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A Japanese footprint on the dusty Australian outback

IN her latest butoh work, a solo for herself, Tess de Quincey has probably put her strongest individual stamp on the butoh conventions that she brought back to Australia after six years of studying and performing in Japan.

Outwardly, it can be seen in the scuffed and dusty boots which encase and mask the traditional inward-turned balancing on the outside of the foot, usually a major focal point of the barefoot butoh dancer's performance.

The solidity of the boots turns that characteristic action into something less visually poignant, yet pregnant with thematic possibilities. Is it a comment on the Japanese foot-binding of the past?

A Western alternative? Are the stumbling steps a way of indicating a lack of empathy with the natural rhythms of the earth? Knowing that this solo, titled *Is*,

DANCE

IS DANCE

Tess de Quincey
Sound: Julian Knowles
Installation: Stuart Lynch
Performance Space, March 31

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has evolved over a three-year association with Lake Mungo, the third theory seems the most likely. Especially since de Quincey is blindfolded, as she was when she was developing some of her raw material on this dry lake bed in western NSW, and that she has said it takes time to acclimatise to these outback surroundings when she has been away from them.

Such background knowledge may also have influenced my interpretations, right or wrong, of more inward-looking facets of the performance. For instance, giving

the slow and subtle gestures, typical of butoh, the specific meaning here of reflecting the cyclical rhythms of the environment, which stillness and openness allow to permeate the human body.

Or thinking that the wider travelling around the performing area suggests the broad horizons of the Australian outback, that the images on an action video back-drop might signal her Japanese experiences crowding her mind and then falling away with the same suddenness that those uncertain steps become a confident, instinctive walk. In the second part of the piece, this walk develops speed and impetus as de Quincey strides back and forth across the stage.

But now she has swapped her dusty black jacket and trousers for a strapless dress with a long skirt that swirls elegantly in intriguing

counterpoint to the feisty striding and heavy boots.

There is greater interaction in this section with Stuart Lynch's interesting installation, which offers dual elements of a set and a performing partner. A wall of corrugated iron shudders and crashes as de Quincey hurls herself against it; a cluster of beautiful silver cones, hung like plumbines from the ceiling and looking like a shower of rain, knock against each other with a mellow, dry ring; the tilted wool bale is pushed to the ground with a thump.

As individual focal points, Lynch's choice of installation pieces are appropriately evocative and visually arresting in their own right as well as contributing to the action. With better lighting (it was not up to the standard usually achieved by groups at the Performance Space), they could have

maintained the standard of the most effective: the plumbine raindrops lit from above and stippling the floor with shadow.

Julian Knowles's electronic score adds a rasping aural edge to the imagery, drawing from the original data for a satellite picture of Lake Mungo to create a soundscape which ranges from the impact of a thunderstorm to a quiet conclusion left entirely to its one recognisably natural ingredient, the chirping voices of crickets.

While there is never a moment in *Is* which lacks interest or intensity, the work as a whole did not seem to have found its theatrical rhythm on opening night. The impact of the whole was not equal to the sum of its component parts. I suspect it is a piece which will change and develop over its short season, ending on Sunday.



Tess de Quincey . . . individual stamp on butoh conventions.

Picture by VIVEX DER BUNMAN