

within the frame: a timeless space

tess de quincey talks to keith gallasch about embrace

IN A WELCOME AND RADICAL MOVE BY THE SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY, INCLUDING ARTISTIC DIRECTORS CATE BLANCHETT AND ANDREW UFFON HAVE PROGRAMMED A TWO WEEK WHARFSLAND SEASON OF TESS DE QUINCEY'S EMBRACE: SULT FRAME, AN INTENSE 45-MINUTE MOVEMENT WORK 'ILLUMINATING THE SHAPE AND RHYTHMS OF OUR INNER LIVES.' EACH PERFORMANCE WILL BE FOLLOWED BY DRINKS AND DISCUSS. SINCE THIS DUEL BETWEEN SYDNEY-BASED DE QUINCEY AND MELBOURNE ARTIST PETER BRONN IS PART OF A LARGER DE QUINCEY PROJECT (COMBINED WITH 2014, 2015/17 TITLES EMBRACE).

Embrace is an ongoing exchange between De Quincey Co and Indian artists in partnership with Monash University. Based in 2009 in Kolkata, the Embrace exchange explores a relationship with The Natyashastra, the seminal ancient text and cornerstone of Indian artistic practice, with Body Weather, the practice developed by Min-Tsuyata and his Mei-Juku Performance Company in Japan. Tess de Quincey was a dancer with that company for six years (2009-15) before returning to Australia where she has continued to perform solo and with her company as well as teaching Body Weather.

De Quincey defines the developing relationship between The Natyashastra and Body Weather as "a synthesis of Eastern and Western practice and thought bringing together ancient Buddhist and Hindu thinking with elements of 20th Century Western philosophy. It's a radical, open-ended exploration that marks contemporary dance and sports theory with martial arts, traditional Japanese/Korean theatre and Western avant-garde arts practices."

Visiting old friends in India with a great library, de Quincey found herself one day sitting on the tatami reading The Natyashastra and being, she says, "in resonance and connection with my own work but at the same time a lot of differences." Here, she thought, was a more with-which-to-engage-with Indian artists.

De Quincey wasn't thinking of absorbing an Indian performance methodology but connecting with certain "energetic states" common to The Natyashastra and Body Weather. But it's also, she says, about "the placement of the eye—the position of our self-expression and utilizing the body as a transformative entity." De Quincey had turned to Body Weather in response to "a crisis of faith in relation to Western dance, because I wasn't getting what I needed." Workshops in Bali with Ruth Obi in 1999 in Taseq made work, Not Theatre and co-edited with a Shinto priest provided the first steps for a new direction that led her to Body Weather.

For de Quincey, teaching Western dance was to escape conventional notions of form and expressionism. "Working in Japan for six years I became really aware that the placement of the individual is really different there, because you see the individual as serving the communal space... You're not concerned with the 'I', you're actually concerned with the space in between."

I ask: Working on Body Weather is to learn a discipline or explore a particular state of being. "I don't in any way it was about trying to stick. The first couple of years were about coming down to bedrock. Really everything I'd learned in terms of physical work had to be dropped. The Body Weather training on a mind/body/muscle and bone level is more like gymnast's work. It's quite brutal in that respect. Most dancers are working to get aesthetic relationships into their body from the work go to effort, this approach tries to drop them. All those things take a long time to shed."

I wonder what de Quincey is doing if not actually dancing in the Western sense? She replies, "Developing strength and relationship to ground—the grounding that is embodied in that. For example, the mind/body worked is every about understanding the depth of relation to the ground but also about working space together. The communal body is also a very big part of the mind/body. So you see the body from outside working into the greater body. And that in effect is another way of working, a preparation for performance."

De Quincey senses profound cultural differences in performance and audience reception. "A Western dancer will perceive the internal line of the body cutting through space. So you see the line of the arm working through space. It's like the geometry of the body is the indicative factor. For Mei-Juku, the body is being derived by the space. So the surface of the arm is totally different. Even if you were to make an arm through space, the reason for doing it would be so different that the expression of it is ultimately different. Often from an audience point of view you're certainly aware watching the work that there's a very different sense of time and space, especially of time. I think part of the thinking of Body Weather is to open up a different doorway. And of course, as soon as you shift into a new space outside your natural speed, you shift out of normal time."

