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Converging Realities

Feminism In Australian Theatre

by Peta Tait

(with contributions from Venetia Gillot, Julie Holledge, Anna
Messariti, Lydia Miller, Mary Moore)

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...In contrast, writer-director-producer Jenny Kemp uses a completely different approach to foreground the spectator's subjective responses when she sets out to externalise interior landscapes of thought and feeling to be observed, entered and absorbed. Her theatrical collages of visual imagery and soundscapes communicate an impression of sensory realms which flow around each other, inviting the inner responses of the spectators. She sets up a space for the spectators to wander around in with their minds, to roam in, amble through, fantasise about, get lost in, to daydream in. This experimentation with ways to enact inner realities arose out of autobiographical performances in the mid-1970s and from her increasing awareness that theatre needs to offer a sanctuary for the spectator's inner world, inclusive of both its nightmarish and its harmonious dimensions. Kemp explains:

I can't find plays to satisfy me. I need to build my own. I form a theatrical world where we can experience everyday dream, myth and fantasy coexisting where linear time restraints are left behind. I just know I've got to build a different world ... theatre reinforces the values of the mundane world through its form and content - it remakes the social world we live in. I find this problematic.

Kemp criticises a theatre which merely duplicates the outward naturalistic appearances of social reality as unsatisfying and indicative of an impoverished vision.

Influenced by both Freud and Jung, Kemp synthesises their theories into descriptions of dream states, memories and fantasies. If her work infers a search for a feminine unconscious, a similar purpose to that of the *écriture féminine* described in the work of Cixous and Irigaray, this is because Kemp wants to redress the social repression of inner experience beginning from her own gendered perspective. *The White Hotel* (1983), adapted from the novel by D.M. Thomas, was about the inner disturbance of Lisa Erdman, an opera singer under treatment with Freud in Vienna. The nightmarish fantasies of Erdman's inner perceptions were conveyed in performance as contradictory to the rational logic of the external reality surrounding her. Yet she intuitively predicted her own death to reveal the personal truth of these inner experiences. One reviewer explained how the production:

...digs below the rational surface of the human mind into the subconscious, relating the fears and repressions of childhood to the adult personality ... As adaptor, director and organiser of this disturbing and wide-ranging play, Jenny Kemp has performed the labours of Hercules.

Another reviewer confirmed: 'The point of view is that a patient diagnosed by Freud as an hysteric, and therefore crazy, in the reality of the twentieth century, is quite sane'. Through the expressive style of her theatre work, Kemp confirms how this inner world conditions and directs social behaviour yet is suppressed by it.

In *Good Night Sweet Dreams* (1986) Kemp developed a text around her own dreams based on a record she and her partner kept over a year. She interchanged dreams, reality, waking and sleeping states in the lives of Leena and Limon,

using puppets to become the elephants, deformed babies and cricketers of the dream-state on the stage. These dreams were seen by critic Peter Weiniger as a ... 'natural extension of our lives, constantly interacting with reality rather than in conflict ... humorous and whimsical ... scenes of domestic life'. The impact of dreams on individual behaviours and social interaction was clearly evident in Kemp's theatrical depictions of this interchange between the unconscious and day-to-day reality. Her theatrical exposé of intensely private moments challenges the separations between inner and outer worlds. For women who have traditionally been confined to private social spaces the metaphoric private space of the mind is both a refuge and a potential field of repression which must be expiated. Kemp's theatre echoes a state of intimacy which can only ever be subjectively experienced. In this way she reveals how the separate and different experiences of individual inner worlds confirm totally different realities occurring simultaneously. One reviewer commented: 'She is enchanted by the idea that upon waking we might come from somewhere completely different, say, in the middle of the ocean, and now we are calmly sitting and having breakfast'."

In *Call of the Wild* (1989) Kemp produced a female subjectivity which circulated between an inner world and the external, visually defined boundaries of animate and inanimate forms. The woman subject was emblematic and mercurial, at times bare-breasted, dressed in a large garden party hat and gloves in multiple images of herself and at other times isolated in her tower (suburban room) doing housework. In her visual references to Paul Delvaux paintings, Kemp juxtaposed the men and women against incongruous, anachronistic buildings and backgrounds and each other to convey disjointed time frames. Elizabeth Drake helped establish a soundscape which gave the audience a sense of listening in on a private conversation.

The spoken text was partly obscured as a male persona read aloud from a book in French and Spanish. The depiction of an unchanging natural feminine self is interpolated by brutal intrusions from the legacy of cultural archetypes such as a Cinderella fantasy where one of the ugly sisters cuts off her heel to fit into the slipper. The meaning is fragmentary and fluid in *Call of the Wild*, showing the female self outside fixed definitions in an expression of contradictory possibilities.

Kemp explains:

I feel the ambiguity is really important because it allows for possibilities rather than things narrowed down - complexity - possibility of change - and complex passion ... I spend a lot of time with actors looking for ambiguous delivery.

A circulating female subjectivity formed the substance of the text, moving around the sexually objectified female body aligned with nature and the socially constructed symbolic woman created through spoken language and artistic images, to communicate an interactive state of being which takes in elements of both and throws up endless interchangeable combinations.

Kemp wants the audience to find themselves in the conjunction of their inner and outer worlds. But the world of female subjectivity is unsafe, continuously exposed to intrusions and invasions from a hostile external world; constantly under threat of sudden violence. *Remember* (1992) concerns a woman's rape moving between memories of what preceded the event, the rape, the victims present time in the hospital room, the waking fantasies arising out of the experience and its impact on her dream-state. In the oscillating time sequences of the text the potential for the rape to have been prevented coexists with the consequential aftermath, formed as much from the resulting

psychological terror as it was from the body's physical trauma. The circumstances surrounding the rape are repeated and relived as the performance manifests the woman's thoughts, constantly sifting through her feelings of shock and disbelief. The murder of her assailant becomes both part of the event and a projected fantasy of revenge in the performance.

Kemp's theatre would seem to be responding to the regret expressed by Artaud in his question:

How does it happen that in the theater ... everything that cannot be expressed in speech, in words, or, if you prefer, everything that is not contained in the dialogue is left in the background?

She brings the unspoken to the foreground and overlaps thoughts and reflections in a strongly imagistic theatre text which speculatively mirrors the creative process itself. Her intention for the audience to come closer to understanding their own inner states through this theatre also echoes Artaud's call for a metaphysics of speech and gesture: theater must pursue by all its means a reassertion not only of all aspects of the objective and descriptive external world, but of the internal world, that is, of man [author's insertion: of woman] considered metaphysically'. The absence of narrative and of predictable dramatic structures gives the audience time to mentally drift in and out of the work. Kemp explains how she is inviting her audience to 'play' and daydream within the viewing of the performance. The merging of time sequences replicates an inner world where past and future are always experienced through the present and memory is continually reappraised and compounded.