

GOOD WEEKEND

October 31, 1992

The Sydney Morning Herald Magazine

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour*

WILLIAM BLAKE

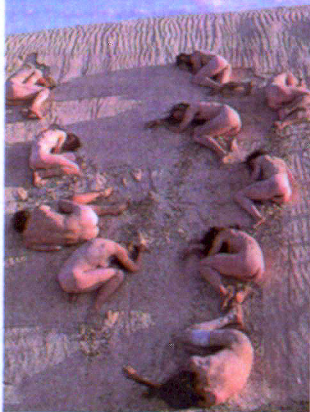
SIMULTANEOUSLY alienating and inspiring, arid and fertile, endless yet full of infinitesimal worlds, brutal and fragile: in experiencing the expanse of Lake Mungo, in the Willandra Lakes region of far south-west NSW, it is almost impossible not to fall back on the mythological contradictions which have shaped Australians' ideas of the outback.

Even the name is a contradiction. Lake Mungo is a dry plain of saltbush bounded on one side by a spectacular 20 km long crescent of white sand dunes (visitors are forbidden to bring their own water).

These ancient dunes contain the bones and relics of Aboriginal people who lived around the lake for at least 40,000 years, up until the time of Burke and Wills. As the preserve of the longest continuous record of Aboriginal life in Australia, Lake Mungo is one of the world's most archeologically and geologically significant sites.

It might seem paradoxical then that an urban-based group of performers, inspired by the avant-garde Japanese dance form of butoh, should have chosen Lake Mungo as a place to live and dance for the past two-and-a-half months.

Butoh came into being in the 1960s as a



Why does a performance troupe inspired by a Japanese dance form seek its muse in a



remote NSW lake bed? PAUL DUNPHY went to investigate. Photography by ROSS BIRD.

Right and inset, members of Body Weather in performance in the sands of Lake Mungo.

the mountains north of Tokyo for six years.

She explains that the work undertaken by the Lake Mungo Body Weather group, comprising performers from Sydney, Melbourne and Europe, involves testing the accepted boundaries of the body and personality as provoked by the desert environment.

"I wanted to find a place that had a sense of enormity to provide extremes of sensation," says de Quincey. "The idea is not about personal expression but, rather, working to the limits of endurance and breaking down defence barriers in order to observe the relation of a universal human being to a particular landscape. I found this place [Lake Mungo] perfect."

The group's 10 performers, supplemented by five Sydney-based experimental musicians, come to the project from a variety of backgrounds, including martial arts, sculpture, theatre direction and librarianship, as well as dance.

The group's training regime concentrates on broadening the capabilities of the body. The mornings are dedicated to strenuous physical exercise to music, stressing the co-ordination of the mind and body.

The afternoons are taken up by activities which follow the idea of the body's transformation by external forces. This work aims to shift ego-based ideas of self into the wider context of the surrounding environment by such exercises as enacting for long periods the feelings of particular animals native to the region, or compressing the effect of time on the body by assuming a posture and moving at the tortuously slow pace of one millimetre a second for 20 minutes.

Meetings with Aborigines who have a long historical involvement with the area have contributed to the performers' engagement with the site, she says.

"While our objective is to convey a universal experience of physical dialogue with this extreme environment, it is nonetheless necessary to approach with great respect the people who know the land and have a strong history here." At the same time, de Quincey insists, it is impossible to understand adequately Aboriginal feeling for the place because outsiders can never acquire the knowledge to be able to speak for the Aboriginal people.

During its latest sojourn to Lake Mungo, Body Weather performed a work, *Square of Infinity*, in the lake bed to allow the local community to see for itself what the rumours of strange goings-on in the dunes have been about. Last year, the group performed in the historic Mungo woolshed to an enthusiastic audience of 14, half of which had never attended a theatrical performance.

A Sydney season of *Square of Infinity* opens at The Performance Space, Redfern, on Thursday, October 29, and will run nightly until November 8 with an extra late-night show on November 7. □

Paul Dunphy is a Melbourne-based writer.

DUNE DANCERS

profoundly Japanese reaction to the 20th century's global Westernisation, shattering notions of what constituted dance performance with its confrontational presentation of extreme images and elusiveness of overt meaning.

Director and choreographer of the Body Weather project group Tess de Quincey was working as a sculptor and dancer in Copenhagen in 1983 when she saw a performance by the founder of butoh, Tsumi Hijikata, and felt compelled to travel to Japan "to see what it was all about".

In Japan, she met Min Tanaka, one of the major exponents of butoh, and finding immediate affinity with his method and art, joined his Mai-Juku group. She worked with the group as a performer and lived on its Body Weather dance workshop/farm in