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Visions of the nether world

RUNNING, jumping, standing still. Small, quick steps on the spot and long, striding leaps. Gravel spraying through clouds of red dust. Bodies curved inwards in the *butoh* language of quivering, dysfunctional looking limbs. Heads and shoulders held high in autocratic stance. Slow movements and fast action. Nothing remaining the same for long, but all of it going on for a marathon six hours.

When *Segments from an Inferno* began at 11 am, the sun was beating down on the gravelled courtyard around the Hyde Park Barracks. By the finish, at 5 pm, an autumn chill was in the air. As in all such demanding, extended performances, there is a shared sense of achievement and camaraderie among everyone involved,

DANCE

BY JILL SYKES

**Segments from an Inferno,
Hyde Park Barracks, April 29**

the participants and the watchers, and an odd sense of loss when it is all over.

Such an emotional grip is an experience in itself, but it was only one of many levels on which this extraordinary dance installation, a Dance Week event, could be enjoyed.

The source of inspiration was Dante's *Inferno*, which Tess de Quincey and Stuart Lynch explored earlier this year as artists in residence at the Centre for Performance Studies, University of Sydney. Working to the nine circles of the *Inferno*, they constructed the performance in nine segments of 40 minutes, each

beginning with a series of images in *butoh* phrases from which the action developed according to a structure and performing functions devised from Dante's writing and their style of performance.

They linked a variety of aspects between the two, including the choice of venue: just as the souls awaited their fate in the *Inferno*, so early arrivals in Australia were detained in the Hyde Park Barracks until their futures were decided.

Physical descriptions in the text have been taken as movement source material, with the "puppet body" of Japan's *butoh* echoing the manipulation of Dante's souls. Intellectual implications such as metaphor, history and literary weight have also played a part.

Underlining the academic considerations behind this venture, a group of 13 Sydney University students undertook a six-hour tutorial at long tables alongside, also taking turns to read the 34 cantos of the *Inferno* in Italian or English.

As their tutor, Paul Dwyer, led an animated and amplified discussion, Tim Fitzpatrick, in academic gown, commented on the relationship between Dante's *Inferno* and the performance, taping his written thoughts to a rope line to provide 20 metres of writing.

But in a public arena, especially a pedestrian thoroughway like this courtyard, unforeseen events intervene and much of the fascination of this performance came from the surprised interaction or otherwise of passersby. Several women on mobile phones walked right

through it without noticing. A man, similarly occupied, stepped carefully around.

Some people were embarrassed to find themselves in the middle of what could only be called bizarre activity for a sunny Sydney afternoon.

Others became absorbed and stepped to watch.

Best of all was 16-month-old William, who became entranced by these adults seeming to play children's games and falling to the ground right at his level. After careful observation, he stepped into their space, imitating their jumping actions and exploring their props. It was, perhaps, the most evocative piece of public comment.

In the context of so much unpredictable intervention, the performance itself remained remarkably focused. Except for a brief costume change midway, the four performers maintained an energetic level of activity which mostly isolated each of them physically on an individual track, yet always kept them mentally connected as a performing unit.

Carmen Olsson's wiry body is an outstanding inscriber of *butoh* movement at its most sensitive and intense. Heike Muller makes strong and bold physical statements. Their trance-like concentration and internally propelled vigour was impressive and engrossing.

De Quincey and Lynch (as choreographers, directors and performers) clearly led the action as it evolved precisely to the structural schedule while appearing to develop a life of its own. Time, space and place shaped the event as surely as the words and thoughts of Dante inspired it.