

Whispering Limbs: Cross-cultural Collaboration in a Hybrid of Contemporary Dance, Media, Sound and Improvisation.

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Abstract

Whispering Limbs was a performance collaboration between Cairns-based duo *Bonemap*, Brisbane-based dance trio *Polytoxic*, Indigenous Cairns-based dancer Earl Rosas and Townsville-based sound artist Steven Campbell. The collaboration was facilitated by *Bonemap*'s principal artists, Rebecca Youdell and Russell Milledge. Through the lens of cross-cultural collaboration, the work places the dancers in a sweep of surreal landscapes, exploring a range of contemporary cultural and cross-cultural themes within a highly integrated, immersive and improvised performance arena. Devised within two weeks and presented over three nights during the 2009 Cairns *On Edge Contemporary Media and Performance Festival*, *Whispering Limbs* presents a cultural mix of Indigenous, Polynesian and Caucasian performance. This paper details the development process, the performance environment, the main themes of the work and the manner in which these themes were realised through a focus on the choreography, video projections and sound design in four of the work's twelve scenes.

Overview/Process

The three public performances of *Whispering Limbs* were preceded by a week-long artist's residency held on the Atherton Tablelands, the aims of the residency to provide the dancers and media artist with a collective multi-disciplinary experience, instilling the collaboration with the values and qualities needed for ensemble performance, while developing the themes and choreographic ideas for the work. Sound design was distantly yet concurrently undertaken in Townsville with thematic and structural input from the residency artists and subsequent draft sound designs exchanged via email.

Preceding the three public performances, two days were spent in Cairns' Jute Theatre in rehearsal and final development of the choreography, projection, sound and lighting. An additional closed and controlled performance was undertaken for the purposes of filming prior to the final public performance.

The cross-cultural mix of performers provided a collaborative platform on which various choreographic combinations, from solo through to quintet, could be explored in relation to the cultural heritage of the individual performers, and also to the presentation of a range of themes affecting all within the cultural mix. Exploration of these themes resulted in a continually varying choreography and consequent variation in the video projections and sound materials, the overall work comprised of twelve distinct subsections or scenes.

Whilst this basic 12-scene structure of the work was set, the majority of the choreography was structured improvisation, with synchronised and asynchronous ensemble choreography appearing in scene 2 and 3. Similarly, a set of predetermined sound and video materials formed a basis for improvisation, the predetermined materials augmented with real-time sound and video materials in a live mix – live action stage performance.

The Performance Environment

Figure 1 shows the performance area (Cairns' Jute Theatre) from the audience perspective post performance and with general 'worker' lighting rather than theatrical lighting effects. At the lower left the circular table has three areas dedicated to lighting, projection and sound control, the three operators seated on the cushioned crates shown. The dancers utilised the remainder of the space, the water tray and gum boots shown at the lower centre used in a water-based scene titled *Water Terrain*.



Figure 1 – *Whispering Limbs* - Main Performance Space

The main performance space was augmented in two scenes of the work titled *Cultural Reveal* and *In Boxes*, with two 'boxes' appearing as insets in the back wall of the space, each with enough room for a single dancer, as shown as the upper lighted areas in Figure 2. These were created by utilising dressed scaffolding and dressed back stage areas. The third performer was positioned slightly forward of the stage wall and back stage door. The performance area was arranged in zones where specific treatments of light, projection and movement could be isolated and focused.



Figure 2 – *Whispering Limbs* – Rear Wall Box Insets

Video/Projection Overview

The approach to the integration of video material into the work developed first from design considerations in response to physical limitations of the theatrical space and the specific site of the JUTE Theatre. Determinations were based on what breadth was available in this theatre and what limitations the screens and projection hardware imposed for the work. From this process a scale plan was developed to further visualise the specific interrelation of theatrical lighting, projection/ projection surfaces, performance and audience zones. The idea of zones within the design remained strong and contributed to dramaturgical considerations as they related to the generation of media assets. These assets, in terms of the projection design, included animated stills as well as source video clips. The stills were acquired as photographic portraits in a studio session while the source video clips were shot during the residency on the Atherton Tablelands.

