

Full attention

The Little Con

27 February 2009

And 12seconds founder Sol Lipman is more than happy to ride the wave of what former Microsoft researcher Linda Stone dubbed 'continuous partial attention'.

A warm summer's evening at Cecil Street Studio in North Fitzroy Melbourne, the first Little Con for 2009, and my first ever. There are only a handful of people watching, perhaps as many performers as there is audience.

It has started before I know it.

With her red hair, and red t-shirt ("I love rock n roll"), Dianne Reid begins the dancing. Usually quite reserved, when performing she becomes altogether something else. A look, a glance, there is openness in her body and across her chest. She comments on her own work as she dances: "How did you get down there?" Dianne is dancing, for the most part, forward facing, pushing me to look; the perceptual hub that are the human's ventral surfaces. There is a shimmering in her body, restlessness. I am struck by the detailed experience of her body-mind. Dianne negotiates the familiar and the unfamiliar with striking ease and it is clear that she knows this place and these sensations. I recognise her listening occurring in the small shifts as she attends to the next 'stream' of provocation.

She maintains her self-deprecating commentary: "At some point I've got to get serious", "you'll never know when you need the splits", "showered in my own virtuosity", "I've got to sell myself more". I am reminded of the fringe; that this is an important edge of the Melbourne dance scene.

Dianne is joined onstage by Grinderman's "Electric Alice" and I too feel like I am a child again with Nick Cave's deep voice extolling us to notice just how big and bright the moon is.

And then, there is something leaving, of being thrown from her body, or throwing it away, expulsion. Downstage left, Dianne mimics the rotating fan, and becomes a plastic clown face at the fair, table-tennis balls at the ready. We laugh because we know, because we recognise. It's a clear ending, but it does feel a little too easy.

Side by side, small smiles, noticing us noticing, Caley O'Neill and Gabby Rose begin. I find myself wanting to laugh, like an opening night festival audience, hungry for a laugh at any opportunity. Caley and Gabby's skins are crawling: apparent microorganisms generating tracks of movement across the surfaces of their bodies. Their hips are loose and they are still smiling, perhaps a little nervously. Gabby's turquoise bra strap pokes out from underneath her singlet, a colourful quotidian stripe puncturing the abnormality of their actions. The "DJ" fades in She & Him covering The Beatles' "I Should Have Known Better", and Gabby and Caley become dolls, getting themselves ready, leaning, "holding" one part of the body, and releasing an

other. The movement pathways work from the centre outwards, nearly always arriving at the fingers and hands or head; and they both carefully watch the ends of these actions.

It's sweet, moving, and over almost before it's begun.

In my periphery, Paul Romano is beginning from within us. He has extraordinary feet (everyone knows this) but right now they are not clean. They have the kind of dirt on them that dancers know very well: dark spots, pressed into the skin, in need of pumice. This is definitely not his first dance for the day; these feet have seen a lot of action.

There are tiny tremors in Paul's eyes and lips. Eyes that are looking inwards, hunting for a new synapse, an original moment. He shifts onto his toes, a delicate demi-pointe in first position. This is his 'go to' state, like Dianne Reid's "shimmering whilst listening", a chance to take stock whilst his attention becomes action. I see a light *developpé*, a whisper of line, sternoclavicular mastoid at full tilt, refined balances. The actions from the initiation to the resolution (even if unresolved) are deeply traceable. As is so often when I watch Paul dance, I am reminded of Rosalind Crisp. Her influence is deeply embedded in the aesthetic, and the pre-charactered location of the work.

Paul's gaze is internal. I know this type of looking and sensing. It is manifest in Paul in restlessness: furtive glances, an insatiable desire for the idiosyncratic. Neural dendrites dancing across the micro-voids between the known and the unknown; an acetylcholine junky.

A crow outside is laughing and Paul doesn't flinch. There is an understated frustration in his voice and in the rhythm of the work, a character pushing to be outed. A proud man, trying to keep it together yet finding himself stuck. Then, a virtuosic backbend cuts through the uncertainty.

"It doesn't mean anything" he whispers towards the end, apologetic. But it does Paul, it speaks to a history of moving, a body in thought, and of surprising and being surprised. "10 minutes?" he asks at the end ... and we are clapping.

