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Between inner and outer worlds

Progress reports from Cath McKinnon and Jenny Kemp on creating new works for the Adelaide Festival

As the Adelaide Festival draws near Australian writers, directors and performing artists-Jenny Kemp, Red Shed, IRAA, Meryl Tankard, Magpie, the Ethereal Eye collaborators amongst others-are pulling together new works that will be put to the test by premiering up against already acclaimed international works. As tough as this can be, a festival can play nurturer, offering support, challenge and profile.

Cath MacKinnon co-director and writer with Red Shed Theatre company, hard at work with script revisions and the shooting of filmed segments, outlines the ingredients of *Station 2: Eye of Another*. "There's two ways into it. One is the storyline, the events of one night. Jude avid Bing who have been kicked out of the warehouse where they live and are on the street; a taxi driver, girlfriend and son are caught up in domestic tensions-he's on the road driving his taxi; Nick, a young policeman working at a new station has problems with his family. It sounds like naturalism but it isn't."

Asked then if the work is presented in a fragmentary way so the audience pieces it together, Cath says, "I tried to give a different focus to three different story lines not necessarily as individual points of view but more to do with particular environments, belief systems, the (acts and fictions and confusions of those who are held within these environments. It's about how two people and the rest of society come together and deal with each other. I'm working on the structure at the moment. I've put the characters inside a fence and outside the fence and patrolling the fence, a metaphor for a state of mind and where you feel you are in relation to other people. I don't think you'll notice that as you watch the performance.

"For the audience it will be like a puzzle. They'll be trying to piece together what happened on the night from different versions. They'll also be working out what is fiction and what is fact. At different times most of the characters talk to the audience. On the night there's a slashing, a stabbing and a shooting. Action takes place and sometimes it's 're-wound' and reviewed. The external framework is like a court but abstractly, in a dream-like state.

"We're trying to work with film to explore the illusory nature of how we create ourselves. At the moment we're experimenting and playing with it. We've just started to work with the script. We'd like a lot longer to play with it. But we're very clear where we're going. The final decisions on the visual elements will greatly alter the way the piece will come out, giving a whole different feeling to it."

Jenny Kemp also spoke about her creative process, the stages of development in her new work and her preoccupation with consciousness and the psyche, though in a different way from Cath McKinnon.

Jenny started work on *The Black Sequin Dress* three years ago. Barrie Kosky knew that Jenny, as she puts it, "needs a long gestation period especially because I've got to make that transition from writer into director.

"Last year, we had a creative development period that involved the designer, actors, composer, writer/director. Really what I was doing at that time was testing out the writing, the structure and a whole lot of things. I was really working as a writer and sometimes having to call tip the director in me in order to test something out. Sometimes you think, hang on this isn't working but it might be where the actors are coming from so if I shift where they're coming from then maybe it can work. This bit isn't working but maybe if a sound comes in or music maybe it will work rhythmically".

The performers include Mary Sitarenos, Margaret Mills, Natasha Herbert, all of whom Jenny has worked with before, plus Ian Scott, Greg Stone and Dancework's Director Helen Herbertson. "There are four women in a way playing the same woman. Helen doesn't speak but she is about my age. I really appreciate her presence both physically and the age of her and she's helping me with the choreography. Last year I worked with her on a creative development at Danceworks on a project of hers so there's a bit of a dialogue occurring between us and we're interested in the crossover point between theatre and dance."

I asked Jenny to talk about her need for particularly intuitive performers. Is it because there isn't any conventional narrative or character grid for them to lock into and that the need to be open to her vision? "A lot of the work is dealing with time-memory and looking at a single moment and going deeply into that moment. It requires a sense of inner rhythm and not so much to do with a socialised time- frame.

"I spend quite a bit of time working on a story board, building the mise en scene before the creative development period. After, I come in with a pretty strong structural offer some of which has been drawn from the paintings of Paul Delvaux. That's my offer to the performers so they, know what this world is. The writing doesn't change much. It's more to do with working on layers-an emotional layer, a thinking layer, a physical layer, all going on at the same time. To build the mise en scene requires a real kinaesthetic sense from the actors. They've got the text plus I've set up a block of work in the morning which gives them the grids that exist in the space. Every time they get lost or wonder what's going on I end up talking for probably half an hour. Then off we go again. That might happen twice a week. I'm continually dropping clues."

Complementing this, the design process of Jenny's work is complete very early, in this case by the creative development period with a version of the set installed and tested. Consequent]), the performers get to 'live' in Jacqueline Everitt's design for a long time.

What about the multiple playing of one woman by four performers?

"It's a way looking at the functioning of the psyche creatively and what its struggles are and what are its possibilities. In what ways are thought and emotion or thought and memory or desire and dream catalytic. So there are four women. It seems to need that many to create a landscape of the psyche.

"I'm also interested in image and the deepening of an image the way the Jungian writer James Hillman talks about it. At any moment what seems important is that there is some sort of duality or ambiguity or more than one thing happening rather than a didactic form. I'm really trying to attend to the complexity of the psyche and allowing that to be something that doesn't have to be overwhelming."

Asked whether *The Black Sequin Dress* is at all autobiographical, Jenny muses, "Less so in this work but at the same time as being less in it, you could also argue that there's more of me in it. In terms of what actually, happens to the woman it's very much a theatrical construct, so none of the conversations are ones I have had. None of the thoughts are things that have come directly out of my life".

I suggested that the power of *The Call of the Wild* was in the way it worked as a reverie. I wanted to know if this would be the case with the new work.

"Yes, but I'm also concerned with the relationship between the inner and the outer world and I think that I've probably attended to that a bit more thoroughly. There should be moments where the audience thinks, 'All, now this is really what it's about', or where it really grounds or appears quite real"

Would those be moments of direct conscious address to the audience or moments of naturalistic exchange? "That sort of thing. It's where I'm pushing the parameters a bit, so I think, okay I can go in all the way in there, but I'm not going all the way in unless I go all the way out there. I have to find what 'in there' or 'out there' are and what their relationship to each other is. That's what I'm examining really."

KG

Red Sled Theatre Company, *Station 2: Eye of Another* by Cath McKinnon. Performers: Dennis Moore, Leah Purcell, Eileen Darley, Grant Piro, Sid Brisbane, Ulli Birve. Sally Hildyard. Director: Tim Maddock. 251 Wakefield Street, March 4.

Jenny Kemp, *The Black Sequin Dress*, composed by Elizabeth Drake, designed by Jacqueline Everitt. Performers: Mary Sitarenos, Margaret Mills, Natasha Herbert, Ian Scott, Greg Stone, Helen Herbertson. Scott Theatre. March 5-10