

DIVERSE DANCERS IN THEIR PRIME

Prime Cuts 09

COLLECTION OF WORKS

at TAPAC Theatre, Western Springs, Auckland
Until 8 Oct 2009

Reviewed by Raewyn Whyte, 8 Oct 2009 (www.theatreview.org.nz)

Five very different worlds are evoked by the beautifully crafted dance works which comprise Prime Cuts 2009 in the Tempo festival. Despite the very differing approaches and themes explored in each work, the collection provides richly satisfying viewing.

The Samoan legend of *Sina ma Tuna* is the inspiration for Sefa Enari's *Fanua*, for dancer (Filoi Vaila'au), violin, drum kit and log drums (Loata Mahe, Jenny Raven and Poulima Salima). The music implies a landscape inhabited by people and birds, but the dance is set in a watery realm, with sinuous circles and spirals resulting from the courtship between woman and eel.

The choreography features gestures, motifs, patterns and rhythms drawn from traditional Samoan dances, combined with compositional strategies from contemporary dance. The dancer is internally focused, her rotating wrists and floating fingers drawing us into her world, so we float and roil with her and the eel, until the denouement when she returns to the land to bury the eel's head.

The symbiotic relationships of bush, land, sea around her cottage in Te Huia are evoked in Melanie Turner's *Texture* for three dancers (Zahra Killeen-Chance, Katherine Tate, Heidi Vit). The movement is abstract, stripped of reference, with phrases repeating and mutating into variegated combinations - and yet it manages to suggest the tangle of branches and leaves, fronds and saplings found in regenerating bush, the flitting of birds and the weathering of rocks on the shore.

Projected imagery and film (Melanie Turner) is also primarily abstract, camouflaging the white-clad dancers in fine black mesh and moving strips, deep unevenly shaped shadows and hints of flax spears. Collaged music (Harakeke and Te Ku from Tahi, with sections from Gorecki's *Piesni Speiwaja* and *String Quartet No 3 Opus 67*) provide a similarly diverse array of sounds.

The opening and closing of the human hand and variant positioning of thumb and fingers is the source of Anna Bate's *Score*, a rigorous exploration of gesture and intention, strategies of engagement and warning-off, combined with high energy and at times almost riotous movement and gleeful use of tinsel.

Always unpredictable with quick-fire changes of mood and performer-audience relationship, the dance is in multiple sections cued by changes of music with everything from dubby pulsing and ambiency to a motion picture soundtrack. It switches from hesitant to in-your-face, teasing to combative; from stillness to full-out dancing - and it very much feels like a celebration of the wonderfully matched intensity and vitality of the dancers, Anna Bate and Mariana Rinaldi.

Eight months-pregnant Gabrielle Thomas shares her experience of motherhood in *Hapu*, a moving meditation which manages to be at once delicate and robust. Opening with film made during her first pregnancy and accompanied by taonga puoro tracks from Hirini Melbourne and Richard Nunns, we join her underwater, floating, playing, anticipating the experience to come -her curving belly very much the star.

She emerges from the water and into the theatre, dancing now at the same stage in her second pregnancy, sharing with us her first baby's sonogram and the "celestial grotesque resculpting" of her gravid belly - but also her body's strength, flexibility and grace. A battered blue wicker chair is her partner on stage and subsequently in the closing section of film where she restlessly places and replaces the chair in the water, sitting while awaiting the birth.

Closing the programme is **re:set**, a gentle, playful and ultimately charming dance for two men, co-developed by Kristian Larsen and Geordan Wilcox. These dancers are well known as inhabiting different realms of dance despite overlaps in their training - real-time composition (aka improvisation) for Larsen, and ballet for former Royal New Zealand Ballet member Wilcox. Inevitably, the contrasting movement qualities of their backgrounds are a dominant element in what we see.

Wilcox, dressed in white business shirt and tailored black pants with neatly groomed hair, is all clean lines, contained gestures, uprightness, travelling leaps, and almost floats on the surface of the stage: Larsen, by contrast, clad in black tshirt and cargo pants with hair flopping over his face, is all full-bodied gesture, released grounded movements, rolling rapidly across the floor or bursting into movement.

The contrasts begin to smudge as they dance in parallel and play off each other's phrasing. By the time they stop it's the similarities which count more, especially their relaxed presence and comfort in moving together in the shared space of the stage, a small reminder that our 40-something male dancers have much more to offer us still as dance artists.