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Phillip Adams

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## **PHILLIP ADAMS**

### **Nanette Hassall**

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This paper explores the importance of narrative in Phillip Adams' work. Despite the fact that he is seen by the critics as a member of the 'post moderns' in dance in Australia there are significant ways in which we see him depart from the traditional understandings of those terms in order to develop a more idiosyncratic and personal style.

Those differences can be classified for the purposes of discussion as affecting

- the physical and technical aspects of the work
- the formal choreographic structures
- the spatial and temporal structures and
- the emotional and narrative impact of the choreography on the viewer.

I will compare the work to Merce Cunningham's style and technique because it was Cunningham against whom the young emerging choreographers, later known as the 'post moderns', felt they had to imprint their differences in order to create their own sphere of influence aesthetically – Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs etc..

Adams has created four works for the dance department of the WA Academy of Performing Arts, two for the graduate company 'Link' and two for the undergraduate program. This has provided a rare opportunity for research and analysis of his choreographic processes and the ideas informing the work. Adams is one of Australia's most significant dance artists.

### **THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONTEMPORARY DANCE IN AUSTRALIA**

While ballet has remained a constant in the development of dance in Australia, contemporary dance has developed primarily through waves of influences arriving in Australia from overseas - initially from Europe through major figures such as Gertrude Bodenweiser and later by way of a number of exponents of the various techniques developed by the great pioneers of American modern dance – Graham technique, Lester-Horton technique, Cunningham technique. Tours by some of the major contemporary dance companies such as the Alvin Ailey Company, Pina Bausch's company, and more recently the Cunningham Company have helped to develop and sustain interest in the field. Most of the so-called small companies in Australia have a contemporary bias as do a number of the larger state companies – Australian Dance Theatre, and Sydney Dance Company.

But one of the most influential techniques in contemporary dance has been the pursuit, over the past 20 years of its history in Australia, of the loosely termed 'Release' work. The result of a detailed study of the body's skeletal structure, this approach to movement development has pushed for a greater understanding of the principal tool for dance, the body itself. It has expanded to embrace and encourage exponents of Kinesiology, Alexander work, Bartiniuff Fundamentals, Feldenkrais, the Physiology of Exercise, and Pilates and has transformed the education of dancers. A more scientific approach has been encouraged and Release work has been the driving force behind the development of Safe Dance Practices in all of the country's training institutions. The emphasis was, and still is, particularly in teaching contemporary dance, on physical integration over the display of technical feats, ease and flow over effort and [omit an emphasis] on maximum physical efficiency. Against this background Australia's most influential choreographers, Garry Stewart (ADT), Gideon Obarzanek (Chunky Move), and Adams (Balletlab) and the independent scene primarily based in Melbourne including people like Rebecca Hilton, Lucy Guerin and more recently Francis D'Ath and Simon Ellis have emerged.

## **PHYSICAL AND TECHNICAL**

If I think of Cunningham's work, I think of the body being employed visually and choreographically as a whole. The principal joints in the body are still used as they are in ballet – the arm is articulated primarily from the shoulder socket and the leg from the hip socket – bodies still walk, run and leap through space. The resulting vocabulary is strong and clean and has a purity and classicism that suits Cunningham's pared aesthetic and fuses seamlessly with the creations of the galaxy of internationally renowned artists and composers with whom he collaborates. The Cunningham technique is a classical technique with 'curves' – an active spine. It requires a highly trained dancer, who is capable of moving nimbly, can change direction at any time and who has a highly sophisticated level of spatial awareness.

The body is articulated entirely differently in Adam's work. Initially it appears alien to both Release and Cunningham technique. The body becomes 'disarticulated', appearing to break into small pieces. Falling is a constant - the dancer appears to thrash and flail. Having toppled to the ground it is only partially reconstructed before it "breaks" and falls again. The body is articulated into a series of small jointed sections. Dancers push and shove each other, manhandle and trip their partner, aid and abet their falling, grasp and pull them off balance to roll. For the viewer this experience is deeply disturbing. The dancer appears to be in constant risk of injury, hurt, damage. (Extreme forms eg a performance of Garry Stewart's Thwak at the Riverside Theatre at Parramatta initially drew public condemnation from dance critics.)

## **SPATIAL**

The 'use of space' is one of the most basic choreographic elements assessed in any work created from the youngest student of dance to the most experienced choreographer. If the prepositions to describe Cunningham's work are primarily 'across' and 'through' the space, Adam's conveys a strong feeling of the work being 'up' and 'down'.