Two video projection zones were integrated into the scenographic elements of the work. The first consisted of a black scrim (theatrical shark-tooth gauze) suspended from an open curved rail with a surface area of approximately 66²m (h6000 mm x w11000 mm). Four data projectors were rigged to cover one quadrant section of the final projected image of this zone. The technique of adapting multiple projectors to display a final single image allowed a larger projection over a shorter throw distance. The second video projection zone consisted of a white scrim suspended on a closed ring forming a cylinder. The surface area of the cylinder was approximately 72²m while the diameter of the cylinder was 4m (4000 mm). The projection source for the cylinder was two data projectors rigged to cover half of the cylinder, one lower and one upper with the source matched to present a continuous single image or effect.



At the rear of the photograph a large black scrim is projected onto by four projectors, whilst the white circular scrim at the right is lit and projected on by two projectors.

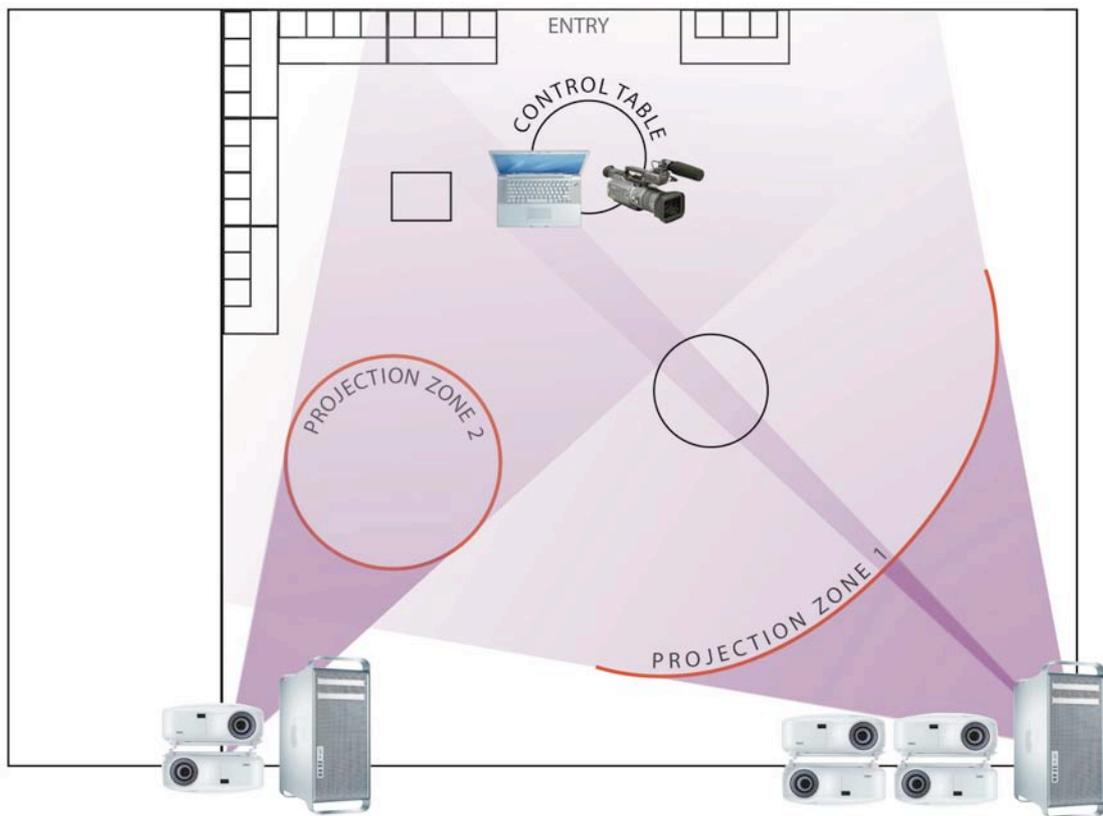


Figure X – *Whispering Limbs* – Jute Theatre Projection Setup

Sound Design Overview

A limited set of approximately 30 sound samples/loops was used for the entire performance. Given the range of themes explored in the choreography and the variety in the video/projections this limited sound set acted as a cohesive device for the overall work. All sounds/loops were controlled and used as a basis for real-time improvisation within *Ableton Live* software. Native Instruments (NI) *Reaktor 5* was used as a plug-in for real-time sound generation within *Live*. NI's *Kontakt* sampler, as a further plug-in, was used in conjunction with a *Lemur* touch-screen controller.

