

TRISHA BROWN: ESPRIT DE CORPS

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CREATIVE ASSOCIATE – VISUAL ARTS



PURE MOVEMENT

Son of Gone Fishin' (1981)

PROGRAM 1: Thu 23 Oct
Arts Centre Melbourne,
Playhouse

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A clear-eyed sylph, choreographer Trisha Brown brims with mercurial energy; beneath her mindful poise resides a waggish humour that bubbles unexpectedly in a deep belly laugh. Her gifted, “liquid” body is renowned, and she has used it assiduously for her phenomenological investigations in the medium of dance — “The body solves problems before the mind knows you had one.” She perfectly embodies the “new intelligence” of the revolutionary movement research that changed the terms of contemporary dance, emphasizing exploratory processes such as *ideokinesis* (movement facilitated by image or thought), Kinetic Awareness (focus on relaxed alignment of the spine and limbs to permit fluid and spontaneous movement), release techniques and directed energy (Alexander), and skeletal gesture (Klein) over the rote learning, goal-oriented drills, stylized tension, and muscular force of the traditional dancer’s “set.”

From her preoccupation with the complexity and limits of the body and its gravity, Brown has formed an abstract, anti-symbolic dance vocabulary based on pure movement, gestures both common and highly idiosyncratic, and lightning reversibility. By re-conceiving the body as a field of equal places with varying centers, she made it possible for dancers to initiate actions from any place in the body at

any time, giving rise to an extraordinary lightness of movement that travels through the body like a wave. “People think dancers are very free spirits up there, but they’re not,” Brown comments. “They’re perfectionists, they’re disciplined.” In a contemporary culture where the embodied self is, again, a hotly contested idea, the exemplary body—unified, emancipated, and self-determining—has profound

*“The body solves problems before
the mind knows you had one.”*

philosophical and political implications as a source of human potential.

In the dance world, Brown is classified as postmodernist, a term that, for her, simply means “the permission to invent.” In the experimental ferment of the legendary Judson Dance Theater, which she founded with Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer, Brown conceived quirky, gravity-defying solos like *Trillium* (1962), named after a wildflower that fades as soon as it is picked, and *The Dance With The Duck’s Head* (1968), which she performed in logging boots and an elaborate paper mache costume and mask on a metal frame held aloft by four men. For *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* (1970), she sent an invisibly harnessed dancer walking down the backside of a seven-story building as if strolling the sidewalk, while people watched, transfixed, from the

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yard below. This ephemeral act, and others that followed, like *Roof Piece* (1973), challenged the body's perception of its own limits while opening the space of dance to the world around it. It requires little effort to relate these works to the radical environmental sculptures of Brown's contemporaries, Gordon Matta-Clark and Richard Serra. Now considered to be the crucible of postmodern performance, the Judson experiment is widely admired and emulated by a new generation of performing and visual artists. Looking back, Brown muses, "I really had no idea, I was very young and somewhat naïve. We were exploring our interests in courageous and highly self-conscious ways however we could manage, without formal structure or public support."



PURE MOVEMENT
Les Yeux et l'âme (2011)
PROGRAM 2: Sat 25 Oct
Arts Centre Melbourne,
Playhouse

Brown's maverick career has entailed many varied apprenticeships, beginning in Nature itself, which she describes as "my first art lesson." She speaks vividly of a childhood spent freely roaming the "dazzling edges" of Aberdeen, Washington from ocean to forest—climbing trees, pole-vaulting, playing sports with her brother, hunting and fishing.

Indeed, the leggy, fearless tomboy of her youth is never far from the skipping, gambolling steps natural to young bodies that are so much a part of her mature choreographic vocabulary. Studying modern dance and composition at Mills College, she quickly sought more exploratory methods. When she encountered the task-based work of Anna Halprin and John Cage's *chance operations*, she understood for the first time



FILMS
Roof Piece (1973)
Mon 20 – Sat 25 Oct
Australian Centre
for the Moving Image

"The modern choreographer has the right to make up the WAY that s/he makes a dance."

Thirty-five years ago, Brown formed her own company where she continues to elaborate her unique dance philosophy in original works, performed regularly across the world. In recent years, her protean creativity has revealed itself in a staggering array of events, from the revelatory American museum retrospective and book *Trisha Brown: Dance and Art in Dialogue, 1961–2001*, organized by Hendel Teicher, which mapped her evolution as a choreographer as well as her deep affinities with visual art and artists, to solo exhibitions of monumental drawings that she makes by improvising directly on huge sheets of paper, using charcoal sticks gripped in her hands and feet, to highly acclaimed forays into opera, including Monteverdi's *Orfeo* and Sciarrino's *Luci mie traditrici*. Most recently, the Paris Opera invited her to explore the frontier of classical ballet. Using the metaphysical poetry of Czesław Miłosz and Edna St. Vincent Millay as cues, she worked closely with three étoiles ("star" dancers in the classical hierarchy) to produce the movement alphabets for *O zlozny/ O composite* (2004), an exquisite and otherworldly sequence of solos, duets, and trios. In the contrasting sumptuousness of the Palais Garnier, they performed to slow perfection on a bare stage lit by Brown's long time collaborator, Jennifer Lipton, against a vast night sky backdrop by Vija Celmins, accompanied by the voices and sounds of an electronic score by Laurie Anderson.

that "the modern choreographer has the right to make up the WAY that s/he makes a dance." Later, working with choreographer and dancer Simone Forti, she figured out how to channel spontaneous movement into a dance form that could be precisely repeated. To this day, "structured improvisation" remains her signature technique.