The majority of dance works emphasise the use of the whole space. Adam's work by contrast is a series of scenes, most of which could be performed in a space the size of a small bathroom. It is domestic in scale. At the end of 'the scene' the dancers simply walk to the start of the next event, usually as the light state changes. Often 2, 3 or 4 people are jammed into this confined space. They proceed to collapse and fall on each other – a confusion of limbs and torsos, tripping and bouncing off each other. While Cunningham works on a large 'canvas', Adam's influences in construction are often filmic and tight, even constrained. Whilst there is a resulting 'static' quality spatially, there is an emotional multiplier effect in this spatial constriction for Adams. The emotional intensity is heightened.

The Cunningham works have had no problem in the past filling St Mark's Square in Venice, any number of college gymnasiums, the enormous entrance to the new Tate Gallery in London and Darius's palace at Persepolis. In performance, I have seen the doors for the loading bays at the back of the theatre opened and the streetscapes of Italy providing the backdrop to the dance. Cunningham is interested in a field of space with a strong sense of its continuity beyond the boundaries of the artificial and arbitrary surround created by the proscenium arch. The dancer appears in our field of vision from the wings but it is implied that this is not necessarily the start of the action. Trisha Brown's work takes this concept and hones it even more finely; movement events are partly obscured by the wings, challenging the audience to reconstruct the interconnections we cannot see.

In Adam's work you often sense the boundaries and shape of the space which encloses the dancer, 'the scene in which the event is set', eg the shooting gallery at the showground in 'Endling', established by a single row of foot lights or later in the same work the small arena surrounding the 'matadors' coming in for the kill. Adam has a predilection for including objects which define a space inside the performance area – a mattress in 'Untended Garden' and the cloak in 'Endling' spread on the ground both become sites for complex duets.

Likewise the 'magic' carpets in 'Ikebana in California' are carried to re-articulate the stage into a series of smaller performance areas, obscuring some dancers and revealing others. Cunningham introduces objects into the choreography created by visual artists such as Frank Stella's mobiles in 'Scramble', Andy Warhol's large silver inflated pillows in 'Rainforest', Bob Rauschenberg's 'demon machine' created from found objects at each performance for 'Winterbranch' and the detailed recreations of Duchamp's 'Large Glass' in 'Walkaroundtime' designed and constructed by Jasper Johns.

By contrast Adam's work is full of 'junk', - moth eaten animal skins, stuffed toys. The 'Untended Garden', created for the Link Dance Company this year is a complete inversion of the symbolic garden of the Renaissance. It is a tip. What's more the junk items are given space and time to "speak". The dancers are often employed to activate the items; eg the dancers simply set up the spinning objects in 'Untended Garden' and wait for them to stop spinning. In 'Ikebana' a carpet is folded and refolded around a dancer as if it was a piece of origami paper. The dancer simply moves to accommodate the action of the object.

Adams plays with scale. Often the 'props' are 'condensed', miniature versions of much larger objects like the toy piano in Untended Garden and the gingerbread house in 'Thredbo'.

## **TIME**

In Cunningham's work the curtain rises and the scene is set. For the next 30-40 minutes or however long the work extends, he explores that site – the strange creatures resident in 'Rainforest', the throw of the dice and the resulting "plays" in the game of 'Canfield', the pointillist beauty of 'Summerspace', and the terror and dark of 'Winterbranch'.

Despite the sense of random elements and chaos that might be suggested from a philosophy that states 'that any movement can follow any other', for which Cunningham is famous, the dances are highly organised. Chance might determine the order of the movement events in a work on a particular evening (eg in 'Canfield') or the spatial pathways initially for the work, but each section of the choreography or movement event is minutely described, timed and rehearsed by Cunningham with the dancers once any chance elements have been determined.

Adams' approach is entirely post modern. Scenes switch their setting rapidly in time and place. This disjunction within works can be geographic (it is a bison the matadors surround) and temporal (an early American shooting gallery is contrasted against extreme and frenzied contemporary dance, with projected footage of the last Tasmanian Tiger in the Balmoral Zoo in 1935). Yet, like Cunningham, the scenes in Adams' strongest works are not random. The effect is compelling – gradually the scenes compile into multifaceted perspectives of a single yet complex idea. Individually they often feel 'unreadable', so disparate one from the other, yet all are drawn within the same ambit. There is the distinct feeling of a 'thread' that holds them all together if the viewer can just grasp what that thread is.