We are given no respite.

Shaun McLeod's stillness is like the dirt on Paul Romano's feet: it speaks of being placed, and of experience. It settles me, and I feel comfortable as I watch. He sings a refrain from She & Him's Beatles cover (the song that he himself had put on for Caley and Gabby). "What's the next line?" he asks. "I am uncertain". He is facing us, and like Dianne Reid he chooses to self-consciously undermine his vast experience. His toes curve in, gripping the floor, and his eyes are following his hands. I recognise this idiosyncrasy of Shaun's dancing. I think, in that moment, that if I were to direct Shaun I would find ways to disrupt this pattern. But we are who we are, and in his gaze is a tacit call for us to observe what it is that he is seeing.

He generates long contralateral extensions across his body; arm to leg. It's compact, contained, solid and 'on'. He strikes clean postures—to this, to that—whilst maintaining a strong rhythmic lyricism. He asks (still hanging onto The Beatles),

"What if she *doesn't* say she'll love you too?" His hand is on his head, thinking, even a little anxious. Later, the wall brings relief for his dancing persona; some respite. We are given the longest stillness of the evening. Eyes down.

And then it's just him, walking away from who he's become. Shaun whistles, fingers tapping, the small holding the large together. I feel like I am witnessing him dancing, and then him being him.

"Sorry about that", his back is to the corner, he checks the toilet door, and bows.

Lastly, there are two more: Joey Lehrer and Ann-Maree Ellis. She sees us whilst she is sensing, her feet and fingers are light. Joey enters the space soon after and some bottles crash outside. It has been some time since the Little Con started this evening and these two dancers are well past their warm-up. Yet their work is immediately knowing and lyrical, tracing the lines of momentum, their gazes strongly directed.

I feel them heading towards the vernacular of contact improvisation, as if the beginning is simply what happens before the *proper* CI dancing begins. Their work in contact is highly skilled, idiosyncratic, but unmistakably CI. Is this recognisable in the space they occupy (their 'shapes'), or the type of attention that CI propagates? I sense that their dancing and listening changes once they are out of contact, as if the information they are privy to (or how it is absorbed) is disrupted by the (increased) space between them.

Their work together is skimming the floor now, counter balances, alternating perspectives; their heads making strong isolated shapes, pulling their bodies away from the regular or known. I am deeply drawn to these places they are starting to occupy, where my vision of their two bodies is confused. Who belongs to which limb? Whose action is that? Ann-Maree releases a forced sigh, and Joey looks over his shoulder. There is confidence here, and skill. His eyes predictably watching his hands as he solos. They are on the cusp, simmering, but at the same time the music 'pushed' on them (Gotye's "The Only Way") seems to unsettle them, or more accurately infects their attention: the seduction of sound. The upshot is that I struggle to read beyond a simplistic narrative of a man and a woman. The cover of The Beatles from earlier in the evening is no longer heard, but the presence of the saccharine lyrics still hovers in the space. Joey and Ann-Maree finish in a 'shape' and I am thinking "So, I should have realised a lot of things before / If this is love you've gotta give me more / Give me more, hey hey hey, give me more".

It is exhilarating to be privy to people sensing and listening; an intimacy so rarely afforded (even in dance), or given value in our time. It assumes a degree of trust between the watcher and the watched and these dancers have gently asked me to participate in their actions. In my watching, I have been drawn to consider the extremes of human action; revelling in how it is that we have come to this discipline of improvised dancing. This holds true whether I think of these Little Con dances as being a subset of all human endeavour, or merely a portion of that which we call

dancing. What I have watched tonight represents, in some small way, the edges of human experience, the nooks and crannies of our desires, our interests, our capacity to absorb and be absorbed by the idiosyncratic, and to attend. It is deeply pleasurable.

Yes it is near-continuous, but there is nothing remotely partial in the attention of these performers and their audience.

Simon Ellis

14 March 2009

Performers: Dianne Reid, Caley O'Neill, Gabby Rose, Paul Romano, Shaun McLeod, Ann-Maree Ellis, Joey Lehrer.

Music: Grinderman – Electric Alice, She & Him – I Should Have Known Better, Gotye – The Only Way

Reference

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