Not surprisingly then, training in a form de Quincey used frequently in Kolkata in 2009 after worked an embrace. Lined up with 40 children from the slums, slumped in the streets, and embrace. A Slave Thread, with 10 dancers and many locals in a spectacular site-specific work moving from a park to an old home, now a classical music venue. "The sense of framing has partly come about through doing site-specific works. A Slave Thread established a frame for audience in a stable old home, shifted it around and took them through different frames. I was very affected by the portraits of the old Raj you see somewhere like the Bengal Club. If you're directing the audience's attention what they are seeing it, in one sense, a Slave frame. As you move through a site you're drawing in an different frames, using performers to delineate frames... and of course, there were plenty of frames within that building—rainbow and work."

But in embrace: gull frame, there'll only be one frame, "a gift frame". Across de Quincey, a water-side that she and Bronn will perform in, going through a number of "energetic states." She tells me in what I consider where the term comes from. "I've been working a lot in Seattle with Phila Olfert, a very interesting therapist and psychologist based in Sydney Working



with love, that is essential partner work in Body Weather, but I have a psychological understanding of the same elements. He made the body completely. He whole relationship to understanding psychology is from the neuro-epigenetic? understood to be the communication factor in any performance. He speaks about energetics, so made my reference comes from that."

De Quincey details the structure of the performance. "We're gone along with The Natyashastra states—love, laughter, sorrow, anger (the famous two), disgust, astonishment. We run through a cycle of them and then, for eight minutes at the end, we're improvising. The first state is love. For the next eight states and out there inside love. Within love, you have also astonishment, anger, fear and so on, but the base state is love. It's almost like a holographic world that you can keep breaking down. The first time we did it as a total improvisation, I'd been really concerned I would frame, the epigenetic state and physical look in points within, that delineates the agreement between the performers as to which state we're in. And we're going from one state to the next, as simple as that."

There's no sense of a line-off about embrace: Sult Frame for de Quincey. "I find it very interesting, the idea of process and product. The only reason we can make the performance is because of all the other Embrace performances before it."

What is also an important component of the performance for de Quincey. "I've been waiting for a long time for a way to use Ligeti's Symphonic Frax for 180 Musicians (1982), which I discovered years ago and just fell in love with. But we couldn't get permission from the estate to use it. So I asked Michael Tsoukas to make a piece as a homage to Ligeti. It's very different from the Ligeti, but it uses microtones. We tried using computer-generated sounds but it was a disaster as we sought microtones. In the Ligeti I've shared about the extraordinary patterns that only last for brief moments emerging from absolute chaos."

"But the interesting issue is how we understand patterns and perceive them. And the issue connects to me the means by which to open the space of the framing of chaotic relationships in our lives. The microtonal

issue is feeling, an intuitive feeling of logic, but at the same time they cut through them. We've had to make that feeling abstract. And that's been an interesting cerebral experiment. Michael's composition is much more musical than Ligeti's, even though he didn't set out to do that. And there are moments where it's completely like a Balinese orchestra. And we have looked at that other."

But the music is not there to be performed to Tess de Quincey. "It's timeless. It's there at the time. To me, part of what I understand the piece is to feel in time, because you can't work with emotions without feeling time—all these long threads and where they go back into our histories and forward into our future feelings. Those perspectives seem to be absolutely embedded in the time of time and space, even though it's a very gift time space... As soon as you bring the world down to a matchbox, space becomes infinite as well. It's the paradox of space."

Sydney Theatre Company, What/Loud, embrace: Sult Frame, created and performed by Tess de Quincey and Peter Bronn, original Concept Tess de Quincey, set Designer Russell Emerson, Stage Designer, lighting designer Travis Molysew, sound designer Michael Tsoukas, Michael Wharmell Studio, Sydney Theatre, Feb 27-March 1

Image: Peter Bronn Tess de Quincey, embrace: Sult Frame, photo: Daniel James & Russell Emerson