## **CHOREOGRAPHIC STRUCTURES**

In Cunningham's work you have an overwhelming sense of choreographic order and the thorough integration of formal processes (of which chance is one), which have been clearly defined. Cunningham rarely talks in rehearsal and directs from the front. The work is important but the choreographic methods or craft are the means by which the outcome is achieved. In Adams' work the line from the choreographer to the dancer is direct. Adams communicates constantly with the dancers - "and then the sun rises on the desert, the princesses are hot (wipes brow), and now if you step over here and yes that's right, put that leg through there" etc. He steps inside the melee of arms and legs. There is enormous flexibility in the lengths to which he is prepared to go to achieve his objectives. Any formal concerns are completely subordinate to the moment and the story that is unfolding. The need for formal structure, such a pressing concern for so many exponents of a post modern aesthetic, becomes secondary to the event that he is describing. But like Cunningham, once

the movement is choreographed it is meticulously rehearsed – initially slowly and in minute detail and then gradually faster and faster. Speed enhances the sense of perilousness and confuses the untrained eye into thinking the movement is chaotic, even improvised.

The ‘hands on’ approach extends to every detail of the production. Adams’ knows precisely what kind of lighting he wants for each scene such as the fluoros in ‘Ikebana’. He spends days talking with the costume and set designer to get just what he wants: the costumes for ‘Ikebana,’ he insists must have “flowers to the elbows” and the set should be a Ngouchi ‘look alike’ cactus garden. He deliberates for hours selecting just the right piece of music for the scene. The sound reinforces each scene. Adams studied music in his youth, but far from narrowing his range of musical interests, his tastes are extremely eclectic - a popular 60’s ‘surfie’ pop record contrasts with the most esoteric contemporary work or a straight classical piece. If this includes hours in ‘op’ shops or antique record shops to find exactly what he wants then he is happy to do so. Many of the scenes within a work are reinforced with the particular piece of music chosen along with its particular item of set design. This integration of music and design within individual scenes is a traditional method of choreographing work which is, at once, out of step with a postmodern aesthetic. Yet this firm embeddedness of music and design is another clue to the power of Adams’ work.

The integration of elements is far from Cunningham’s emphasis on the separation and independence of the co-existing art forms in his choreography such as music created independently of the choreography by John Cage. The sound and design elements are traditionally assembled with the Cunningham’s choreography only on the first night of a performance of a work - a risky business. In one score, John Cage tells a long and very funny story which the dancers have never heard before – one dancer dissolves laughing and the choreography dissolves with the dancer! No-one can see anything in ‘Winterbranch’ – where all the lighting cues are random. In ‘Canfield,’ a vertical bar of light designed by Robert Morris moves across the stage between the dancers and the audience, lighting some areas of the choreography while other sections are in darkness and the dancers are virtually blinded by the lights. At the same time the audacity of the designs, both musically and visually, separate Cunningham’s works from any of his contemporaries. Cunningham is a mega star in dance.

## **NARRATIVE**

But it is the narrative that is important to Adams, sometimes imbued with deeply personal memories. In Adams’ work the apparent chaos is only superficial, since this same chaos becomes the underlying order created through the fabric of his own life. In talking about the making of the ‘Untended Garden’ in an interview, Adams describes the scenes with his father, as a child, when they would go and collect objects from the local tip. They would bring a collection home with them. Objects were assembled in new configurations and finally there would be a conflagration. Adams’ Dad would set the objects alight in a bonfire. In the actual work there are, for a dance piece, an odd set of relationships established. The objects from the tip virtually fill the space. There is very little remaining room to ‘dance’. The dancers are relegated to amateurs, assisting the objects to dance. In fact the dancers speak and sing more than they move. But this is still a garden - like the original paradisaical garden of lost innocence. Flowers are thrown on to the mattress on which the two young girls have danced. It transforms into a casket. The young girls are gone. The dancers stand around the mattress/burial chamber to mourn their loss.

Adams is obsessed with death, with burials, and in moments of passing from one state to another – from hot to cold, from life to death, from teenager to adulthood and the rituals that attend those transitions. “Burials are important” he says. In ‘Endling’ the dancer gathers the cloak of dead animal skins around his shoulders and proceeds up the space – a post-modern version of a primitive coronation in grim rather than celebratory solemnity.

