

KEIR CHOREOGRAPHIC AWARD 2016 - A REVIEW BY DEBORAH JOWITT

For two evenings in April, 2016, I sat among the spectators in Dancehouse's modestly appointed black-box theater, feeling as if I were in another world. In one sense, I was. I live in New York, and now I was in Melbourne; jet lag could have been to blame for my disorientation (delayed flights, hours and hours of unraveling in airports and on planes). But although much of what I saw onstage related to choreographic themes and devices with which I'm familiar, I intermittently felt like an alien unsure of the turf it's on. How often do you see dancers in two pieces out of eight wearing morphsuits? How often do this many performers arrange their own set pieces and props and tidy up afterward? How often do they control sound, video, or lighting equipment onstage while onstage performing? What often seemed to be involved was a tactical interplay between process and product, which created something akin to a carefully designed garment some of whose seams are on the outside.

I was at Dancehouse to conduct a five-day workshop in dance writing and to attend the first of two evenings showcasing works by the eight semi-finalists for the biennial Keir Choreographic Award, founded by Philip Keir in 2014. I was primed for the performances. Each of the eight (chosen for the competition from over sixty applicants) was given \$10,000 and a hundred hours in free rehearsal space to ready their works for this week. Four would be chosen to perform in Sydney, where the chosen winner would receive \$30,000 and the People's Choice \$10,000.

The Keir Foundation's website announced the competition in these words: "The Keir Choreographic Award welcomes choreographic ideas for works that reflect the interconnectivity between [artistic] disciplines and challenge conventions about what the moving body is or can be in contemporary society." I can, therefore, readily understand why a choreographer entering the competition might shape his/her project to fit this description, although I can also see that the award might have developed as it did in response to interesting works already being made that combined theater, dance, and the visual arts. However I found myself occasionally echoing a question that I heard voiced by several spectators: "Where's the dancing?" (And "dancing" didn't, of course, refer to performers kicking up their heels to show off, but to the kind of deeply embodied movement that helps shape and power a theme).

I continue my discussion in the present tense, in the hope of re-situating myself firmly in that Australian landscape and recapturing my impressions.

As I watch the eight works, I note their individual characteristics, but also whatever they may have in common. For instance, Chloe Chignell's *Shine* begins while the audience is entering the theater for Program One. The faceless choreographer, completely covered by a gold morphsuit and slowly revolving on a low platform, announces her performance over and over. It will last twenty minutes, she informs us, and "It is about to begin." Sarah Aiken (*Tools for Personal Expansion*), also on Program One, starts with the choreographer introducing herself, "I'm Sarah Aiken."

In *Shine*, Chignell, Ellen Davies, and Bhenji Ra begin separated in space, posed and anonymous in their gleaming body suits. They begin gradually to approximate masturbation, like machines warming up. Corin lleto's sound score becomes agitated. The three collapse. The work was originally titled Deep Shine, but the adjective, as Chignell has told us, has been removed. The shimmer, then, is only skin deep in this study tackling superficiality. The most telling moment—and a terrifically theatrical one—comes when Chignell emerges from her gold outfit to reveal (wait for it!) a magenta one just like those her colleagues wear. Now apparently identical, the three hint at individuality in a brief spate of aggressive-defensive, contrapuntal maneuvers (for which they don sneakers), after which they form a line stretching away from the audience and create a chain of pristine, symmetrical images that evoke birth and copulation, with the person in back starting the process by sliding forward between the spread legs of the other two. In the end, they cuddle and tangle together like large gleaming worms.

While Chignell is unsheathing herself, Davies and Ra, linked on the floor and motionless, hold microphones to their invisible mouths to deliver a banal domestic argument. To usher in the curious ending, all three, frozen in a "family" pose, begin to make their hands quiver, then their legs, as they make their way to an open door at the back of the performing area. What could be a futile effort to shimmer peters out, and they pause to turn their blank faces toward us before collapsing on the stairway that leads upward beyond the doorway. No exit for them, and no dramatic blackout for *Shine*. They just lie there for a few seconds, then rise and bow to the ensuing applause.

