

# tess de quincey

## NERVE9

### turning women, words, dance and space inside out

**JD – I'd firstly like to talk about your view of dance and new media.**

TdQ – Well, this immediately launches into the 'what is dance' question, which is so many things on so many levels. I tend to think of dance as the space and the activation of space and the exchange of energy between performers and audience, but that of course also includes any elements of installation in whichever form, be they objects or visual, musical or felt metaphors.

It was interesting that earlier on you mentioned the dichotomy between film and new media—I have always been struck by how pure film is so very different from live performance—you know, you can go into a bad film and shrug it off afterwards, but if you go and see a bad performance it's almost unbearable—you walk out of there and want to crawl out of your own skin. It's so difficult being present in a space if you actually don't like what's going on. I find that is one of the most interesting aspects of what live performance brings, but at the same time I want to bring filmic elements into it, because from way back I've been interested in inter-disciplinary work, having spent many years also in graphics and sculpture. How I design a dance piece therefore, is very relative to the concerns of a graphic and sculptural space.

In this work I actually wanted to address something that was a very close and deep experience for me, about losing language. It's about being in a sort of thick, viscous space of non-entity. It's something that I experienced at one stage in my life where I really thought I had no language. I was in Denmark and I had lost enough English so that I wasn't really thinking in English, but I didn't have enough Danish to think properly in Danish, so I found myself in this very strange sphere of experience.

Coming to work in Australia many years later, and actually regaining English as a language, launched me into a fascination of this peculiar area of almost pre-language. It was also about women and my experiences, as a woman, in facing some of these things, so I felt the best thing to do would be to find the most interesting women in Australia to work with, which is what I did. That is how this piece started to formulate itself. But it was also about formulating languages and the cellular understanding of something that arises in this sort of gently fluent mess.

Weaving between the work of three of Australia's most acclaimed women artists, and in response to writings by Julia Kristeva, choreographer Tess de Quincey invites audiences into a feminine space, an environment where body and word coexist. This collaboration brings together poet Amanda Stewart with digital sequencer Debra Petrovitch and the new media artist Francesca da Rimini.

Other women contributors bring elements from Turkish, Iranian, Indian, Chinese, Arabic, French, Chilean and Balinese female forms. Visual and sonic poetry is interwoven with choreography that is based in a synthesis of Eastern and Western dance traditions. It's about female sensibility, viscous states, a foetal sensing the nature of form, non-form and the space in between ... an embryonic wavering, oscillations and balance points and the primacy of the body surfing in the subconscious ocean.

**Tess de Quincey talks about this work with Julie Dyson.**

I began reading a lot of Julia Kristeva, because her writing corresponded very well with this experience. Some of the other artists I was working with knew her well too, particularly Amanda Stewart, and so things started to move from there.

**JD – The term 'new media' is interpreted so differently by many dance artists. Would you use this term in relation to your work? The media you have just described are quite different from the more common interpretation of the term many artists would understand.**

TdQ – To my mind dance is a coming together of all those elements of the senses, so to work with different disciplines makes a lot of sense to me. If I am working with a live performance, then I think there are very specific rules which manifest themselves—it's actually the energetic exchange with the audience which defines everything. But if I am to work in a non-live situation, then I think that other things would occur. In this piece I really wanted to make a space that would resonate around those concerns with the audience, so I thought that the best way of reaching that goal was with interdisciplinary work, because I wanted to create an immersive space of experience which corresponded to the concerns. However, if I were to take that into an exhibition where it functions very differently then I suspect I would be describing it quite differently.

I always come back to the fact that we all have a body, so from that basis, what is the sensory input that we work off? It's the five senses that make themselves operable all the time, so in a live performance that's what I'm trying to weave. But I haven't put those issues into the scenario of an exhibition. You've invited me to take that on now—great!

**JD – The work would look different, of course. It's interesting to shift from an exhibition to a performance space and to see how those media are transformed.**

TdQ – I've also had an emphasis as a dancer about presence—I like the magic of presence. But the whole exhibition idea is another thing—a whole other wondering about the time of it, how the speed of it works, how the audience wanders through it, and what people read. The whole context is totally different.