## **ENDLING**

There are works of Adams in which the 'nonsense' element, the 'quirkiness' finally undermines the choreography but in 'Endling' the sensibility is different. The contrasting elements come together to make a powerful statement about the nature of extinction, the loss of biodiversity, man's personal responsibility for this environmental disaster and the ultimate price that will be paid. In the last moments of 'Endling' the matadors surround the dying animal poised for the final kill but this figure is only a human wearing horns, reminding us that the degradation of our planet will only lead to our own demise. The figure is also female, the progenitor of the species. Despite all our science and gene technology we are unlikely to see another Tasmanian tiger, or a Great White Auk or any of the other plants and animals that have been lost from the earth. It is hard to estimate how much poorer we are for their loss.

Normally there is humour in Adams' conception, but 'Endling' is very dark. Ultimately humanity is in a struggle with the rest of life. The punter enters the shooting gallery and shoots all the targets that are obviously human. For me 'Endling' has a distinct 'post holocaust' feel to it. Like the final of the six stories woven in David Mitchell's 'Cloud Atlas', set somewhere in the future, man's primitive and diseased state is the result of his own greed. 'Endling' is an elegy on the nature of destruction.

The movement structures that feel so edgy and dangerous create an emotional space that contrasts strongly with choreography we normally regard as 'post-modern'. The work is deeply moving. The deconstruction of the body allows the works to speak clearly about emotional territory that dance often finds difficult to negotiate. Movement metaphors speak of violence and death. The domestic scale allows us to concentrate on the violence often wrought upon each other. The bodies are smashed together and against walls while the last tiger dies pacing inside the cage. There is anger and frustration with the world. The images Adams creates in 'Endling' ripple out. Scenes end with people flattened and stilled as lights fade to black. The tragedy of the caged tiger provides a metaphor for the other 15 mammals of the 263 known in Australia to have vanished since European settlement. It is this capacity to distil an image that speaks volumes that is special to Adams' work – the fragment that refers to the whole.

Both Cunningham and Adams have something in common however. Both celebrate the body – its physicality, skill and its capacity to speak about ideas that defy expression in other modes of communication. Both re-instate the body as a primary force. Recent theoretical constructs of the body as an entity that should be 'transcended, transformed or re-engineered' (Kunst p.47) has no place here. Although the Cunningham company has always exploited any technological advantage in music and design in its works, only in Cunningham's most recent work, developed with the use of the Lifeforms programs has 'a body' entered the performance arena which is transformed. Extraordinary spectral creatures fly above the actual dancers' heads in 'Biped' created in 1999.

Adams exploits the body's imperfections. He revels in its mortality. At the same time a trained eye recognises the degree of physical complexity involved in his works. This physicality is not a simulated existence relegated to a flat screen.

## **CONCLUSION**

The fragmentation of the body, the disjunction in time, the cinematic structure of the work – scene-cut-scene, all these techniques belong to a post modern canon. Yet in 'Endling' Adams manages to avoid creating a work that simply reflects and comments on its own form, that is simply self-referential. The specificity of the narrative is the driving force and all of the choreographic elements are subjected to that end. Narrative is in fact a traditional way to construct dance though one discarded by post modern dance makers. Adams takes it to new dimensions in a significant step that links the past with the future.

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## **Ms Nanette Hassall**

Nanette trained extensively in classical and modern dance, in Australia and overseas and graduated from the Juillard School in New York. Her performance career includes companies such as the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, Ballet Rambert and the Strider Dance Company in London.

Nanette taught at Dartington College in England with Mary Fulkerson developing a foundation in Release work. In Australia she worked with the Dance Company of NSW under Jaap Flier and established Dance Exchange with Russell Dumas. After her position as Lecturer in charge of Contemporary Dance at the Victorian College of the Arts, she formed the company Danceworks in Melbourne, created to encourage the development of new Australian choreography and choreographers.

As a dance advocate, she has served on numerous panels and boards including The Australia Council, the Australia-New Zealand Choreographers and Composers Project, the Green Mill Dance Board AND Buzz Dance Theatre. Nanette was appointed Head of the Dance Department at The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts in 1995.

Nanette is the Chair of the Tertiary Dance Council of Australia and is currently Chair of the World Dance Alliance Choreography and Performance Committee for the Asia-Pacific Region. In 2002 Nanette received the Ausdance National Award for Services to Dance Education.

In 1997 the Dance Department established a Dance Research Centre which develops projects examining the relationship between performance and research.

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