The technologically impressive Sarah Aiken (*Tools for Personal Expansion*) plays with the implications of its self-absorbed title, first attacking the choreographer's theme of expansion on a purely physical level. Aiken acquires two flesh-and-blood extensions of herself. Both Emily Robinson and Claire Leske introduce themselves into a microphone as "Sarah Aiken," and the looped voices accumulate into an unruly, if mechanical chorus as the three travel about the space together. Robinson, then Leske assume whatever big, straight-limbed or angled poses Aiken strikes, each woman a split second after the other, which creates a kind of echo, or movement trail. As the poses become more spacious, even off-balance, one of them hands a microphone to an audience member, who says, "I'm Sarah Aiken" and passes it along. Now we have an ever-growing multitude of individual voices interested in being this woman.

Aiken says in a program note that she's "reworking the self through social, digital, and physical means." While she crawls or inches along the floor seated, Leske focuses an iPhone on her body, using its "panorama" feature; the resultant image projected on the back wall lengthens Aiken's torso until "she" resembles a caterpillar. Aiken and Robinson doing the same movement but crossing over each other results in a long linked chain. When Aiken mans the device and the other two circle her, Leske acquires a longer digital arm, so does Robinson. Then, in a real-life image of elongation (after an awkward but apparently necessary blackout), the two flank Aiken, who has assumed the arms-spread stance with which she began the dance, and pull her sleeves until they stretch almost across the performance space in either direction. Actual expansion trumps virtual. The lights turn red, there's a crash, and every Sarah Aiken disappears.

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Even the simplest and clearest work of the eight, Ghenoa Gela's *Fragments of Malungoka-Women of the Sea* uses digital media to some degree. Projected moving images of the activities of Elle Evangelista, Melanie Palomares, and Melinda Tyquin are captured and projected intermittently during the performance by the apparatus hanging around Tyquin's neck (interactive and LX designer: Toby Knyvet). It takes a while to identify the figures of the other two, swimming eerily at odd angles in the black-and-white turbulence that suggests a fragmentary memory. The fleeting onscreen dance reflects Gela's intent to bring together traditions of her female ancestors in the Torres Strait Islands and her background in contemporary dance, presenting performers not from those islands to spectators also likely to be unfamiliar with the traditions she honors.

The three women enter in a line, raising their knees high as in a march, or walking bent over, as if following tracks. They wear pantaloons made of black cords that hint at grass skirts; stylized, featureless white masks, held in place by their teeth, diminish their individuality. As their shadows loom on the backdrop, Ania Reynolds' score begins with high tinkling sounds above a bass line.

An atmosphere emerges. As the three go about their activities—lunging; erupting in heavy, wide-legged jumps; playing a choosing-game (rock, paper, scissors); slapping their bodies as they dance—they frequently pause, huddled together, and stare warily in one direction or another. Is it their heritage that they contemplate, or potential danger? They're looking at us when the lights go out and those blank white faces phosphoresce (the moment has the force of an ending, but since the dance continues, it seems an isolated gimmick). In the end, there's only noise.

James Batchelor's *Inhabited Geometries* (also on Program 2) has a similar single-mindedness, but he is concerned with the environment he inhabits, and, according to the program, spent time living on the streets of Melbourne, experiencing how the human body could, or could not, be succored by hard edges and sharp corners. It is interesting to watch him assemble his own set pieces before the dance begins. He lays a long, gray avenue of fabric across the performing area and covers it with a strip of transparent plastic. He pushes together three gray polygons to form an architectural structure. In other words, he creates the landscape he intends to inhabit. Which bears thinking about.

The most moving image, to me, is the first one. Morgan Hickingbotham, seated at a console anchored to a far corner, begins to deliver a low, sustained sound and another that make me think of an owl's cry (but not exactly that). Carefully, Batchelor wedges himself onto a barely discernible ledge of the three-part structure, draping himself into comfort where comfort seems an impossible goal. Later, he will slip, head first, between the cracks that emerge between the blocks when his actions separate them. One block, which he pushes some distance away from the others, reveals a mirrored interior, reflecting light and color; lying with his head inside it, he could be seeking shelter or entering a dream. The uncredited lighting is extraordinary. Vanes of light travel over the floor at one point, and Batchelor moves through the darkness that they pierce.