Figure 3 illustrates the sound hardware/software setup utilised. Tactile hardware control of *Ableton Live* was undertaken with a *Euphonix MC Control* Control Surface. Sound output was in stereo, a split stereo speaker system with a subwoofer used with the stereo image duplicated at the front and rear to sonically envelope the performance space.

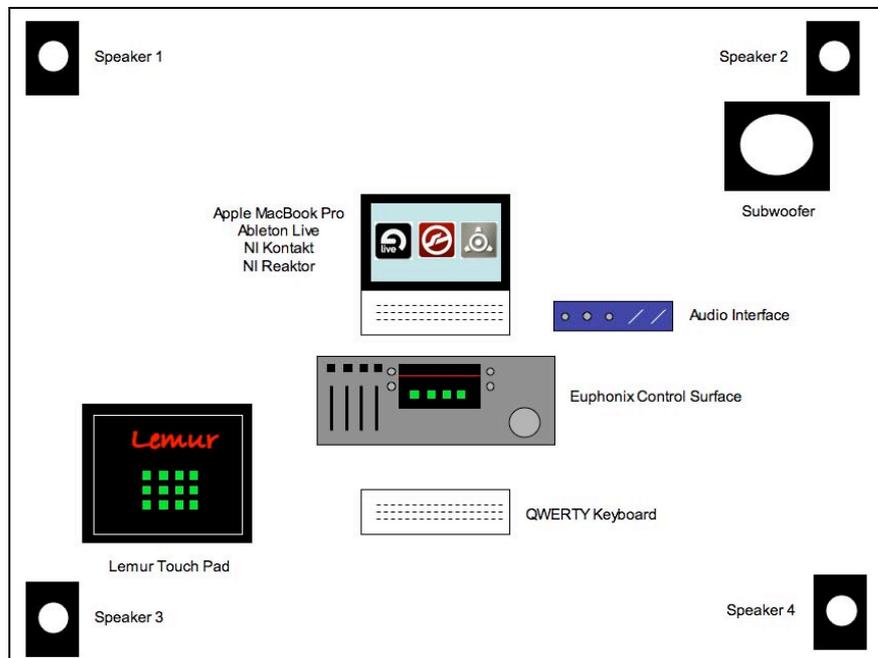


Figure X – *Whispering Limbs* – Sound Hardware/Software Setup

An overarching approach taken to the sound design was based on the title of the work; '*Whispering*' suggesting abstract and arrhythmic soundscapes, well suited to a number of the scenes featuring a recurring *Water* theme, while '*Limbs*' suggested percussive and rhythmically driven sound textures suited to the action and movement of the dancers, particularly the work's culturally-based solo dances and ensemble dances. Combinations of sounds associated with both words/worlds provided fertile ground for sonic and musical variation over the course of the hour-long performance.

Prior to rehearsals seven "Textures" ranging from 2.5 to 7 minutes were developed and sent to the artists undertaking the artist residency. In the ensuing and final rehearsals with the dancers several of the "Textures" were adopted and built upon, several rejected and further new sonic textures created on the sound designer's

experiencing the choreography and video projections developed over the period of the artist residency.

Themes

Themes explored in *Whispering Limbs* came out of discussions during the artist residency, the themes arising through dialogues on a range of social, cultural, historical, metaphysical, scientific and political ideas. The work “furthers Bonemap’s deeply introspective dialogue with nature, exploring ecology through physical and visual expression” (Cooper 2009), the twelve scenes of the work each having a title and thematic foci as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 – Scenes and Thematic Content Summary

Scene	Thematic Content
1. Fishbowl	Fishbowl as metaphor for global warming, green footprints, conservation and recycling and as metaphor for the environment maintained by Indigenous Australians.
2. Repelled by Nature	Human removal from nature through rapid urbanization.
3. Weed Ballet	Transformation – removing the colloquial to reveal the organic, the animal within.
4. Cultural Reveal	Blending of Pacific cultures – Australian and Samoan – the gradual disappearance of strict traditional culture in favour of hybrid contemporary Polynesian cultural values.
5. Water Woman	Mystery and the untameable bush. Humans as made from the Earth’s elements and party to its mysteries.
6. Puff Princess	Multiplicity of the feminine, fantasy and cultural identity through the metaphor of the environment. Juxtaposition of fantasy/fairytale with Bogan notions of the bush – human impact on the environment.
7. Water Terrain	Global warming and land reclamation. Islands at the mercy of rising waters.
8. Island	Global warming and land reclamation. Islands at the mercy of rising waters.
9. In Boxes	Global warming and land reclamation. Islands at the mercy of rising waters.
10. Earl’s Table	Human environment control - guardians or gods? The role indigenous people play in land maintenance
11. Grass Man	The commodification of land as real estate, the desire for human contact with nature.
12. Excess	Consumerism, investment, greed, human removal from nature, bling, questionable culture and unsustainable existence.

