



Adelaide Festival of Arts

Photos: CHRIS HERZFELD



ADT's Troy Honeysett (back) Kimball Wong and Larissa McGowan traverse the mind/body question.

Australian Dance Theatre

BE YOUR SELF
Her Majesty's Theatre

Lucy Guerin Inc

UNTRAINED
Adelaide Centre for the Arts

Jin Xing Dance Theatre

SHANGHAI BEAUTY
Dunstan Playhouse
February

THE BODY WAS something of a theme in the first three dance shows on offer as part of this year's festival, and it was intriguing to see the difference in each choreographer's approach.

In *Be Your Self*, Garry Stewart's new work for Australian Dance Theatre, he takes an intellectual approach, ambitiously tackling one of the big conundrums of philosophy known as the mind-body question. Broadly speaking, this is the debate about whether we are merely physical entities – bodies – or whether our consciousness or mind somehow exceeds materiality. Such an abstract question cannot of course be answered in a dance, and Stewart wisely concentrates on the idea of the self as

constituted by multiple perceptions advanced by Scottish philosopher David Hume.

The work consists of a series of scenes that play with our perceptions of the body. In the opening scene, the disjunction between sensory experience and our scientific understanding of it is beautifully caught by the device of an actor, Annabel Giles, reciting at speed anatomical and physiological facts about the slow motion movements made by dancer Kimball Wong. This device is used several times to great effect through the piece. In another scene, Giles gives an amazingly detailed account of the physiological underpinnings of various emotions acted out by white-clad dancers traversing the stage in juddering, robotic motion. The score by Brendon Woithe, using bodily sounds such as breathing, heartbeats and creaking joints, is pivotal to the piece, as is the intricately plotted lighting design by Damien Cooper. Although the pace is overall less frenzied than we have come to expect from Stewart, his eclectic approach to movement is evident in the use of tumbling – some, astoundingly, performed from a lying down position – body popping, and much work from a head stand position.

It has to be said though, that much of the middle section, which is made up of a series of duets, group pieces and solos, goes on for too long, and that the relationship between scenes is not adequately articulated, so that the piece sometimes seems like a series of disconnected skits. Some fine-tuning is needed to render the whole more coherent. Nevertheless, the final section is memorable, as the dancers, often seemingly with their heads and body parts disconnected, weave their way in and out of a woven ramp front stage, making strange new amalgams of body parts bizarrely patterned under projections of blood and cellular components. The effect is truly disconcerting yet often lyrical, as Stewart plays with perceptions of the rightness of the body through unsettling notions of front and back, male and female, black and white.

Lucy Guerin's *Untrained* is an unassuming work that aims to examine our ideas about what is worth watching in a performance, or what gives the audience pleasure. The work features two professional dancers, Byron Perry and Antony Hamilton, alongside two completely untrained men, Ross Coulter and Simon Obarzanek, both of whom

happen to be visual artists. They are an ordinary looking bunch of blokes, all clad in daggy track pants and T-shirts, but their differences become apparent as the show unfolds. Working from a set of instruction cards, the quartet work their way through a series of tasks that includes improvised dance sequences, miming cats, discussion of their personal fears and relationships, giving pep talks to paper sculptures, singing, eating crackers and taking on and off their T-shirts. The razor sharp movement skills of the two dancers are obvious, particularly when the untrained pair try to mirror their dance sequences, but what is equally obvious is that technical skill is not the only thing that engages the audience. The humour and humility with which the untrained perform, and their vulnerability when trying to execute some tricky and potentially dangerous moves, has the audience cheering them on, gasping in anxiety and applauding wildly when they approximate reasonably successfully. What is worth watching, Guerin reveals, is the human being rather than the virtuosic movement; the individual personality and the individual body can speak to us and move us whether it has been trained or not. *Untrained* is a delight from start to finish, and makes an important point about the emptiness of virtuosity for its own sake.

Shanghai Beauty, from China's Jin Xing Dance Theatre, focuses on the different ideas about beauty and the body held by China and the West. It starts with a film of choreographer Jin Xing being made up as a character from Chinese opera. The contrast set up here between traditional Chinese culture and modernity clearly informs the choreography, which oscillates in style between traditional Chinese dance, and movement styles such as T'ai Chi and the martial arts, and the contemporary Western techniques of Martha Graham and Jose Limon. The change in styles is signalled rather obviously by costume changes, as Mao jackets and cheongsams are exchanged for halter-tops and bare chests, and the score changes from Chinese traditional music and pop to Bach's *The Well Tempered Clavier*. Of these, the sequences in Chinese styles are the most successful, as graceful cheongsam-clad women glide about the stage performing elaborate port de bras and men perform martial arts moves. The choreography, billed to Jin Xing in collaboration with Jutta Heil and Dieter Baumann of the Rubato Dance

Company, Berlin, is less interesting in the "Western" sections; the movement vocabulary draws too frequently on undigested Graham and Limon exercises, is occasionally shakily performed and lacks a distinctive voice. Despite its interesting premise, the work as a whole suffers from a lack of dramatic impetus; scene succeeds scene without building dramatic intensity or narrative drive, and what could have been a riveting piece becomes a series of spectacles. The arrival of Jin Xing in the flesh in full Chinese opera garb brings the work to a neat end, but I felt that this work did not really deliver on its promise.

– MAGGIE TONKIN