

Still Angela: a slice of the girl

Mary-Ann Robinson talks with Jenny Kemp and collaborators

Still Angela premieres for Melbourne's Plabox in April. Some of the collaborators, writer-director Jenny Kemp, composer Elizabeth Drake and performers Natasha Herbert, Margaret Mills, Lucy Taylor, Mark Minchinton, Ros Warby and Simon Wilton met Mary-Ann Robinson to discuss the evolution of the work.

Some of the team have worked together before on projects such as Call of the Wild (1989) and The Black Sequin Dress (1996). Is this piece a continuation of earlier work?



Simon Wilton, Lucy Taylor, Mark Minchinton, Natasha Herbert, Margaret Mills, Felicity MacDonald, *Still Angela*

Kemp From a writers point of view maybe it is... We've still got the sense of a woman who is passing through a period of transition and we've got once again 4 women playing one woman. Also that sense of an inner and an outer landscape or location, an inner and an outer world and a disjunction between those worlds. And the putting together of the 3 disciplines of sound, choreography and visual theatre.

Minchinton One of the things that's changed since Call of the Wild's that the Delvaux [Paul Delvaux the Belgian artist whose work figures in Kemp's creations] stuff has sedimented. It's not so overt And the spatial relationships have changed

Kemp A difference from then is [choreographer] Helen Herbertson.

Drake We could say that The Black Sequin Dress is like a transition between Call of The Wild and this work, because that was where Helen came in and worked with the actors in a generic way, to actually construct on the floor. It seems that in this one the movement is the driving force, possibly more than the text.

Warby I would say that the text is still the driving force. It feels like it went through a transition from the text to the initial development in which the focus was

sort of, throw it on the floor and doing lots of impulse work. Now that the piece is being formulated, with the framing becoming much more refined, that balance has shifted again.

Kemp We are having to behave quite choreographically now in order to place text and movement alongside each other. Even though we are not doing expressive dance movements as such, we're doing movement that revolves around spatial and temporal choices because in many of the scenes there are about 5 grids operating. By grid I mean layers of reality or experience happening simultaneously and they are all actually slightly, disjunctive in relation to each other. It's quite complex making the spatial choices so that's clear to the audience

Warby Between the spatial and the textual, the layers are quite sophisticated and there are a lot of people on the floor

Mills I feel that the action, or the movement, or the spatial plan that we are working to is given far more precedence in this one, I think that in *Black Sequin* there were more discrete events in the text

Herbert With the ratio of those that speak and those that don't, at some stages there are 3 characters that aren't verbal. Helen has provided another language that's happening non-verbally. At first, as an actor, it's hard to be aware of all of that because you just want to hook into speaking, but we're having to stretch that out and be aware of the other language that's going on.

Kemp Your cue might be someone on the other side of the room doing something...

Herbert Which is nothing to do with the scene that you place yourself in. But it is of course, in another way. The challenge I found was when speaking and engaging in domestic scenes my character is on the move- there's a certain pace to her and yet I'm having to move fast slowly because you have to react to whatever else is happening.

Kemp Because we're working with scenes about emotional memory and actual memory, there are times when the actions of the figure Natasha's playing are being examined by another character and that's what's interrupting her, or slowing it down it doesn't actually change the nature of her energy but we're pulling it apart so it can be looked at because it's being remembered. So that is a really particular task for the performer. Helen said the other day that the girl is not even there in a way, but it's a slice of the girl, a fragment of a memory of something. And yet there is actually a person out there, a whole person, and they have to be that. But the way, we perceive them, or the way they become a part of what's happening, is as if at

times it's in the back of the brain. We're trying to get the rhythm of a transition or a catharsis or some inner work that might be taking place.

Warby It's like trying to get the rhythm of one character through 4 people and 2 languages-choreography and text.

Robinson Can you talk about the process of directing in this way?

Kemp Directing is very complex because one can only direct or be in dialogue with one layer at a time, so there's been some discomfort in people not being attended to. That's why, when we're all in the space Helen might be talking to one layer of it and Elizabeth can be talking to another layer of it. We've had blocks of time through our creative development when we were all in there and all able to speak.

Drake it's like it evolves from the inside out.

Herbert We've had to discover what it is we're doing and that has come through our relationship to one another

Taylor My experience of finding my Angela is that I can't find the text until I've found the physicality. But I can't find the physicality without text. And then there's the relationship to the space and everybody else within that. So it's quite delicate. I'm trying to be patient with myself because it's quite complex. I've got to be conscious of the fact that I'm a memory and someone's remembering me, I'm in my kitchen - am I remembering me? In the end I think I just have to be in the kitchen and the form and the content will support the idea.

Kemp Everyone else is this one person, Angela, and Simon is the other person, Jack. What's that like for you, Simon?

Wilton It shifts according to the different Angelas. It's not as complex, because I deal with them one at a time and they're very clearly written scenes, very true situations, very easy to click into.

Taylor It's wonderful sometimes because you think, am I addressing all aspects of my personality and character? But it doesn't matter because I've got 3 other people to do that for me. I don't have to do it all.

Kemp It is actually Angela at 3 ages, but we only need one Jack because the Angela's 3 ages are mutable within her at one age. The younger self is still there as an older self is forming. We're looking inside Angela and at the outside of Jack. In real terms there might only be one Angela sitting in a kitchen until she gets out and

goes on a train journey. And the whole thing could be remembered. There are a number of narrative grids that are activated. They actually do coexist slightly, so people might decide that it means something different to the person sitting next to them, or not be quite sure whether she actually goes to the desert or actually goes off the train. A little bit like in *Black Sequin Dress*, there are those moments where you're preparing for the future and you imagine the future. In imagining it, you're preparing for it.

Robinson *Elizabeth can you tell us about the music, in particular the carousel and the carnival link.*

Drake I've tried not to follow the text too much but I'm definitely influenced by a certain tone of the language. There's something quite particular about this work, something kind of pure and raw. So I didn't want to do something that sounded too sophisticated or too romantic. I wanted it to be just happening over there (in the corner) And the carousel I have worked through because of the connection with horses, and the fact that it exists in a carnival, a setting which is outside our ordinary, lives, the place of dreams and dreaming. Mark was also interested in the carnival as a place where things are turned upside down, where things aren't quite what they seem.

Mills The whole thing about the world of nature -rain and earth, mother and memory - there is this layering of meaning in the script that is really strong.

Kemp It's good that you mention the greater landscape, the sense of the place in nature, the feeling of being connected to the air and trees and sky, as well as being connected to a person. In some ways the play looks at what that is. Quite often when we're very young, connectedness in attached to another person and there is not necessarily a strong sense of autonomy. The play is looking at that shift towards autonomy and towards connection with place, or greater landscape. Not that that would cancel out connection with another person, but it's opening up those possibilities. A kind of rite of passage.

Still Angela, *director-writer Jenny Kemp, designer Jacqueline Everitt, composer Elizabeth Drake, Choreographer Helen Hervertson, lighting designer David Murray, script consultant Mark Minchinton, film Ben Speth. Creative development and direction in collaboration with Natasha Herbert, Felicity MacDonald, Margaret Mills, Mark Minchinton, Lucy Taylor, Ros Warby, Simon Wilton, Playbox, The Merlyn Theatre, CUB Malthouse, Melbourne, April 10 -27, 8pm; Mon - Tues at 6.30pm.*