

quaint. The world is a vast place in which Australia has but a small role, despite her great expanses. A distant outpost of the European diaspora, Australia is one of the last great frontier societies at a moment where the limits have been reached and the very notion of frontier has been revealed to be about violation and transgression. Founded on the myth of the bush, Australia is the most urbanized society on earth. While we are the most remote Western society on the planet we are totally integrated into a globalized consumer culture driven by trivial and transient wants and desires. A product of modernity, we approach the centenary of Federation in a postmodern age in which the very idea of a fixed identity is regarded as absurd. For Pierce, the country of lost children is itself a lost child, its anxiety about childhood innocence is anxiety for itself and the deep-seated sense that it can never know itself and never be at home.

Zsusanna Soboslay

## GOING ON

Richard James Allen and Karen Pearlman, eds, *Performing the Unnameable: An Anthology of Australian Performance Texts*. Sydney: Currency Press, in association with Real Time, 1999. ISBN 0 86819 4204, 224pp. R.R.P. \$35.00

"I must go on. I can't go on. Go on."  
(Samuel Beckett).

*Stage Fright*. Voice frozen in its box. A Beckettian figure—raincoated, carrot in pocket—finds it impossible to speak. There is too much unspeakable going on.

*Fright of the stage*. Analysts unable to speak the horrifically multitudinous aspects of performance. Unnameables fly about the space—slippages of meaning, multiple motivations, unrepeatable incidences. ... Not only (in traditional theatre) are there directors directing, actors interpreting, audiences imagining, lighting illusioning, sets and sounds designing meaning (who makes this bloody thing?), but in contemporary performance you also have a frightful dissolving of boundaries between these roles, everybody involved in everything, with images weighted equally to words (if there are words at all) and sometimes, not even a performer (or an audience) in sight.

I've seen or read various attempts to deal with stage frights, from a Sydney Front production (a performer enacts a long and painfully silent embarrassment at being watched), to the earliest attempts at semiotic analysis, giddily swatting at a swarm of performance features and parameters in an attempt to locate and legitimate the sites of meaning-making in this form.

*Pace* Buddhist monks, few seem unweighted by the unspoken multiplicities. An exception who comes to mind is John Cage—basing performance structures on the throws of dice, writing about silence as an experience replete with haphazard joys, inviting his audience to listen to nothing (as in 4'33", a piece where the performer enters the stage, sits at the piano, and maintains immobile silence for the duration of the piece) and hear the tuning and shaping of the world. This piece of the 60's can still cause audience uproar.

I do think that, in some specific ways, the editors of this book buy into the anxiety of speaking contemporary performance-making: in the book's titling, in its homogeneous format, in its cover image of a woman's face morphed into a shriek, and in the manner in which they called for submissions.

Allen and Pearlman, for whom I have great respect, both for this book and their own work, are

nonetheless rather disingenuous in stating their disappointment with submissions. They say they found not much varied response in format to their call. In their introduction, they seem disappointed not to have received maps, diagrams, notation systems, notes. But their call was for "scripts," which is a term loaded towards words and, even more specifically, words already patterned into some coherence of shape or form. Perhaps a call for "process documents" may have gleaned responses of different form.

Also, as a shortlisted entrant, I found there were very many conditions on how one explained one's process, with an emphasis on rationality where possible. I remember a particular conversation where explicability to an academic readership—i.e., people who do not make, or are inexperienced in performance process—was stressed. This was arguably an important thing to try to do—except, firstly, that it runs the danger of abandoning non-analytic languages to second-place in the meaning stakes (keeping them mute), and secondly, I don't think the writings in this volume end up working this way at all.

What we have is a volume which collates and to some extent gives frames to 17 of the most important Australian performance works of the last two decades. There are individuals (such as Jenny Kemp) and collectives (such as Sidetrack, Entre'act) represented here.

We have a book of works which perhaps are little different from playtexts, except that the glue of each "script" is not likely to be narrative, character development, or story line. Rather, there are, for example, sensation, image, and action sequences, rhythmic concatenations, movement strategies, trips through a person's inner organism in fantasy. Each "script" has its own convention which you have to receive or (re-)compose through what is given of its texts and/or process explanation.

Some of the maker's commentaries help more than others: there are inconsistencies with the degree to which self-commentary does (or even could) help flesh out the event. Perhaps accordingly, I am left with three types of response to the works represented here:

1. *to works I have never seen*: I take on the script and stage directions as I would if I were a performance realiser (i.e., director or performer) of a new piece. I subject the script to an imaginal process—journeying through a sequence of stage events (ex-Stasis, *Beautiful Mutants*, 1993); or allowing words to create spaces and places around me. This is the magic of language, of text ("I say dark, and it is dark"—Margaret Cameron, *Things Calypso Wanted to Say*, 1989) that the editors rightly uphold and argue for as still valuable in contemporary works.
2. *to works I have never seen, by people with whose aesthetic I am familiar*: I imagine particular performers enacting the script. I supply a tone of voice, an attitude, the way their muscles hold.
3. *to works I have seen*: memory recalls the *mise-en-scène* and the power (or weakness) of the performances. Memory becomes a shorthand to my re-imagining.