There are three primary recurring and connecting themes within the work. The first is in relation to *Water*, the filled and occupied fish bowl of the opening scene a representation of nature and the environment of the earth. This fish bowl reappears in Scenes 10 (*Earl’s Table*) and 12 (*Excess*), while a second fish bowl, located on the round technical equipment/personnel table is cast as a real-time double, appearing

synchronised in projections. The water theme emerged from the preliminary residency as the performers and media artist accessed the watercourses on location. The Barron River and Emerald Creek bound the Tablelands property where the residency took place. This allowed logistical and technical access to an otherwise awkward field location. These wet environments provided external tactile impetus in the development of choreographic and media based ideas as well as textures that were internalised as body memory within the structured improvising of the dancers work.

Scene 4, *Cultural Reveal* is a solo dance exploring a blend of Pacific cultures: Australian and Samoan. The disappearance of the dancer back into the massive skirt from which she had emerged has resonances with Pacific cultures disappearing as a result of water inundation from climate change and global warming. This solo dance focused on the hands as expressive communicators of Islander aesthetic and abstract narrative. The appeal of this aesthetic choreography is also an indication of cultural resilience and specific nuanced Pacific Islander identity.

Water appears as a representation of a river in Scene 5 of the work, the *Water Woman* navigating the imagined river with a small electric light emulating a candle held aloft from a body sized rusted metal trunk. The image is further reflected through the projection of a pre-recorded video of the dancers emerging from a real river. In the projected image action is reversed and the dancers emerge from the river dry and with candelabra alight. Through the gauze projection surface the live Caucasian dancer appears adrift in a trunk gently carried by an imaginary current, her way self-illuminated by the hand-held light. The dancer is on a migratory journey carried by the current of change, the trunk a symbol of belonging and transition from one state to another. The layered projection simultaneously communicated the duality of journey and transformation. As the dancers' image appeared from the depths of the water, rather than being of the water and wet, they emerge and walk along the rivers shallow reaches dry with guiding candles alight. In *Water Woman* the identity and metaphor represented by the water, and as impetus for the dancer, is a relationship with the environment. This scene is infused with the circumstance of migration over water and the transformative journey between one culture to another, from one land to another.

As relative to the impacts of global warming and land reclamation, water is a focus of Scenes 7-9 (*Water Terrain, Island* and *In Boxes*). A trio of dancers appear in raincoats and gumboots, leaking and expelling water from their boots, heads and hands, thematic representations of rising water levels and drowning islands.

The second recurring theme in the work is *Excess*, coupled with the notion of humans being removed from nature and the environment. In Scene 2 (*Repelled by Nature*), the dancers are conservatively attired in their finery of evening dresses with high heels and sharp suits, stamping and leaping away from imagined insects crawling up their legs.

In Scene 6 *Puff Princess*, the dancer challenged the perennial symbol of Ballet as a high Western tradition. This was achieved through juxtaposing the portrayal of a dubious character with irreverent qualities in-between classical balletic movement sequences. The sharp contrast of the two frames of reference producing a humorous critique of high art principles and the decay of elite aesthetic forms as samples of Western excess.

The final scene of the work, *Excess*, has the fish bowl (as a representation of nature) placed high on a domed frame. The three female dancers enter, excessively dressed in red, gold and black mock high-fashion outfits, with hats and accessories made from plastic toy animals. They are disjointed models with superficial tendencies who attempt to reach the fish bowl but are repeatedly repelled.

The third primary and recurring theme is that of *Human Environment Linkage*. In the closing parts of Scene 2 (*Repelled by Nature*), the dancers remove their conservative clothing to reveal slips, a representation of a transformation to show the animal within. Moving into Scene 3 (*Weed Ballet*), the dancers focus on their adopted animal forms.

