

# Strange beasts

Keith Gallasch

"It's like paying to visit a madhouse", muttered a satisfied customer with a smile at the end of De Quincey Company's *Five*. Witnessing one of the 5 15-minute performances while hearing those already experienced and others to come, all at the very same time, all repeating themselves as the audience moves in small groups room to room, yields at times a delirium somewhere between reverie and nightmare. The performers embody intense states of being, but they're mostly talkative, reaching out to us with words even if the bodies sometimes, fascinatingly, seem to be somewhere else. This shared tension between body and voice and the simultaneity of and the overlap between performances generated a palpable sense of one work, more than the sum of its 5 parts.

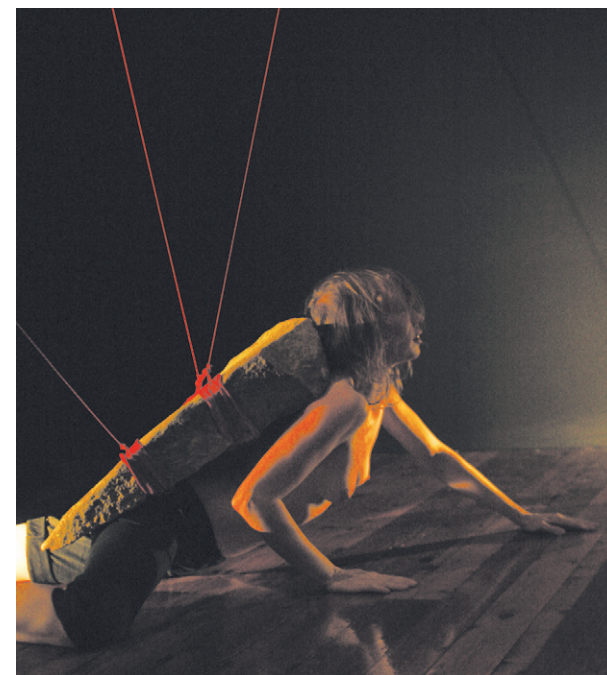
Of the performances that most appealed to me, one did not employ the live voice and the other worked the voice from a point of duress. Victoria Hunt's *Flying Backwards to Meet the Future...* is a physically intense evocation of the impact of a death in the family. The performer's body is wracked against a soundscore that includes readings from a Coroner's Court record. Projected images of a Maori kite taking flight suggest some kind of release. Adroitly designed, lit and constantly transformed, *Flying Backwards...* is multimedia performance with the body at its centre while the soundtrack and projections do the talking. In contrast, Linda Luke's *Death of A Wall* is kin to performance art. We enter the room to find the performer pinned beneath a heavy rock suspended by red threads from the ceiling. The power of this performance is not in the multiplication of theatrical means but in the essence of the weight of a rock on a naked body. Even after she frees herself we

feel its presence in her relationship to the walls of the room, to herself, and in the sudden burst of leaping and laughing. The words from Cafavy and Kazantzakis spill from her, quavery, tense, unleashed. There is no sense of recitation—the challenge common to most of *Five*'s performances is their melding of literary quotation with intensely focused physical performances. Here the performer is weighed down by but is part of the rock, of the buildings and architecture around which the work appears to pivot.

The title of Narelle Benjamin's new work, *Out of Water*, suggests that its protagonists are displaced; certainly they don't appear to be of the natural order of things as the light reveals their odd shapes—human but not, and bottom up in more ways than one. They look like life forms, emerging from water perhaps, or some fecund soup of incipient life and unfolding later into something human. Of their tautly curled bodies we first see only back and buttocks. Even when standing the bodies shape themselves strangely, as if joints could angle whichever way, and move as if gravity doesn't matter. After Kathy Cogill unfolds into full height, her extended arms waver as if beating with new found life. Kristina Chan and Lina Limosani duet with exquisite precision like twin organisms before separating into fine solo flights, one as if failing to find the point of gravity that will bring rest, the other as if finding gravity inverted. Restless sleep and a return to life are followed by a (too) long, collective entropy (reinforced by the sound score's mechanical, musical wind-down). Perhaps a life cycle has been completed. *Out of Water* is a great advance on Benjamin's first choreographic outing with *Inside Out* (RT59, p 31) in 2004. Here the

choreography is sustained rather than episodic, the yoga influence finely absorbed, and, best of all, Benjamin refuses to work from dancing feet to realise her vision. The points of origin for movement are everywhere in the body and they work the floor and re-work gravity to give us a new sense of our bodies at a moment in history when we are reconsidering the importance of our biological selves.

For *Grounded on Air*, Dean Walsh has created a strange, even scary persona, that looks us in the eye, demands we dance (we do), and expects us to play silent confidante to tales of an empty life and hints of inner demons. He manages to do this with a cool, quiet delivery sparsely scripted with a deliciously calculated naivety (earlier works reveal a more poetically inclined Walsh). The symbolism is laid on deadpan from the beginning, Walsh sitting to the side, at a desk, head in a cloud of balloons. Dance too becomes a motif, not only indicative of the waste that comes of weeks of partying, but of an exhausting, trivial battle of styles, including snatches of balletic and contemporary dance, until they manically merge. A huge swing centre stage suggest pleasure as Walsh arcs towards us but also represents the failure to communicate (a to and fro phone exchange of vacuous consolation and a cry for help) and sheer helplessness, when trapped beneath an instrument of pleasure that could take off your head. Such is life. Many balloons are burst or let fly, elegant dancing is attained,



Linda Luke, *FIVE* short solos

Mayu Kanamori

and the final swing-ride is satisfyingly sideways. Walsh's persona in *Grounded on Air* is wonderful for not being loveable, reminding me not a little of the infinitely frustrating characters from the the creations of UK's Forced Entertainment. But Walsh allows his stage alter-ego some redemption, and us the pleasure of a finely constructed encounter with a strange beast.

*De Quincey Company*, *FIVE* short solos, director Tess de Quincey, performers Peter Fraser, Victoria Hunt, Linda Luke, Tom Davies, Kristina Harrison, lighting Richard Manner, Performance Space Galleries, June 23-July 3

*One Extra*, *Out of Water*, choreography Narelle Benjamin, composer Huey Benjamin; *Grounded on Air*, performer-choreographer Dean Walsh, sound Drew Crawford; lighting for both shows Neil Simpson; Performance Space, June 29-July 10