

Melbourne International Arts Festival

Chunky Move, Arts House, Meat Market – October 9, 2008; Lucy Guerin Company, Arts House, Meat Market – October 17, 2008; Helen Herbertson, Shed 4, Docklands – October 13, 2008; Kage, Fairfax Studio, Victorian Arts Centre – October 22, 2008

Two Faced Bastard

Corridor

Sunstruck

Appetite

Sophie Travers

This was Kristy Edmunds' last year as director of Melbourne International Arts Festival and a recognisably stylish sign-off, showcasing the local dance companies for which the city is known. Edmunds showed strong support for the local dance culture in her four years of festival programming. Whilst the balance between international and local work has often swung more in favour of the former, with a large scale Merce Cunningham residency in 2007, this year four world premieres from Melbourne-based companies sat alongside two works each

from Batsheva and Wendy Houston and *If I Sing to You* by Deborah Hay. Chunky Move, the most high profile player on the Melbourne scene, opened the festival with *Two Faced Bastard*, a collaboration between artistic director Gideon Obarzanek and choreographer Lucy Guerin. A follow up of sorts to this couple's 2003 hit, *Tense Dave*, the piece returned to a highly theatrical setting, in contrast to the previous two abstract, technologically driven productions, *Mortal Engine* and *Glow*. The audience splits upon entering the auditorium,

taking their seats on either side of a curtain in front of which they view either a post-show-talk style forum with seated dancers and actors discussing the whys and wherefores of their performing lives, or a backstage type area where dancers limber up and run through their moves in silence or to a rumbling, ruptured electronic score. Breaking through the curtain to demonstrate their points, the speaker/dancers at the forum continually slip between performance and analysis, disrupting any sense of a coherent theatrical production to the point of ▶

inviting the audience to chose whether they too wish to experience the other side of the curtain. Intriguingly, more than half elect to swap sides and with much to-do even this usually static and reliable aspect of a night at the theatre is destroyed. With much humour and plenty of business, the piece rollicks towards its uncertain end, leaving the audience either perplexed and somewhat disgruntled, or in my case delighted by such reckless manhandling of conventions.

Lucy Guerin's premiere for her own company, *Corridor*, transformed the same Meat Market venue one week later, to similar

disorientating effect. Seating her audience on two sides of a long playing space, Guerin created a narrow corridor for her six dancers. Addressing ideas of interpretation and transmission, she translated instructions delivered by mobile phone, MP3 and written and spoken words into a dizzying array of movement. Perhaps too tricky at times, *Corridor* was never dull. My personal highlight was the impossibly robust paper coats so expertly manipulated by Kirstie McCracken and Antony Hamilton, in their scratchy, stretchy, ungainly duet.

Another stalwart of the Melbourne scene, independent

choreographer Helen Herbertson, also premiered a work preoccupied with site and staging. *Sunstruck*, another collaboration with designer Ben Cobham, took place in a warehouse-like shed in Melbourne's post-industrial docklands. Traversing several hundred metres of darkened void towards a circle of chairs, Herbertson's audience were instantly confronted with ideas of emptiness and intimacy. Her skilled improvisers, Trevor Patrick and Nick Sommerville enacted relationships of connection and distance, circled themselves by a spotlight on tracks, a third player in all their dramas.

Elusive yet poignant, this slight production plumbed emotional depths. Perhaps it was the plaintive echo of the live violin and cello and the penumbral light that evoked loss, fear and solace on a cold Melbourne night.

Within the conventional confines of the Victorian Arts Centre, dance theatre company Kage did their best to

whip up a frenzy with their world premiere, *Appetite*. Artistic directors Gerard van Dyck and Kate Denborough embrace theatrical excess in all their productions. *Appetite* was no exception, featuring the scurrilous writing of Ross Mueller, an intriguing split-level set by architects Kennedy Nolan and an original score from singer/songwriter New Buffalo. The cast of six, led by TV darling Catherine McClements, wrung every last drop of cruelty out of Mueller's story of a woman preparing a 40-course meal for her 40th birthday. The final debauch, culminating in the lustful defilement of a suckling pig, summarises the visceral depravity of much of the performance. Surprisingly sad at times, *Appetite* succeeded in breaking out of the constraints of its form through the force of performance and the ambiguity of the writing.

The four productions showed more energy and invention than should rightly exist in such a small city with a tightly-knit dance scene. Edmunds may have taken a risk in such collegiate programming but the results are unequivocal. Dance in Melbourne is in rude health.

**Left, Lucy Guerin Company in *Corridor*. Photograph by Jeff Busby.**