With the two works coming up now, the first consists of five solo works which will be happening at the Performance Space galleries—they are actually a wander through by the audience, so each performer will be on a fifteen-minute cycle. The inference, when we invite people into the space, is that they will stay with one performer for fifteen minutes.

After that we go into the central desert and do a one-hour work in the river bed in Alice Springs—also designed as a wandering. We have spent three years of art labs there, and this is coming out of these three years of process work, so we really are keen to be able to show it in Alice.

**JD – That's a very long research period, and we don't often have that luxury in Australia. You have obviously had to be very focused about this particular outcome.**

TdQ – Oh yes! This was the fifteenth grant application, and out of these fifteen we have only got three and a half up. So it's been a very long haul, so I get very bloody-minded about this thing! I'm not going to give up—it's too central and too important, so if someone tells me I can't do it I'll go underground and come up the other end—like a caterpillar!

**JD – I think it's quite extraordinary that you have been able to survive that period of time in that headspace.**

TdQ – It is desperately hard, I have to say. But in the last years I've begun to focus on much more long-term development cycles—I feel it's the only way for me to go forward now. I cannot buy into just doing the quick, snappy stuff, although I love to work very fast at certain times. But there has to be the right development behind and underneath that to generate a rich work. I like to marry different process cycles so that I actually feel I have my feet properly in the ground. Previously I would have just shrugged my shoulders and just made something new, but now I've got to the point where I'm refusing to do this, because I don't think it's the way to work. But the degree of persistence has had to be quite extraordinary. But it's worth it to persevere in the commitment to a long-term process.

**JD – There is also the loyalty of the dancers, I presume, and the fact that they are committed to your vision—they want to be part of that, whatever happens.**

TdQ – Yes, indeed. We have lifted a huge amount together and they have been magnificently resolute, enabling us also to build a company. I think it's also to do with the particular

process of Body Weather training that we do. There are certain people for whom that process works really well, and they can't find it elsewhere, so it's ingrained—it becomes a cellular thing. But one is consistently existing on the edge of impossibility—it's a constant fall down, get up, fall down, get up—it's a humble place to be which is, I think a very good thing. But it's wonderful to have a moment of celebration such as this, where we can finally take it touring.

It will be very interesting to see how audiences take it. When we took it to Paris, with its origins in the work of Julia Kristeva who is based there, I felt that this was taking it home. The women who came up to me afterwards were very voluble about understanding the meaning, they felt it was very much about a womb state—they talked a lot about infancy and the unformed. It was so interesting that they were so voluble—they weren't particularly reading from Kristeva, but they caught all the aspects of that in the performance. They caught the underlying issues that I was dealing with and held onto it in terms of their own references, which was very lovely to see. But I think they are a sophisticated audience, so there is less fear around dance—and I think there is still a lot of that in Australia

**JD – I think there is some fear around not understanding what people are trying to say.**

TdQ – It seems to me to be the action of the mind—the thinking processes jarring up against the experiential, as opposed to just opening the mind to experience and letting it weave out through one's pores. We have a very head-space oriented society. It's so important to try to move tangentially by inviting people into that other space—but yes it can be a very fearful space, I think. It's also about creating the dialogue with one's audiences in some way—using opportunities to do workshops, or talks or symposia, or whatever. It's all the extraneous stuff around a performance that sometimes can help to break down the barriers. It's just the tension of worry and anxiety that 'I don't think I'll understand', and it's not necessarily about understanding in the thinking way, it's about experiencing and feeling. And then you get to meet the person who says 'oh, OK—it's that simple!'. It's just so human.

De Quincey: NERVE 9  
solo dance performance

| Visual & Sonic Poetry: Amanda Stewart  
| Audio Visual Sequencing: Debra Petrovitch  
| Text: Francesca da Rimini  
| Dance: Tess de Quincey | Design & Image  
| Editing: Russell Emerson  
| Lighting & Digital Design: Richard Manner

Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, 27 September–8 October  
Salamanca Arts Centre, Hobart, 11–15 October  
Performance Space, Sydney, 18–30 October  
North Melbourne Town Hall, 2–12 November  
Brisbane Powerhouse, 16–19 November  
Brown's Mart, Darwin, 23–24 November

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