In no instance is it not incumbent on me to flesh out the dimensions of the "texts," to practically enact them (embody them, direct them, move them, feel them) as I read. In each of these instances, I would not choose to label this "fleshing out" unnameable, although I would say that it is harder than in traditional playtexts where plot and character give a shorthand structure to the way I feel through to a text's form. Here, the fleshing out from and through language is as multidimensional as is my organism, breathing, twitching, dying and replenishing. It is exhausting, but I must go on. I do go on, and on and on.

Sadly, the book's format actively inhibits this process. It is visually harsh and homogeneous from script to script, often printed in blocks of white text on black cubes (always difficult to negotiate) with images rendered as subliminal background to text or miniature in relation to it. This is ironic in a volume of works many of which uphold what Wesley Enoch describes as crucial to his

process: to discard words if made redundant by image, sound, or movement, if any of these elements says better what one is trying to say. Enoch makes a statement for the equivalence of media to each other, of carefully crafting each to best effect. It is sad that these features are largely not given equal respect in this volume (except, perhaps, in Open City's contribution, where I do get a sense of the performance event re-sculpted into a journey through the printed page.)

Having fought to enter each of the segments, however, I find that the scripts do create 17 varied and amazing worlds: a long dance interspersed with violence, champagne and bow-ties (Sydney Front, *First and Last Warning*, 1992); a dream stripped to the underskins, fantasies tripping along dusty sideboards (Jenny Kemp, *Call of the Wild*, 1989); a culture's life, land and identity losing cohesion like a fractured, melting block of ice (Kooemba Jdarra, *Seven Stages of Grieving*, 1995); a murder suite running backwards, forwards, reeling reel-to-reel without ever being solved (Richard Murphet, *Quick Death*, 1981); a performance trying to talk to a dislimbed body through a peep-hole (Open City, *Sum of the Sudden*, 1993); a barking bigot with hotpink fingernails (Wilson/Herfferon: *The Geography of Haunted Places*, 1994); olives, jasmine, basil: Greek village life and language lapping at memory like a

seashore at my hairy knees (Doppio Teatro: *Preludes to an Exile*, 1996); in a dark brick alley, my war: a spitfire plane's engines making me cower (Lyndal Jones: *Spitfire 123 ...*, 1996).

These are different worlds, composed of words which bash and sing. My body undergoes many transformations in the reading. Each reading is a re-imagining. It is exhausting.

To enter the enormous worlds within these words, I have to risk everything: die to every word. ("Little suddens you fear might turn into eternities." (Baxter/Gallasch: *Sum of the Sudden*)) I have to tune to the shapes being made, and suffer a thousand vertigos.

This volume houses seventeen eternities. Within each, you must allow eternity to come to you to shape itself differently. That means dying, a little, with each word, each phrase. It is a pity the book as a whole prevents this, making me panic in its samenesses. I don't find the volume inspiring as I do, say, book-"events" such as the Malina's Living Theatre document from the 70's, full of yoga diagrams and sketches and sequences and ravings; or Simone Forti's dancer's tome. The former is written well after the event; the latter a source book of ideas, with images that do not so much accompany as prod the thinking (and the imagining body) further on. In both, the making, the knitting together, the concatenation is not explained. Often I feel propelled

further by such documents, than by a book such as this, into a space of making. Here, I am propelled into a space of performance history and grateful that there have been thinkers such as these.

That said, there are omissions, which the editors openly acknowledge. You might have to look at another book entirely, such as Anne Marsh's *Body and Self* (Oxford, 1993) to find body-generated works such as those of Jill Scott, Jill Orr, Ken Unsworth, Bonita Ely, Derek Kreckler, Jude Walton, Barbara Campbell, Arthur Wicks, and perhaps only *Real Time* (the national bi-monthly arts tabloid by artists about artists, dedicated to experiential analytic writing) to read, for example, about the site-specific improvisatory works of Tess de Quincey/Stuart Lynch and the site-sound physical theatre of Gravity Feed.

Incidentally, I had been excluded from the final publication for very valid reasons: that "this was not a best work" and that "better was yet to come," with which I entirely agreed. The only thing this reflects is that there is an "unnameable" to do with quality that this book (and perhaps anybody) hesitates to overtly address. If one work is inferior, what is superior in another? I don't think *Performing the Unnameable* ever set out to explain this, but within its own parameters has given us an important record of

a series of Australian works which need to be recognised as influential within the last two decades of Australian performance practice.

*Megan Surmon*

## TAKING PURPLE FOR GRANTED

Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli, ed., *Girls' Talk: young women speak their hearts and minds*. Finch Publishing.  
ISBN 1 876451 92 5, 288pp.  
R.R.P. \$19.95 pb.

*Girls' Talk* celebrates the power that has been afforded young women by their older sisters who chanted and marched and braved the new path. Three cheers for the mothers of the women's movement, for the genesis of feminism and the realisation that being woman is not a dirty word. Neither is being a feminist, according to the young women, aged 8 and over, in this anthology. Feminism is life.

Images, stories, comments and diary entries weave through the book, borrowing heavily from the young adult magazine market for layout