park, run by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife

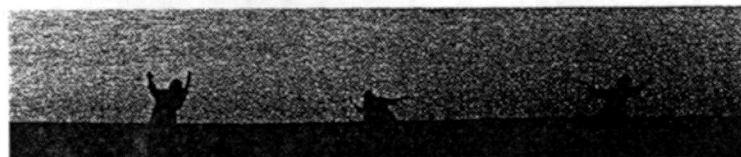
Service, is an extraordinary place. Its eroded landscape has yielded all kinds of information about Australia's Aboriginal past, including the 25,000-year-old remains of an Aboriginal woman whose ritual burial is the oldest recorded anywhere in the world.

For Tess de Quincey, it was a perfect site for a performance project built on a combination of Welsh tenacity, an affinity for Australia acquired as she grew up in this country, and years of butoh experience in Japan with Min Tanaka and the Mai-Juku Performance Company.

The expression *Body Weather* doubles as a title for the group and a descriptive name of the training approach developed by Min Tanaka. In formal terms, de Quincey outlines its theory and application in these words:

"Body Weather aims to provide the opportunity to thoroughly reassess and investigate the body, peeling off habits and cultural trappings to touch on the bare body, undecorated and unassimilated. It is an investigation of the internal and external environment, the borderline between the two constantly questioned and redefined. It is also an examination of the body as a bearer of history."

"The ancient, bare bones of the



Australian continent, its vast space... present an obvious mirror, a palpable reference within which to work. The choice of a desert site for the development of this project has been made in consideration of the potential that the character of the outback provides, in terms not only of the natural environment but an immediate access to our past and the extremities of time and space.

So what does all this mean in practice? A gruelling regime of physical preparation, research and response to the environment, culminating in the shaping of a performance which reflects those experiences and conveys them in the language of movement.

For Peter Fraser, Leah Grycewicz, Claire Hague, Nikki Heywood, Stuart Lynch, Russell Milledge, Phillip Mills

and Heike Muller, it means seven weeks' isolation from city distractions, hours of exposure to punishing weather conditions, a round-the-clock working lifestyle with your fellow performers, endless questioning of yourself and your values. The process is as much mental as physical in its aims to sensitise and strengthen the participants.

They might spend an hour examining every detail of a square metre of ground and the equivalent space above it, an hour moving only on all fours, an hour blindfolded. Their contact with the earth, plants and trees was elemental. They did amazing things like walking in chill winds and darkness towards the approaching dawn, linked by string held between their teeth — only to get to the chosen viewpoint too early so they nearly froze while they waited.

They recount this incident with a mixture of humour and pride. It appears to be the kind of mind-and-body endurance exercise which helped to forge such a potent spirit of respect and caring between them. And, of course, it had a purpose in helping to strip away their egos in order to get in touch with their inner selves, discovering deeper layers of understanding and interpretation.

On the more basic side, their preparation was assisted in the last few weeks by the presence of macrobiotic lifestyle and cooking teacher Sandra Rotheraine. She watched and catered for them as individuals and a group, responding to their needs for food that would lift them or calm them with an appealing variety of nutritious combinations.

This detailed attention to the whole person gave a kind of rhythmic unity to the fragmented segments of the project as they were pulled together with gathering momentum over the last two days on site. The five musicians, who had joined the collaboration only in the last week, were bringing together soundscapes and improvisations with a deadline-driven intensity which would

PHOTOS BY HEIDRUN LOHR

find its peak during the presentation's 10-day season at Sydney's Performance Space.

Starting work at 6.30am on a film with cinematographer Roman Baska, the dancers recreated sequences amongst the lanoline-drenched timbers of the 19th century shearing shed, morning light and a cold wind slicing through the slab walls on to bodies clad in nothing more substantial than underpants.

Next they were out in the rapidly heating air, rolling down a sand dune at blistering speed and creating astonishing sound effects of flesh meeting sand. After that, there were rehearsals in the full glare of the sun and then a run-through starting at sunset. They



didn't finish until after 9 pm. Not every day was so long, but the workload was strenuous — and rewarding. All but one of the performers had taken part in the first stage of the project over a shorter period the year before, and there had been certain expectations of the creative input from the environment. But nature intervened: the drought broke as they arrived and there was more rain than had been known in the area for years. This was what shaped *Square of Infinity*.

De Quincey had envisaged a fairly slow-paced unfolding of action set against the seemingly endless horizon.

Instead, with the weather constantly changing — cold and wet to hot, sometimes all at once — the mood turned into a buffeting confrontation with powers beyond human control set against a sense of rebirth and survival beyond the odds.

For the rain brought huge changes to Lake Mungo: a green cover of new grasses and huge numbers of caterpillars, blue-tongued lizards, baby kangaroos, even shield shrimps, whose buried eggs can wait for years until a really good rainfall prompts them into a growth cycle.

All this was observed, researched and expressed through movement, from

which material was drawn and developed for performance. While the basic vocabulary was distinctively butoh, its tight formality was tempered by the expansive environment. This was a genuine meeting point between Japan and Australia.

For the performers, whose usual occupations include sculptor, actor, librarian and tai chi teacher, the process of making *Square of Infinity* was a springboard for new ventures in various directions. They talk easily about it being "a focus that takes you out of your natural body" and "a different way of seeing things and breaking old habits, like a new skin... as a person and an artist."

## Butoh in Mungo: dancing in the outback

### IT'S RAINING IN MUNGO

Japanese butoh dance in the Australian outback?

Jill Sykes describes a beautiful marriage of contrasts