To trace Brown's trajectory from this early structuralist phase to her highly evolved choreography with its metaphorical complexities is to begin to grasp the depth and challenge of her vision: her innovative scoring methods that allow dance and sound to co-exist at a complementary, non-interpretative distance; her mixing of private and public gestures; her tendency to work in parts, building dramaturgical cycles where forms and ideas continually come and go; her use of oppositional strategies to generate unexpected phrases and forms; her preference to reveal what is usually hidden and conceal what is usually visible. Brown's constant experimentation and learning in dialogically related fields of artistic inquiry have enhanced her natural aptitude for thinking abstractly, acquiring and imparting skills, adapting to new situations, and grasping intricate relationships. Those who work with her—from artists to company dancers to the charismatic baritone Simon Keenlyside, with whom she developed her stirring interpretation of *Die Winterreise* (2002)—marvel at how she prompts them to explore the possibilities of instinct and self-expression and take active part in the choreographic process. In Brown's luminous wake, distinctions between genres and camps fall away; there seems to be no limits to her reach.

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EARLY WORKS
Spanish Dance (1973)
Wed 22 & Sun 26 Oct
Arts House, Meat Market

She comments wryly, “Doing something new seems to suit me well.”

This year, Trisha Brown Dance Company is celebrating its thirty-fifth anniversary with an international touring program of diverse choreographies, including the silent, toughly exuberant *Glacial Decoy* (1979), Brown’s earliest stage collaboration with the artist Robert Rauschenberg; the shimmering, poignant *Geometry Of Quiet* (2002) accompanied by a live solo for breath and flute by the enigmatic composer Salvatore Sciarrino; and nascent works like *how long does the subject linger at the edge of the volume* (2005), part of a larger research project with Arizona State University incorporating the latest in digital motion-capture technology. In this piece, dancers perform alongside dynamic graphic images generated from their movement and relayed into the space of the stage. (The somewhat obscure title was whispered by one of the set computer operators to another during a preparatory working session; Brown wrote it down, thinking “What kind of poetry is this?”)

In his meditation on the ethics and practices of the language revolution, George Steiner coined the term “extraterritorial” to describe individuals like Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov, who claimed new rights to experiment and embrace the instable life of the artist by working between and beyond location, language and genre. Taking the knowledge gained from years of rejecting convention, promoting the unified mind and body, and collaborating with kindred iconoclasts, Trisha Brown continues to explore choreographic forms and ideas within a charged and unstable mode of vitality. In doing so, she has invigorated dance and its related fields with a stream of startling hybrids that are contingent, ambiguous, paradoxical, and unpredictable in nature.

Rather like life itself.

Louise Neri is the Creative Associate for the Visual Arts, Melbourne Festival 2013–15. She lives and works in New York City.

TRISHA BROWN DANCE COMPANY SERIES

PURE MOVEMENT
ARTS CENTRE MELBOURNE,
PLAYHOUSE

PROGRAM 1

Thu 23 Oct at 8.30pm

Solo Olos (1976)
Son of Gone Fishin’ (1981)
– Intermission –
If you couldn’t see me (1994)
Newark (1987)

PROGRAM 2

Sat 25 Oct at 8.30pm

Sun 26 Oct at 7pm

Watermotor (1978)
Newark (1987)
Les Yeux et l’ame (2011)
– Intermission –
Rogues (2011)
Set & Reset (1983)

EARLY WORKS

ARTS HOUSE, MEAT MARKET

Wed 22 Oct at 6pm & 9pm

Sun 26 Oct at 2pm

REPERTOIRE

Spanish Dance (1973)
Accumulation (1971)
Group Primary Accumulation
(1973)
Sticks I, II & IV (1973)
Leaning Duets I & II (1970)
Figure 8 (1974)
Scallops (1973)

FILMS

AUSTRALIAN CENTRE
FOR THE MOVING IMAGE,
ACMI CINEMAS 1 & 2

Mon 20 Oct at 5.30pm

ACMI CINEMA 2

L’Orfeo (1998) 115 mins
Italian with French subtitles

Mon 20 Oct at 8pm

ACMI CINEMA 2

Trisha and Carmen (1988) 13 mins
Aeros (1990) 32 mins
Shot Backstage (1998) 32 mins
It’s a Draw (2002) 27 mins

Tue 21 Oct at 4.30pm

ACMI CINEMA 1

4.30pm

Early Works (1966–1979) 186 mins
8pm
A Conversation between Trisha Brown and Klaus Kertess (2004) 72 mins

Sat 25 Oct at 2pm

ACMI CINEMA 2

Selections from *Early Works*
(1966–1979) 90 mins

For further information on the Trisha Brown Dance Company series visit melbournefestival.com.au/trisha