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Reviews



The Land of Yes & The Land of No, Sydney Dance Company



The Land of Yes & The Land of No, photo © Tristram Kenton



Hickson Road, Sydney



Hickson Road roundabout



Hickson Road, Sydney

Signs of the times

In its home town, Sydney Dance Company is presenting Rafael Bonachela's most engaging work since he became the company's artistic director.

The odd thing is, he did not create it for the Sydney Dance Company, but for his own small troupe back in London, the Bonachela Dance Company.

The Land of Yes & The Land of No premiered at a German festival in June 2009, a few months after Bonachela became SDC's boss. Perhaps he was energised and inspired by his new appointment in Sydney, and the prospect of many more years in the sunny city.

Bonachela has trimmed about 15 minutes from the length of the work and added four more dancers, making a total of 10 dancers (two thirds of the company) who whip through the now 70 minute work with energy and focus, giving their all for Bonachela, and no doubt relieved that The Land of Yes is a work in which they can really display their technique to the full.

Danced to Road Sign Variations, a minimalist classical/acoustic score (organ, piano, strings and vocals) by Bonachela's favourite composer, Ezio Bosso, the work still feels like ten minutes too long, partly because there is no respite from the score that threatens overload after about 40 minutes, not because of its volume (a common problem with Bonachela/Bosso works) but its relative sameness – although there is relief during a quirky duet, danced to Speed Limit, a Night Ride – part of Bosso's full score – and in a solo for Richard Cilli, danced to vocals.

Due to the pre-publicity, many will know that the title The Land of Yes & The Land of No refers to Bonachela's interest in the everyday signage that clutters our city lives.

But if you did not know that in advance, you wouldn't necessarily link the choreography with signs, except when the dancers are making obvious gestures, such as pointing or holding up their hands to indicate 'stop'.

Nor does the choreography, or even the concept, link signs we observe – such as 'merge' or 'one way' – with the impact on our emotions and the way in which they might spark memories and responses, as Bonachela states was his aim.

The overarching choreographic impression is one of restraint and sometimes despair, but with tender or comic moments punctuating the introversion. Recurring motifs and steps include kicks, whirling arms, circular leaps, and sharp turns of the head, as if the dancers are checking one another or the plethora of instructions that surround them.

A program note explains that Alan Macdonald's design, dominated by a rectangular grid of flickering neon tubes, represents both an architectural element (doors, windows), and scaffolding that the dancers must cross – "out into the city of our imagination". The grid is colour washed with various jewel shades, among them purple, green, dark blue, and coral-red.

The grid brought back memories of Nicole Fonte's work for the Australian Ballet in 2008, titled The Possibility Space, in which the set, designed by Markus Pysall, was a similar neon grid.

Bonachela excels in The Land of Yes solos and duets, in particular the first solo danced by Charmene Yap, whose beautiful, muscular back is as eloquent as any I've seen on the dance stage. Her anguished, grounded solo becomes a duet and unless I'm imagining it, there is a moment within that duet that looks like Michelangelo's Pieta has come to life.

While the ensemble work indicates progression and withdrawal, with the dancers moving in horizontal lines, the solos, duets and trios are confined to smaller spaces within which the dancers tend to move in spiral patterns.

Richard Cilli's standout solo alternates small gestures with broad movements of his entire body, most effectively when he arches his back and falls to his knees as voices sing Hallelujah. His grounded movements, his gestures and his arms – sometimes hanging as if disconnected to his body – seem to signify distress rather than joyful praise.

Another choreographic highlight is a sweetly comic duet for Natalie Allen and Chen Wen, who move in robotic unison yet appear to relish the chance to show their individuality within the ensemble.

Theo Clinkard's sheer white costumes, many of them finely pleated, are chic and easy on the eye, although many seemed unrelated to the theme of the work despite the program note explaining that they are "clothes you would wear out in the city on a bright clear day".

The Land of Yes is playing at the Sydney Theatre in Hickson Road where a roundabout features, in its centre, a squashed red convertible. Inside the car is a lump of concrete. To me, it doesn't indicate a road smash but time passing and changing. Others will see it differently.

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