In Scene 10 (*Earl's Table*), the solo Indigenous dancer places the fish bowl on a small table with an assortment of small toys including a house and car. Moving the items around the table, they become puppets under his control, raising the question of his being a guardian or a god. The *Human Environment Linkage* is between the dancer and the contemporary environment as represented by the toys, and the natural environment as represented by the fish and its bowl. A further link is with the role that Indigenous people play in their management of the natural environment.

Scene 11 (*Grass Man*) sees a Samoan male dancer perform a cultural dance barefoot on a circular swatch of living grass, having caringly tended to it by watering and weeding. In opposition to the ideas expressed in Scene 2 (*Repelled by Nature*), the *Human Environment Linkage* theme here expresses the human desire for contact with nature.

Focus 1: Scene 1 - Fishbowl

Synopsis and Thematic Focus

Indigenous performer Earl Rosas (see Figure X) enters a light diagonal pathway. The stage is dark, but the light illuminates a small red fighting fish carried on his head in a round glass fishbowl. The vessel on his head remains remarkably still, as the dancer dressed in brown suit pants slowly elongates and twists his form moving from his full height, to the ground and then back up again. He then exits in the same slow way, methodically walking and carrying the fish.

As discussed above, the Fishbowl is a metaphor for global warming, green footprints, conservation and recycling, a representation of nature, the environment and the earth itself. Further, a theme of personal conservation of natural resources is inherent – the carrying of the fishbowl referencing a people on a desert planet who have to carry water on their person to drink for survival.

Writing in *Real-Time* magazine, Gallasch (2009) summarises the thematic content of Rosas' performances with the fish bowl in Scenes 1, 10 and 12:

His was a powerful presence that framed the work, carrying a fish in a large glass bowl on his head, doubtless representing the fragility of our relationship

with nature and the Aboriginal guardianship that has been for so long ignored and denied. (Gallasch, 2009)



Figure X – *Whispering Limbs* – Earl Rosas in Scene 1

Video/Projection

The live video camera amplified the ephemeral moment and provided a projected double within the scenography of the performance. This amplification, through video enlargement, of the presence of a live fish in a bowl made obvious the small details within the performance and heightened the vulnerability of the small creature. The audiences empathy could shift between the human body in dance and the swimming fish accompanying the dancer.

The operation and live mixing of video material required rehearsal of the cameras movement and a technical environment that allowed a vision controlled through specially programmed software and hardware tools.

Sound

Reflecting the recurring *Water* theme, a dripping soundscape is synthetically generated in real-time, this continued as an underpinning throughout the scene. Low pitched sounds reminiscent of a thong slapping PVC piping, and high pitched synthetic bell sounds are used to create arrhythmic textures of various speeds and densities. In a further real-time interaction using the *Lemur* touch-screen, improvised sonic responses with the lower sounds are made to Rosas' feet and leg movements, and responses with the higher sounds to his hand and arm movements.

Toward the end of the scene a variety of ominous-sounding loops are triggered within *Ableton Live*, reflecting, in Cooper's (2009) words, the manner in which "Rosas appears like an ancient shaman...[or] perhaps he is a titan, suspended in space, carrying a blue planet."

Focus 2: Scene 4 - *Cultural Reveal*

Synopsis and Thematic Focus

Cultural Reveal presents a solo dance performed by Samoan dancer Lisa Fa'alafi. A light illuminates a large white bundle in a second story inset box on the back wall of the performance space, the bundle beginning to move and grow. A snake-like hand slithers upwards, then the head, shoulders and torso are revealed (see Figure X).



Figure X – *Whispering Limbs* – Lisa Fa'alafi in Scene 4

As the dancer fully stands the bundle becomes a large ballroom skirt with a bodice of woven leaf. Her movements are spirited and dynamic - the short, sharp and sudden gestures of the head, eyes and hands resemble Samoan dance and contain a combination of tradition and the contemporary. She entices with mechanical doll-like movement before melting into the hole of the waistband, disappearing into the fullness of the skirt. The iridescent skirt, seemingly moving by itself, vanishes with her disappearance.

The blend of Samoan and Australian cultures is the primary focus of the scene, with an underpinning of the *Water* theme: the dancer emerges from the skirt much as if she were aquatically submerged, beginning her dance with the snake-like movements of her periscopic hand. She carries out her cultural dance before being finally inundated by the skirt, submerged again.

