

TESS DE QUINCEY

by Dr Edward Scheer
first commissioned by APA



Triple Alice 1, installation Pam Lofts and photographer Juno Gemes

The first time I saw Tess de Quincey, was at The Performance Space in Sydney 1988. She would later describe this dance, **Movement on the Edge** as one in which "the calligraphy of the body shapes a landscape". A body writing was taking place though the inscriptions were hard to read unless you knew butoh.

The glacial pace of the dance, the slow advance on the audience and then the sudden tumble to the floor repeated ad nauseam. An amalgam of Bausch cruelty and butoh rigour reflecting the training De Quincey had been through with Min Tanaka's Mai-Juku company in Japan. But what landscape was being shaped thus? De Quincey suggests a "fragile" and "extreme" place of being, not a purely butoh body nor a "Japanese" corporeality. It seemed a genuine hybrid to me.

De Quincey points out that she worked with Min Tanaka "because he was working internationally and was less concerned with Japanese identity and more interested in human identity." She argues that "Mai-Juku was always an international company" and hence that she "didn't find it foreign."

Contemporary Japanese performance genres have come to represent a performative horizon for many of Australia's most innovative physical performers. Tess de Quincey has approached this horizon insistently and vigorously from her work with Mai-Juku in Japan between 1985-1991 to her own performances as dancer and choreographer throughout the 1990's. Originally trained in graphics and sculpture in Copenhagen, she went on to work in dance-theatre in Denmark.

Then based in Japan from 1985 until 1991, she worked in the theatres of Tatsumi Hijikata, originator and instigator of Butoh and studied for two years with Kazuo Ohno, perhaps the

most renowned Butoh exponent.

Early solo pieces were firmly in the butoh tradition as in **Movement on the Edge** (1988) and **Another Dust** which toured extensively in both Europe and Australia between 1988-92. The Body Weather workshops and performances continued the interrogation but also the redeployment of butoh in different contexts such as the Lake Mungo project, **Square of Infinity** (1991-94) a film and performance project which premiered in the spectacular dry lake bed of Mungo in far West New South Wales. This was part of a three-year project in Mungo that also included the solo pieces dance-sound-installation **is** in 1994 and **is.2** which toured Australia in 1995.

De Quincey's performance styles became more varied in her collaborations with Stuart Lynch, shifting away from a direct butoh influence to a more fluid style designed to be more responsive to local 'physical contexts' in pieces like **Compression 100** (186 different performances 1-31 May 1996) and **The Durational Trilogy - 'Segments from an Inferno'** (6 hours), **'Epilogue to Compression'** (12 hours) and **'24 Hours'** 1996-1999. In her most recent short pieces, , butoh appears as a kind of corporeal memory coming through only in flashes. Other recent works include **Inhabitation Nos. 1 & 2** and two pieces for the Ribbons of Steel closure event marking the end of the BHP Steelworks in Newcastle - **The Battery** with 12 coke oven workers and **From the Earth**.

De Quincey was recipient of the Australia Council's prestigious Choreographic Fellowship 1998-99. Her recently formed, Sydney-based performance company DE QUINCEY COMPANY are presenting a series of four new performance works during 2000. She is currently directing the **TRIPLE ALICE** Forum & Laboratories (1999-2001) which bring together cross-cultural interdisciplinary practices of artists and theorists in relation to the Central Desert of Australia.

Body Weather is a technology that open onto a space of potential in which new forms can emerge beyond the parameters of individual tastes and codes into an in between, indeterminate zone of relations.

De Quincey stresses that "Body Weather is a training in relations, in mental and physical states and how they effect each other... It's not about you, it's not about me, it's about the modulations of space between us... loaded with history, meaning, relation. If I see a modern dancer the arm will cut through space and the identity of the person becomes apparent, like self expression. Whereas in the butoh world it's the opposite: you are being danced by the space."

In **Butoh Product #2 - Nerve**, De Quincey continues the body writing experiment begun in **Movement on the Edge**. This is done with text effects splashing around her, courtesy of performance poet Amanda Stewart's textual montage and projection. The sounds and images of words are collapsed back on themselves and we have the bare material of language on display. De Quincey worked within a similar paradigm to return the performing body to its being on stage, holding ground until the impulse to move takes over.

This piece suggests that the Body Weather training is still present though the sentences of the body have been rewritten. Even without locomotive movement the pulses of the body's capacities for movement were in evidence. A fragile shifting landscape of text and body released from the requirement of saying anything, revealing their being, also releases the spectator to see what Artaud describes as "action and creation in a dynamism, never characterised, never situated, never defined, where it is perpetual invention which is the law." He continued: "Invention of the performing self first of all and also of a hybrid performance trajectory in Australia."

