

Quest for meaning in a desert sunset

DANCE

JILL SYKES

SQUARE OF INFINITY

Choreography: Tess de Quincey; music: Jim Denley, Shane Fahey, Jamie Fielding, Rik Rue, Stevie Wishart; lighting: Geoff Cobham
Dancers: Peter Fraser, Leah Grycewicz, Claire Hague, Nikki Heywood, Stuart Lynch, Russell Milledge, Phillip Mills, Heike Muller
Presented by Body Weather, Mungo National Park. October 23

AS THE sunset sky deepened into orange and mauve, fingered with wisps of cloud, a trombone blasted over the ancient, dried bed of Lake Mungo. A violin and a flute added their voices, and gradually a scattering of black-clad figures rose out of the distant saltbush.

Silhouetted against the unbroken horizon, arms out-flung and heads back as though searching the sky, they came slowly forward onto a section of hard, bare clay. For the next hour, they expressed their responses to the arid beauty of their surroundings through the intense, contorted movement language of butoh.

Square of Infinity has been seven weeks in the making, with the dancers going out and working among the diverse landscape of fantastic eroded shapes, sand dunes, tree-dotted hills, mallee scrub and saltbush that form Mungo National Park.

Researching and experiencing their environment — arriving as a drought broke to pouring rain and chilling wind; completing their preparations in the white hot glare of a scorching sun — the dancers have brought together

external and internal elements, natural and stylised.

The results of their efforts, meshed with a musical collaboration over a shorter period, will be seen in Sydney this week, opening at the Performance Space on Thursday.

Quite how the presentation will translate from the expansive outback site of its first public showing to the confines of an inner-city performing venue will not be known until then. Some sections — such as the diffuse central sequences, which were the only weak area — will probably benefit from more sophisticated staging techniques. Others, like the opening and closing scenes, may never equal their *in situ* impact.

But the body of the piece is so substantial that it is sure to convey a measure of the Lake Mungo experience. What the city audiences will have to take on trust is the extraordinary environmental, geophysical and historical qualities of its inspirational sources. Even after two days, they take a hold on you.

Following the dancers' mysterious arrival, they form an unsteady line from which they topple, one by one, until only a woman remains standing. Claire Hague's incisive solo, in which she savagely slices the space around her is a powerful counterpoint to Peter Fraser's sensitive, ground-level kneading of the air.

They set the mood of struggle which pervades *Square of Infinity*. Its stated theme is a series of questions about the body, the place, time and space, memory and communication through body and sound. But these become absorbed by the immediacy of the action and the music, so the search for meaning becomes a many-layered and personal quest.



A figure flits across the evening landscape of Mungo National Park in *Square of Infinity*.

The performers appear to be buffeted by fire and storm, their bodies being hurtled in all directions yet held at the precipice by the will to survive. The force of the movement is electrifying at times, particularly in the final acceleration to a

conclusion of cataclysmic stillness.

As the four men make their way forward in a slow line of prehistoric simplicity, the four women crouch separately in a similarly elemental posture — then suddenly they are all rolling into the

saltbush with savage speed, to finish upended among the bushes.

A slow return to their feet is coloured by the typical butoh gestures of open mouths, empty eyes and poignantly-pleading hands as they move towards the horizon ... and vanish, as darkness leaves a cobweb of stars visible overhead.

Throughout the performance the butoh hallmarks are distinctive: the minuscule movements, a symmetrical arms and hands, in-turned feet, foetal crouching and bizarre expressions. There are also obvious Australian references, including a striding Emu and an evocation of Aboriginal rock paintings. Most importantly, there is a cohesive sense of personal rhythms and interpretative input which weaves these disparate elements into a theatrical whole.

This is greatly to the credit of the choreographer, Tess de Quincey, who devised the project and assembled a strong team of people to realise it.

The technical calibre, daring and commitment of the dancers as an ensemble is engrossing, and outstanding individual performances from Nikki Heywood and Stuart Lynch build on those of Hague and Fraser. Geoff Cobham created atmospheric magic with incredibly limited lighting resources.

The musicians' contribution at Mungo — spearheaded by sound recordist and mixer, Rik Rue, flautist, Jim Denley and Stevie Wishart on violin and hurdy-gurdy — will probably prove even more critical for the indoor venue. It is already developing as a sympathetic interpretive partner and counterbalance to the movement, and looks like going further during the Sydney performances. As does the dance itself.