Video/Projection

A camera close-up of the performer's live hands projects onto her skirt and the language of the gesture is amplified. The specific reference to Polynesian dance gestures through the hands is a focus of this segment of the performance. The live camera feed allows the subtle tensions and rhythms in the dancers movements to populate the larger performance as a spacial projection.

Sound

A log drum sample provides the basis of a rhythmic loop that starts the scene, the rhythm of this loop used with various samples and in various scenes throughout the work. The log drum sound is joined by a bamboo rattle sample, both very loosely referencing Pacific island musical cultures. Metallic percussion (triangles/crotales) is incorporated to underpin the imagery of the music-box-like dancer.

As the scene progresses, layers of percussive materials build the sonic texture – an inundation of percussion relative to the *Water* theme and the inundation of Pacific islands as a result of rising sea levels and tsunamis. Snare/rimshot and Tom Tom rhythms loosely relate to the blend of Western and Samoan cultures portrayed.

Focus 3: Scene 6 – *Puff Princess*

Rebecca Youdell (see Figure X) enters dressed in a yellow limp tutu, a bouquet of straw like weeds strapped to her chest. Her Blundstone boots and gum chewing are irreverent as she wanders casually through the theatre ignoring the onlooker. She stops every so often to look the audience over in a gesture of acknowledgement, reinforcing her aloofness.



Figure X – *Whispering Limbs* – Rebecca Youdell in Scene 6

She makes her way into the main stage area lumbering along in a particular “un-lady like” fashion. A gradual transformation takes place from bogan to ballerina princess, as she starts to dance the *Sugar Plum Fairy* solo from seminal choreographer Marius Petipa’s version of *The Nutcracker Ballet* (references). It’s a cracked dance version, as every so often she reverts to the boot wearing, gum chewing bogan.

After a particularly hard series of tricks on the diagonal, she makes her way to the round floating dias that houses the technical equipment and personnel. She steps onto the pedestal and removes her bouquet like a beauty contestant accepting an award, she turns her back to the audience and throws the bouquet over her shoulder as if a bride at a wedding, turns around to face the audience and she is bogan once more. She descends the platform and saunters off stage.

The precepts for this piece reference the multiplicity of the feminine, fantasy and cultural identity through the metaphor of the environment. The piece questions: what it means to be feminine, and the achievability of that; the fantasy of the fairytale, the facade, and the illusion; and cultural identity in terms of the migration of cultural values with the metaphor of weeds as an introduced species.

The princess informs the ballet tradition with its romantic, objectified, mythic, unobtainable, ephemeral slants, some of which resonate with certain traditions of landscape paintings. This ethereal is juxtaposed with the bogan, working-class notion of the bush and plays out through the transgression of human impact on environmental ecology and the degradation of such.

Video/Projection

A large panoramic projection is projected as a backdrop. However the arrangement of the projection surface, a large black scrim, and the position of the projectors allows for an 'after image' to spill onto the stage. The combination of the panoramic video and the floor 'after image' creates a more immersive scenographic effect to surround the performer. Source footage made during the artist's residency included the visual manipulation of the location with artificial lighting and colour sources. The visual effect had been further manipulated by specific time based choreographic direction. Using the knowledge of the video medium; video's ability to be manipulated in terms of playback speed during presentation, the choreographic direction during camera shooting included directions to exaggerate real time speeds. For example the direction to move imperceptibly slow, with the intent that the footage would not have a fixed playback speed during the live presentation events.

Sound

The same log drum rhythm that underpinned Scene 4 (*Cultural Reveal*) underpins this scene though the sound is here given over to a harsher rimshot sample, more associated with Western musical styles. The previously used clattering bamboo sample is also used here, here in support of the angular and "un-lady like" aspects of the choreography.

A repetitive and rhythmic loop of a marimba enters softly at first and slowly is brought forward in the mix to coincide with the first transformation of the dancer from bogan to ballerina. With the exception of subtle entries of brief triangle and crotales sounds – stereotypically supporting the fairy tale princess imagery – the basic rimshot and marimba texture remains until near the end of the scene.

As Youdell tosses her weed bouquet, the bright marimba loop is replaced by the same ominous sound used at the end of Scene 1 (*Fishbowl*), here though as a sonic manifestation of human transgressions against the environment.

Focus 4: Scene 12 - Excess

Synopsis and Thematic Focus

The final scene of the work involves all dancers, beginning with the entry of the three female dancers dressed in the mock high-fashion outfits. Behind the scrim they make vogue like poses with their silhouettes making shadows of the deformed and bizarre.

