



British designer shows hues the boss

Alan MacDonald loves pushing boundaries, writes **Adam Fulton**.

A camera is not usually far from Alan MacDonald. The English production designer who moulded the look of the royal family's inner world in the Oscar-winning film *The Queen* and helped Kylie Minogue reinvent herself on stage likes to capture the minutiae of life in photographs he can later use for ideas.

He is especially keen on colour and the human responses to it. So, when the Londoner was in town readying his electrified set for the Sydney Dance Company's latest production, *The Land of Yes and the Land of No*, which of Sydney's sumptuous colours and rich urban hues was he photographing?

Grey. And lots of it – particularly in city buildings on grim days. Contrasting colours too. The exercise was partly research for a film adaptation of Shakespeare's *Henry V* set in grey seasons. But it was also to deepen the insight into colour psychology that informed MacDonald's design of a simple yet colourful, versatile and, at times, frenetic set for the dance show.

The Land of Yes and the Land of No was first staged in London in 2009 by the Sydney Dance Company's artistic chief, Rafael Bonachela, and toured Britain and Europe. It has been reworked and expanded with a bigger cast for Australian audiences and again includes the London-based Australian dance dynamo Amy Hollingsworth. It comes to Sydney next week after opening at the Brisbane Festival. Bonachela's initial brief to

MacDonald, a longtime collaborator, was that the show's theme was symbols and signs, their meaning and how people respond to them. The designer began looking twice at all the signs around him.

"You're constantly bombarded with repetitive information in terms of colour, typographic form or use of symbol. It's very simplistic," MacDonald says. "We all know that a picture of a burning cigarette with a red line through it means you ain't allowed to smoke. It was looking at those kind of images – no entry, no smoking, exits, one way, mind the gap, whatever it may be. There's a simplicity of form that helped define what the set is like."

The result is a 12 metre wide rectangular, grid-like frame made of fluorescent tubes. It is static and visually limited – until switched on. Then, colours flicker and zip around, making many shapes from an arrow to a "10" to a strobing neon frenzy, all controlled by computer and prompting an array of associations and moods. The displays reflect sections of the show from "entrance", "one way", "merge" and "exit".

"I tried to give a minimalist set a choreography in its own right that mirrors what we're trying to illustrate on stage emotionally," MacDonald says, quipping: "A lot of kids might think it's about a video game for all I know."

MacDonald retains a youthful air, still sporting a thumb ring at 55. He began in production design in the mid-1980s in film and later expanded to music videos and dance work. "For me the design process is always the same – it's provoke and response."

How he achieves it will vary. In film, for instance, audiences need a recognisable reality. MacDonald can enhance it subtly with tools

including colour palette, texture, light and design choices such as furniture and textiles, he says. On stage, the forms and narrative can be more abstract.

In *The Queen*, MacDonald represented the British royal family's stately homes such as Balmoral Castle with naturalistic, organic colour palettes, in contrast to the more "plastic" and garish 10 Downing Street, residence of the Prime Minister.

"Within *The Queen*, in psychologically defining two separate worlds, is a knowledge that I can bring to worlds like contemporary dance, where you want one section to be warm and sensual but might want other sections to be cold and brutal."

The principles were also at play when he designed the stage sets for a few Kylie Minogue tours starting with her 2002 *Fever* shows, which Bonachela choreographed. "She's clever, she completely understands her brand, she's inspiring," MacDonald says of the pop queen. "At the same time, she's sensible enough to employ people to inspire and provoke her [and] will allow people to push her in directions she's not necessarily comfortable with."

MacDonald has collaborated with Bonachela on half a dozen productions since, saying he found a kindred spirit in the Spaniard, who was recently reappointed to another three years at the Sydney Dance Company. But striking golden ideas still takes a lot of mining. "It's a usual artistic process of a lot of talking, a lot of waffle, and if you get one kernel of an idea out of a two-hour conversation, that's fantastic."

The Land of Yes and the Land of No is at Sydney Theatre from Tuesday to October 29.



Top set ... Alan MacDonald on the set of Sydney's Dance Company's latest performance, *The Land of Yes and the Land of No*. Photo: Steven Siewert