



CHRISSIE PARROTT DANCE COMPANY

In Profile

Robyn Archer and Stefan Karlsson
in *See Ya Next Century*
Dir./Chor: Chrissie Parrott,
Writer/Singer: Robyn Archer;
Music: Cathie Travers,
(Design: Mary Moore)

'Are people looking for the message? There *has* to be a message—though it's usually simpler in dance.'

That deceptively straightforward statement is actually quite a challenge to the small world of Australian dance. It would clearly not find favour with the classicists of the Australian Ballet, for instance, for whom visual beauty, dancing skill and mostly silly story-telling are everything.

It would probably be refuted (or at least deconstructed) by the post-modern abstractionists of Danceworks in Melbourne or Dance Exchange in Sydney. Even Graeme Murphy at the Sydney Dance Company might feel that his primary tasks are to choreograph exciting movement and to tell stories... not bother his patrons with messages.

Perhaps the only local dance companies certain to agree about messages are Meryl Tankard's in Adelaide and the One Extra Company in Sydney. For, although Chrissie Parrott, who was speaking in this case about her New Year production called *See Ya Next Century*, has left the word 'theatre' out of the Chrissie Parrott Dance Company's name (CPDC hereafter), it is *dance theatre* that she's been offering audiences in Perth since 1986—and, increasingly, audiences across the rest of the country.

And some of them—even specialist dance critics—were pretty bemused by *See Ya Next Century*, a cabaret piece seen in Sydney and Melbourne which had limited space for dance as it also incorporated songs by Robyn Archer, live music by Cathie Travers, plus scripted and screened words. It also tried to tell a timely story about the increasing confusion of life as we hurtle towards the 21st century. 'If you don't feel crazy, you're not in touch with the times', was the disturbing message—one that many found difficult to digest in dance.

'It wasn't my best work, but what a challenge!' exhilarated choreographer Parrott. So, where did she come from—this pursuivant of the difficult, who has tackled subjects like displacement of space by the human body (*Terminal*

Velocity, 1989), obsession (*A Tale of Obsession and Ordinary Madness*, 1990), the currently trendy subject of angels in our terrestrial midst (*Earth Angels*, 1990), computers as monsters (*Software Dragon*, 1991), the role of women in myth (*Terra*, 1991) and industrial desensitisation (*Factory* in 1992)?

Chrissie Parrott was brought up by English migrant parents in Perth—having already been fired by the tap bug in her Northern English infancy ('I won ten bob in a talent contest on Blackpool Pier!') and been irrevocably influenced by jokey mealtimes with her father ('a comedian who never made it to the stage, though I must get him into a piece soon'). The combination has, she admits, landed her with the soubriquet 'the funny choreographer'.

But it was serious dance she was after when Parrott left Australia in the seventies for the experience in Cologne (at Tanz Forum) and Stockholm (with Cremer Baletten). Both developed her to the point where she felt able to claim, 'I can do it, I can do it', let's move on to choreography. But neither was able to make room for such progress and she was left with a choice between trying to start her own company in Europe—or back at home. And Europe was as much dominated by male choreographers examining a male view of the world as America or Australia. And this despite a pet theory of Parrott's that 'maybe women have more to say in dance'.

The decision to return to Perth also had more personal factors involved, unmentioned by Parrott, but included in the calculations of Stefan Karlsson, lead dancer with both Sweden's Culberg Ballet (then) and (now) the CPDC—as well as being Parrott's husband. 'I was very pleased where I was—I was happy in my work, and had danced all over the world, but we'd got married and had a child. Chernobyl had just happened and it was time to leave Europe. Perth may have lacked culture (we have fifty theatres in Stockholm) but it was beautiful, people were friendly, audiences were open, and it was isolated enough to take the pressure off new work.'



Jon Burh in *Factory*, 1992
Festival of Perth
(Chor: Chrissie Parrott)



Karlsson was initially offered plenty of work with the WA Ballet, but in the absence of a classical choreographer as experimental as Mats Ek at Culberg, soon tired of ballet's limitations. 'The way they want you to perform is unreal. With contemporary choreography, it feels more real. There is some acting, I suppose, in ballet, but it's gestural and clichéd, and it's usually a matter of the choreographer saying: 'Just do this and it'll work', rather than explaining his creative processes. With Chrissie I was part of the development of the CPDC style from the start... With \$50 in the bank, we worked on a beach during my holidays. God, it was hard on sand—worse than a triathlon!'

In those days, 1987, the CPDC was just a pick-up company, and the last C stood for 'collective'. Parrott was also working for the WA Ballet, teaching at the WA Academy, and sufficiently unsure of her progress to follow her husband to Sydney in 1989 when Karlsson was offered work with the Sydney Dance Company. At 35 the lithe Swede might have made music with the slightly older Graeme Murphy... able to impersonate the master in new works on stage. But Murphy was on a year's sabbatical and apart from partnering the inimitable Janet Vernon, Karlsson felt the year had lead nowhere in particular—and it had been backwards for his wife Chrissie. So, it was home to Perth.

One factor that both now appreciate about Perth is that the annual Festival there has introduced so many modern dance companies to audiences in the city that it has the best educated dance audiences in the country. 'The credit must go to David Blenkinsop and Henry Boston of the Festival,' Chrissie Parrott believes. 'They've taken advantage of all the money put into French and Canadian dance 15 years ago to bring in some fabulous groups. And when I heard how poorly Maguy Marin was received in Sydney, compared with the smash hit she was in Perth, I realised what a help they'd been to me in developing my audience. They're not just looking for polish here—they want difference, they want guts. In Sydney, by comparison, the SDC has prepared them for ever so fine chrome. It's definitely the company which suits that city!'