Male Samoan dancer Efeso (Fez) Fa'anana brings in a dome, and the strutting girls make their way to it. Rosas has entered with his fish bowl and placed it on the living grass swatch. The three girls drag and pose their way around until one performer climbs on top of the dome while the other two vainly remove Rosas' coat, rearranging it on him as if it were a dress. He immediately changes it back to a coat.

As shown in Figure X, Rosas places his fishbowl on top of the structure and sets himself centre and beneath the fish. All three girls climb the ladders and almost touch the fish, but are repulsed by it and exit the space. Rosas is left on stage in proximity to the fish.



Figure X – *Whispering Limbs* – Lisa Fa'alafi and Earl Rosas, Leah Shelton and Rebecca Youdell in Scene 12

The theme of excess was a major stimulus in *Whispering Limbs*. Rife consumerism has been a major contributor to the economic downturn in terms of investment and greed. This coupled with the notion that humans are removed from their environment, but are quite happy to sport tremendous bling made from exclusive animal parts, creates a questionable culture and unsustainable existence.

Video/Projection

The projection design for the last scene was highly improvised. Several source video files and sound manipulation of projected video signals were manually assigned in response to the sonic and performance action. The video software configuration allowed multiple data input, including sound level and frequency, this could be configured to trigger or activate cycles of video fragmentation effects in real time. Glimpses of visual material associated with previous collaborative work was also included to hint at a visual signature and recognition of the continuity of collaboration.

Sound

Sound in the final scene is part of a continuum that begins at the start of the preceding scene, a continuum on which the same materials as used in Scene 4 (*Cultural Reveal*) forms the basis of a long crescendo that reaches its climax at the conclusion of the work. The use of the same materials in Scenes 4 and 11 (*Grass Man*) is fitting as both scenes focus on the cultural dances of the two Samoan dancers.

As the penultimate and final scenes are played out, layer upon layer of sound is introduced ending in excessive percussive rhythms, supported by soundscapes previously used in the work. Real-time percussive sounds were also improvised, supporting the disjointed, deformed and bizarre movements of the female dancers. As in the opening scene, an ominous sound, here a punching, rhythmic, synthesised bass is used to support the shamanistic and powerful nature of Rosas' character. Delay effects on all of the percussive sounds further contribute to the portrayal of excess in the final scene.

At the height of this percussive excess, the sound is abruptly stopped, shortly after the lighting on Rosas fades to black. This leaves the delay effect on the sounds to fade out over a five second period and conclude the work.

Conclusion

The collaboratively conceived and realised *Whispering Limbs* became a vehicle for the exploration of a wide range of themes, interconnected through a focus on the broad themes of *Water*, *Excess* and *Human Environment Linkage*. Encapsulated within these themes was an exploration of various foci including climate change, global warming, land reclamation and inundation, Indigenous Australians as maintainers/guardians of the environment, urbanisation, the animal within, femininity, fantasy and fairy tale, commodification of real estate, consumerism and greed.

Additionally the collaborative and cross-cultural combination provided a platform in which each of the dancers could express various of the work's themes within their own cultural context: Lisa Fa'alafi and Fez Fa'anana as Samoans exploring their own cultural dances and concerns as a music-box dancer and *Grass Man* respectively, Leah Shelton as *Water Woman*, Rebecca Youdell as the bogan ballerina *Puff Princess*, and Earl Rosas, as an Indigenous Australian, emphasising the precarious balance of the environment and his people's guardianship over it through the metaphor of the fish bowl.

Such cross-cultural choreography within the work was supported through pre-recorded and live improvised image projections and sound. As noted by Gallasch (2009) "the collective power of the work...is reinforced by Russell Milledges sweeping diorama projections that reveal the performers in an almost gothic natural world, and by Steven Campbell's percussive electronic score, mixed live."

Similarly, Carless (2009) comments on the integration of the projections and sound with the choreography, whilst succinctly summarising the overall work:

[*Whispering Limbs*] evokes issues and images of spirituality, ecological sustainability, transformation and doubling, generating a metaphysical whirlpool of ideas and images. The media components integrate with the physical performance perfectly to produce a work that is part dark ritual, part mad hatter's tea party. (Carless, 2009)

References

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