Movement on the Edge and **Another Dust** were constructed by the artists to investigate "the division between worlds" and the "field which lies within division" respectively (de Quincey, 1989 & 1990). The body's divisions, its cultured organisations and economies are

redistributed in these dances which reflect and reproduce a larger, experimental, cross-cultural oscillation in Australian performance as well as TdQ's own movement between cultures in a way which mirrors the function of the liminal for Victor Turner.

These early pieces represent intercultural moments in a precisely liminal (in between) sense, as they staged an unmasking of the Western body as carrier of the buoh virus. De Quincey has said that "if butoh is to survive as a contemporary performance practice, it has to find a... relationship to (its own) integral values within the shifts between a local and a globalised identity." Acknowledging cultural specificity is one step on a journey which does not end in a closed field but offers a liminal space. Think of a beach...

Constructing a quality of presence rather than a technique of pressure and force to which the body responds out of necessity suggests a kind of choreographic meteorology denoting atmospheric character and could be used to describe Body Weather in the sense that it seems to construct atmospheres within which the body can exist. For Tess de Quincey the idea of seeing the body as weather, i.e. as a natural dynamic system, is explained through a liminal framework where the body is always part of a larger eco-system.

"At different time of the year different parts of the body start to buckle under. It's the weather of the body, the temperature, the climate: external climate meets internal climate. This work is about finding where the borderline exists. The concept of the skin being the breaking point is not at all where Body Weather philosophy places the delineation. You can be far outside your skin just as the outside can be received far inside and the interaction between the two is massive. Hijikata used to speak about walking outside down the stairs of the body, to turn the body inside out."

Mai-Juku's Body Weather training, introduced to Australia by TdQ, comprises a set of provocations to the body and the mind of the performer. It is an attack on the organism's inertia to release its potentials in terms of "sensorial understanding of space and of body" and to promote the "observation of the body as an environment within a greater environment." (de Quincey, 1999). It is split into three areas: i) MB (muscles/bones) - a form of aerobic work out; ii) Manipulations - exploring "parameters of flexibility" with partners; iii) Ground Work - exercises to encourage awareness of differential speeds in the body, a kind of alertness tuning.

The first TRIPLE ALICE Forum & Laboratory (1999) brought together writers, critics, artists, environmentalists, musicians and politicians around a Body Weather workshop with some 50 participants from all over the world.

As the first of three event it took place over three weeks, September 20-October 10 1999, at Hamilton Downs 110 km North West of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. Martin Harrison, once of the writers involved, described it as "a means for acquiring knowledge about ground and landscape and the body's integration with them" and adds that it produced "a post-industrial analysis" of arid country and its relations with technology.

The web site was activated to post texts and journal entries from the workshop participants and to receive comment from distant virtual participant. Crucially one of the writers involved, Martin Harrison, suggests the event was not "about the representability of space, nor about its cultural appropriation and exclusiveness" but rather "a first attempt at tracing an interactive history of the senses" through an enormously dispersed and many sided... living topo-analysis." He said: "This is a unique hybrid event which offers a way of analysing experience and landscape through performance."

De Quincey describes Body Weather as an "open investigation" and a "laboratory" which suggests that approaching Body Weather from the Western side might be productively done through what Grotowski said, for example, about what he called the "total act", defined as "an extreme solemn gesture" which does not "hold back before any obstacle set by custom and behaviour." It is "modelled in a living organism, in impulses, a way of breathing, a

rhythm of thought and the circulation of blood" and must be "ordered and brought to consciousness, not dissolving into chaos and formal anarchy." In this way it is possible to learn to "respond totally, that is to begin to exist. For each day we only react with half our potential." (Grotowski, 92-92) Grotowski talked about not giving a technique or a bag of tricks to the performer but taking something away: namely the habits and resistances of their body. Body Weather for De Quincey is a training in precisely this way as it creates "an intensity and it is an operation through resistance." (de Quincey, 1999)

Lights come up slowly to reveal an indeterminate shape on the floor. Gradually it stirs and assumes at first only vaguely anthropomorphic characteristics. It's scarcely human, an assemblage of prosthetic limbs. The image forms and reforms for the audience and begins to separate from the floor on which it lies. There seems to be no discernible personality, in this emptied out attitude of the body. There is no evident aesthetic, nor is there a gesture informing us of a technique, just this hollow shell of a body. It is an uncanny body, intensely inactive, suffused with potentials for movements which are largely unmade. The performer is maintaining a relation to the impulses, as Grotowski and Artaud would have it, not willing to diminish the potential energy and affectivity of the tensile poised body, resisting the habitual gesture even to the point of apparent stillness.