His theme may be the softness of the human body versus hard-edged urban geometry, but the imagery also suggests less permanent equations. Zoe Scoglio's beautiful video projection looks not unlike a glacier. When Batchelor slips beneath the sheet of plastic and struggles along beneath it, I think of sea foam thrown up. And when a spotlight illumines him as he huddles over the inhospitable structure, and a gleaming, viscous substance, both beautiful and repulsive, streams from the top of his head to the floor, you can believe this man is melting.

Paea Leach's title, *One and One and One*, implies the equality of her three performers, as does her initial presentation of them, lined up and facing us. But it's not always evident how the body language of the two dancers (Leach and Rhiannon Newton) intersects with the fierce poetry that Candy Royalle recites to them and for us. They dance in unison, but not always in perfect synchrony. And there's a fourth "performer:" two pieces of white canvas, about four feet square, framed together so that they sandwich fluorescent tubes between them. Whether hanging, straight down, tilted, released and tipped into a table, or turned into a wall, lit or unlit, the structure is a cumbersome, enigmatic presence. A blank canvas awaiting a painting? A blank page awaiting a poem?

Royalle commands attention, as do her text's repeating rhythms. Some parts of it argue with an invisible person ("She said. . . 'I want to tell you something,' I wasn't interested in listening. I said, 'you don't know what it is to struggle. You never suffered,' She said, 'you never loved me.'") Looped by Royalle's foot on a wa-wa pedal, "I said" and "she said" fight themselves into a blur. Her words become increasingly politically charged; she's enraged by the state of the world and our inertia. You catch words and phrases on the fly; litanies like "overtime, overwhelmed, over everything. . . ." jump out at us (maybe I've misrepresented the order). "Dance what you mean," she orders. But I can't often fuse the big, space-covering, evenly rhythmized movements that the other two are developing with a consideration of the world's problems. Most emotionally resonant is a passage in which the two dancers roll over each other's backs in a going-nowhere voyage, but its most powerful image is cut short: for what seems like only a few seconds, Leach and Newton crawl on their hands and knees, pressed together and uttering small, whimpering sounds.

Martin Hansen's *If It's All in My Veins* questions the often-taught version of twentieth-century dance history as a family tree of supposed rebels (Isadora-begat-Martha and so on), turning it into a struggle in which the wheels of progress may get stuck in the mud, and God knows what the future may be. Hellen Sky, Maxine Palmerson, and Michelle Ferris act as interrogators, imitators, and stagehands—racing around, posing, moving furniture, and lugging spotlights into positions. Sometimes they rest on chairs, eyeing the space, waiting. They snap their fingers rhythmically but idly; the beat goes on, yet. . . .

The images begin with a GIF of Duncan (or supposedly her) at a London garden party, opening her chest to the sky as she runs past the photographer. Each repetition takes less than three seconds. The three women run in a circle, replicating as they pass us the grainy image we've been looking at over and over. Yet, the rep

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lications aren't exact, and maybe that's one of Hansen's points. Sky may imitate Pavlova's endless bourrées as *The Dying Swan*, but she's wearing sneakers as she ripples her arms. Palmerson may copy the two-dimensional thrust of Nijinsky's arms in the Afternoon of a Faun GIF, but she hasn't twisted her torso against her legs as firmly as his filmed images does. Ferris, seated, copies the upward stab of Mary Wigman's arms and clawed hands in her Witch Dance; she's rhythmically in synch with the repeated move of the German Expressionist dancer (projected on a box beside her, rather than on the back wall), but Wigman's mask stares forward, while Ferris tilts her face slightly up.

The women race to get together with these flickering eruptions of history, calling out "stop!" and "start!" and the elapsing seconds. Those not copying a particular image may direct the impersonator (for instance, "in," "out," "in," "out," etc. to cue Palmerson's arm gestures with Nijinsky's). There's something frantic about the women's haste to imitate. Here come German amateur dancers of the 1930s, clustered outdoors; Trisha Brown in her Water Motor; Pina Bausch's Café Mueller; a film by Anne Teresa De Keersemaker in which the close-up image of one of her dancers is replaced by Beyoncé in "Countdown," doing her well-publicized imitation (Hansen's women toss their hair many times in simulation of her). Eventually, Amelia Lever-Davidson's lighting goes wild, and a montage of pop culture dancing floods the screen. There's some onstage business with a ball and a basin, eerily illuminated, and, in the end, a small amount of confetti is thrown.

