

# Sky's the limit

**D**e Quincey Etc... is a young, new Sydney-based performance group established by Tess De Quincey, a Welsh-born dancer and choreographer working in Australia and internationally. The company has been involved in the multi-disciplinary art laboratories conducted in Central Australia and called Triple Alice. The first art lab, Triple Alice 1, took place in September-October 1999 and provides the basis for this multimedia performance piece, titled *Skyhammer*.

As the title suggests, this performance piece is about the forces of nature and base elements so apparent in Central Australia. This unique geography is more often visited by tourists and long-term travellers than resident Australians, so it is a welcome experience to be exposed to a performative interpretation of the mysterious and perilous region called the Red Centre.

Just under an hour in duration, *Skyhammer* is fascinating and mesmerising. The bodywork of the performers is finely conceived and executed, managing to translate the rawness of experience one associates with harsh terrain and endless space. Sound, lighting and imaging provide atmospherics in what is essentially an environmental and site specific work.

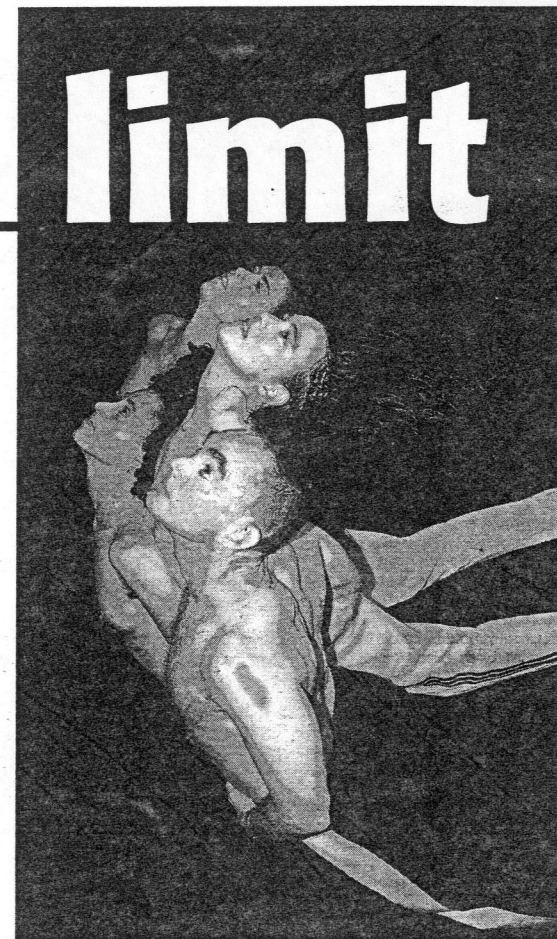
The installations in the galleries, which spectators should view before the performance, provide a thoughtful and evocative pre-script to the piece. Recommended viewing because narrative has no place in a work like this; rather, a weave of media fragments and continual body-presence conspire to throw up clues to the original referents for landscape and lived experience.

The performers work hard to convey physical conditions brought about by heat and light, desolation and isolation. Fragments of spoken text suggest a community as

tattered and jagged as the environment in which it ekes out survival. As the piece progresses a pattern emerges: the body-weave tightens in an orchestrated display of physical threat and violence, then relaxes into moments of reflection and trance-like awe.

While deliberately raw, there are still some aspects, which need to be revisited by De Quincey Etc... in this obviously new and developing work. On a trivial note, the wood smoke is at first effective and evocative, but like any element becomes difficult to control and somewhat overwhelming. What may be an intentional absence of colour was for this reviewer disappointing. While the installations convey a vibrancy of place, the performance presents a different picture. Piles of fine grey dust, video playbacks leached of colour, and lighting which is kept cool with whites, blues and pale yellows fail to represent the heat and blood associated with the Outback. With its current schema, *Skyhammer* confines itself to a bleak, cheerless interpretation of place with only the soft, bare flesh of the performers' torsos suggesting delicate or unexpected beauty.

*Skyhammer* has set itself a difficult task by attempting to provide an analogous experience of the Central Desert. There are traps here. How do you make the presence of a place palpable through simulation? How can bodies in space transport other bodies into other spaces? These are the challenges facing De Quincey Etc... And they so very nearly meet them! The performers present us with actual



exertion: running, jumping, bouncing, falling, hurling and dragging themselves around the hard stage. Their bodies veritably glisten with sweat and sag with fatigue. Yet we still may not be convinced that we are really in the Central Desert ourselves.

Nevertheless, several moments in the strong second half, especially the closing image of enchantment and awe, convince the viewer that this is a powerful and intriguing new work. It has the potential to hold any audience in its thrall.

*Skyhammer* plays tonight to Sunday at 7.30pm at the Performance Space.