Perth has also supplied a variety of places where the CPDC can function in a variety of ways. As Stefan Karlsson says of his wife and choreographer: 'Chrissie never finds a formula that is repeated. The audience sees one piece and comes again to see something totally different.'

Such a change is signalled when Parrott is taking advantage of Perth's summer drought to perform in the open air at The Quarry—an amazing suburban space, lying below three mighty quarry walls, with a vista behind the stage down to the city. Much of her best work has been inspired by this arena—but it's almost impossible to transport to other, less fortunate cities. What a tragedy, when, as Karlsson extols: 'You're on the earth with the heavens above and wind on your body. Your energy is infinite.'

The opposite extreme lies in the ornate, gilded glories of the restored His Majesty's Theatre—where modern dance somehow survives the formality of the space. Parrott was particularly pleased to be able to use it for *Terra*—her biggest work, developed over the unusually long (for Australia) period of twelve weeks, and using the full technology of a conventional stage, including flying and levitation... 'the mystery of theatre, which I love so much. It tied up so many visual ideas I've been working on involving Arthurian legends and goddesses. Unfortunately it was also tied to a text which broke it.'

And here we run into the main stumbling-block in the CPDC's charmed progress so far. In *Terra*, Chrissie Parrott thought that she had copyright permission to use quotations from Jeanette Winterson's novel *Sexing the Cherry*. The idea of taking the Grimm fairytale about twelve dancing princesses to examine different sorts of contemporary relationships appealed to the mythologiser in the choreographer. Sadly—after having time to spend 2 or 3 days with individual dancers working on their characters; after having more money than usual to offer her frequent collaborators (Perth seems full of them) David Pye, composer, and Andrew Carter, designer; and after creating 'the kind of show we expect to see imported from France' (as one reviewer perhaps cringingly, but admiringly put it!), the novelist objected—and the show disappeared into history.

It does seem ludicrous that a writer can have such power over the flights of imagination inspired by his or her work. I feel particularly aggrieved that this 'gothic play of bawdy humour and considerable menace' (*The West Australian*), hailed as 'a must for all who like intelligent, creative, entertaining and stimulating theatre' (*The Australian*) will never come before my eyes.

One reason that Stefan Karlsson can describe *Terra's* disappearance as 'a tragedy' (Chrissie Parrott was unwilling even to talk about it) is that it was part of a development plan that would have culminated in enough works to make touring possible. The major problem with companies like the CPDC is that their one-person inspiration burns out all too easily under the blow-torch of pressure to create new work. In the absence of annual funding from the state, a young dance company has to come up with work after work in order to keep dancers together, to justify rental on a studio space, to afford any sort of office back-up, and to keep a small dedicated audience coming—who would be unwilling to pay for last year's pieces repeated.

Yes, a big Dance Triennium in Perth did recommend that a modern dance company should be funded comparably to the WA Ballet (at half a million dollars plus a year) so that the current disparity of 9 full-time staff at the Ballet to 4 at the CPDC might be evened out. But until this happens, a partial alternative is touring. This gives shows which have had development time spent on them a chance to live again elsewhere in Australia—even overseas. New audiences are found (and the old ones are both proud and unwearied by old work), new sources of money tapped, dancers can be kept together, and the choreographer can, so to speak, rest on her laurels. It is one of the solutions which the National Performing Arts Touring Scheme was established to encourage.

For Stefan Karlsson, such a practical matter is small beer beside the importance of 'getting some status' for the fledgling company. 'Without it, it's crazy. It kills a

company before the audience can make up its own mind.' But, getting down to brass tacks, he'd have had to leave the CPDC this year—despite his obvious loyalty to his wife—if a combination of Federal funding to develop the choreographer, State funding to keep the company together, and Health sponsorship to keep them Active Every Day had not permitted twelve-month contracts for some dancers.

'I'm 38 now', Karlsson put it simply, 'and I deserve more.' He also feels that the company should be 10 to 12 strong (instead of 4/6), should have a new studio 'without a shower in the kitchen' and should be able to attract more commercial sponsorship. 'Unfortunately, corporate head offices tend to be in Melbourne and Sydney, and they're reluctant to put money into Perth projects. So that's another reason to tour.'

This year things are falling into place a little for the CPDC. After proving to *See Ya Next Century's* audiences in Sydney and Melbourne that politics could intrude into the aesthetic of dance (though words, songs and film all help the telling of political stories), the CPDC will be back in the East in October at the Sydney Opera House (thanks to a Sydney Dance Company invitation) and hope to be going on to The Festival of Australian Theatre in Canberra with a show modestly entitled *Love, Life and Beauty*.

Chrissie Parrott will have travelled overseas and choreographed the Queensland Ballet in Stravinsky's *Agon* for the Brisbane Biennial before then. And choreographers from Japan and Sweden will have come into the company while she's away to stimulate their creative juices as well. 'I've got a team with strong movement, good looks and good minds this year. They'll be able to tackle anything my daydreams come up with. What more could a girl want?'

Jeremy Eccles

Photographs by Chris Ha

David Prudham in *Empire*, 1992 Festival of Perth

(Chor: Chrissie Parrott, Music: Michael Nyman)

Opposite page, Meredith Kitchen with left, Stefan Karlsson and right, David Prudham in *Empire*, 1992 Festival of Perth

(Chor: Chrissie Parrott, Music: Michael Nyman)