Throughout the work, a projected stopwatch counts down, but it keeps starting over; just as you think zero is coming, the device has second thoughts; now it's starting at, say, 9:51. The image that stays with me from *If It's All in my Veins* is of contemporary women dancers knocking themselves out to harvest the imperfect footprints of history, while history itself evades them. Whatever waves of greatness ran through those early performers' veins along with their own blood have undergone a sea change. Some choreographers might accept that and build on it; Hansen seems to be choreographing his doubts for the future.

All eight choreographers' program notes emphasize their concern with the ideas that animated their processes. They want that we not just see what they've created, but that we grasp their structural theories. The descriptions can be illuminating, but also confusing and/or intimidating, especially if you read them after you've seen the work to which they refer. Words matter to these choreographers. Those on Program Two objected so strenuously to the edited versions of their original statements that the programs were reprinted with their revised statements added at the bottom. For instance, the initial program note for Rebecca Jensen's *Explorer* read: "Explorer enters the ever-expanding potential offered by the rapidly shifting digital world to meet the perceived limitations of the body." Her subsequent "Artist Statement" puts it this way: "Explorer investigates the ever-expanding potential offered by the rapidly shifting digital world and how this has transformed the perceived limitations of the body." Think about the difference between these. In other words, it was important to Jensen to have us perceive the dance in exactly the way she intended us to.

As I mull over these dances, I occasionally confuse one with another. This may be because I get the impression that several of the choreographers have decided on a theme and then focused on the various oblique

ways they can depict aspects of it. The result is a collage of sorts, but—the materials of dance being human beings living cause-and-effect lives—the parts don't always cohere theatrically, even indirectly. Only afterward, can you reassemble the isolated bits in your mind and make some kind of sense of them. Or not. I may never, for instance, know, why at one point, two of the men in Jensen's *Explorer* (Matthew Adey and Michael McNab) pull the mask-hoods of their trim, white outfits over their heads and a few seconds later push them back again. What did the head coverings enable or necessitate?

Jensen's work includes a number of objects and devices: a frame like a very large coat rack, a handsome painted hanging of what could refer to a glacier, two white objects that could be icebergs, a white box, a eucalyptus branch hanging upside down over a small machine on the floor with buttons that are pushed by the performers, and a device that turns out to be a tiny smoke machine. The striking opening sets the tone for disjunction. A man (Andre Jessop Smith) wearing a mottled morphsuit enters and presses a button that summons up eerie, rising sounds (by Adey). When he opens a side door, in comes Jensen. She's wearing goggles and wielding a leaf-blower, which she trains on the larger mountain of white sheeting. As the fabric yields, you can see the shapes of two enmeshed men seated beneath it; gradually they ooze across the floor in response to the force of the air and lie collapsed. Setting aside the blower and pressing a button on the sound device, Jensen, staring straight ahead, begins to walk a snaky path around and over the two now-motionless, partially revealed men. Although she has fixed them in our minds as terrain to be explored, it's unnerving to watch her step so close to them; once, she places a foot on the side of one guy's head, pauses, and withdraws it.

Over the course of the work, she makes several journeys, in some of them assisted by Smith in his dual capacity as partner and landscape (a large piece of fabric that he drapes over the rack has the same rocky patterning as his costume). She begins on her own, facing a side wall of the theater, and traveling along it in jiggly little steps that also carry her across the back and along the opposite side, eventually struggling across the front. Next, she will "walk" on the walls, horizontal athwart Smith's shoulders, or carried by him and taking big, spraddle-legged steps.

Many times he helps her run up a wall and catches her as she back-flips off it. In one of the sequences most evocative of unanticipated peril, he lies on his back, feet and hands raised for her to sit on (bracing herself on her own hands and feet). On this potentially unsteady terrain, she rotates and changes her positions in various ways. When he stands, she, on his shoulders, spreads into an airplane position. He runs up the aisle with her, but this proves to be an Everest that I guess she's loath to attempt, or a foiled take-off, and they walk back down the steps side by side.

The piece becomes confused as Jensen tangles on the floor with the three men, now recumbent, but able to press the button that turns on the campfire-sized puffs of smoke. And even more perplexing is the fact that Smith peels back his hood, upends himself into a handstand and "walks" backward a few paces on his head (amazing!). In the end, as the hanging billows and then falls to the floor and zooming sounds erupt, Jensen stands on the three men's shoulders and they advance warily toward the door through which she entered.

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The night I saw *Explorer*, she slipped to the floor before the lights went out (other nights, the last image was of her aloft, and I was told that either ending was okay by her). Mission partially failed or triumph still possible. Watching this flawed but strangely compelling work, you could think of as an ecological circus, a failed expedition to the frozen north, confrontations with a universe in flux, and Jensen's own search for new forms.

Interestingly, one of the passages of dancing that struck me during the semi-finals occurred in this work of Jensen's. Adey (better known as a theater designer than a dancer) took off across the front of the stage in a big tempest of movement, as if every part of his body was pursuing its way through space via imagined tangled routes; he did this staring imperturbably at us and left me hungry for more such visceral body language.

Rampant physicality played no part in Alice Heyward's rationally irrational *Before the Fact*. Those who attended Program One could pick up a copy of a slim souvenir-program-sized booklet. Here's the statement on its back cover: "This is a collection of notations documenting works made in the future. These forthcoming works have been archived in a forgotten or anticipated notation system." I'm still trying to twist my brain around Heyward's wedding dance of past, present, and future. Ilya Milstein's "notations" which range from perplexing, imaginative charts to beautiful designs of red teardrop shapes flying on upward diagonals, accompanied by black dots; perhaps others who look at them will accept Heyward's invitation to base dances of their own on them.

Heyward is a precise presence in *Before the Fact*, working within the onstage designs that Milstein periodically adjusts. Her movements themselves might be notating something that doesn't yet exist; the very terrain may well graph a once-and-future place. Diagonal black and/or red tapes create an askew V on the floor; they match the black trim on the cover-all beige apron that she wears. She's surrounded by a tall mirror set on an angle, a beige pyramid of fabric, a small screen, moveable rectangles or squares, a black curtain, a red disk, an unruly heap of blue stuff in a back corner (did I miss anything?). The mirror reflects the designs and, eventually, her. When not busy moving objects around to re-structure the environment, Milstein sits on a chair at the side, reading.

At first, Heyward walks in straight paths, no curves. Organ chords repeat in Gregor Kompar's score. She might be accommodating to designs in the space—her feet tracking the tape paths, her arms reflecting its diagonals—all the time talking about her process. Trim and expert, she nevertheless behaves more like a surveyor than a dancer; her legs simply carry her places; her arms wheel or gesture; her head shakes; but her torso remains primarily erect and unbending.

Removing the apron and turning the pyramid into a beige poncho may signify a notational change, but who can be sure? Near the end, accompanied by whirring, repetitive music, she spins like a dervish, and the poncho flies out as she whips one arm. Then she starts talking again.

Certain actions stand out, perhaps because they mate ideas with purposeful physicality. She lies on the floor, fitting herself into the design taped to a smallish white square on the floor, re-adjusting, trying other relations to it. When she decides she's done, she strips the tapes off the surface, and gradually feeds out what has become a tangled bundle into a line with a squiggle in it lying across the floor. In another intriguing sequence, Heyward moves along the front of the area, where a number of sheets of white paper form a boundary. Kneeling, she picks up each, scrunches it between her hands, and lays it down as a crumpled little punctuation, before moving to the next one.

If the whole piece is notation in action and what we see predicts a future, it's also ephemeral, cleaned up after the performance is over. Some of it may be created in response to Adey's set design. . . or is it the other way around? It's clear that Heyward wants to shake our brains around a bit, and she does.

I wrote this almost a year ago. Anyone reading it now will know that—after hours of debate—the judges gave the Keir Award to Ghenoa Gela and that she also received the audience award. I understood at the time that there was much polite dissension behind the decision, so it may not be appropriate to wonder what the judges' choice reveals about these new pieces. There was a great deal of thoughtful, provocative work on view in the work of the eight semi-finalists. All are choreographers with reputations. Thinking back on the experience of seeing so many pieces by artists unfamiliar to me, I realize that Gela's *Fragments of Malungoka: Women of the Sea* was one of the few dances on view in which movements and ideas felt intimately related, so that aspects of life not easily conveyed in words could be expressed: images of time, place, effort, and desires uniquely revealed through the movements of human beings.