



Tempo Dance Festival 2016

MEREMERE

Creation/Performance: Rodney Bell

Direction: Malia Johnston

Music: Eden Mulholland

AV: Rowan Pierce

Tikanga, Te Reo, Maturanga Maori Dramaturgy: Tui Matira Ranapiri-Ransfield

Dramaturgy: Emma Willis

Set Design: John Verryt

Lighting: Ruby Reihana-Wilson

at [Q Theatre Loft, 305 Queen St](#), Auckland

From 14 Oct 2016 to 16 Oct 2016

[1 hour]

Reviewed by Leah Carrell, 15 Oct 2016 for Theatreview

Meremere is a sharing of a most remarkable story; Rodney Bell's autobiographical journey from an international career in integrated dance, through years of homelessness in America, to returning home to Te Kuiti, Aotearoa. His is an incredible story, told with complete honesty and humility. Bell is highly skilled in all areas of performance and *Meremere* is the ultimate combination of theatre, dance, music, and production elements; of storytelling and image evoking; of power and play.

We enter the space amongst a voiceover of conversations, a cityscape; a transportation to the streets of San Francisco. The space, white and angled, is a gallery waiting to be filled with artwork of memories. The back walls appear sturdy and frames the space like a solid barrier to what is beyond but they are later backlit revealing the walls are made of paper, some sheets are folded like bricks, showing an unsuspecting delicacy -a metaphor perhaps of Bell's journey. A tekoteko at the back is central; an ancestor watching, an anchor grounding him home.

We hear the story of Bell carving a meremere for his cousin's 40th and the modes of reflection this process gave him. His voiceover uses metaphors of his carving to draw on concepts of creation, sacrifice, beauty, loss, transformation. An evocative image, a piece of wood being carved into a meremere, and the idea of how our lives might sit in this process of whittling away something in order to become another. What do we make of those shavings? Those shavings? Those memories? What do we leave behind in order to become something new? The carving was a meditation for Bell, a chance to reflect on his life, and this dance work is a performative exploration of that process.

From a hidden position, he presents a meremere, then an arm, then a staff. He enters the space. When the staff hits the ground the music stops. In this opening dance phrase, a modernised taiaha sequence requires the audience's involvement, "shh, shh, shh" we say. Through this, we are invited in to his world of street performance, and we experience that

very real connection that occurs between performer and audience, a connection that transcends the dramatic situation of a black box theatre. Bell's haka, the strength in his arms, breath, and exertion, is not violent or confrontational but inviting and warm, a discovery not a struggle.

Although this is a solo, he is not alone in the space. He dances a duet with his girlfriend - his wheelchair who carried him around for 10 years- but I see that he is dancing with himself, introducing the man who lived through the experiences we later see. The second wheelchair remains in the space throughout; the former self always present. But the chair also remains a symbol of others who Rodney has carried, or have carried Rodney, through his journey. Rodney speaks with a projection of himself, their dialogue is the all too familiar workings of our inner conscious. This conversation is clever, humorous and plays against traditional conventions of theatre performance. Bell summons a collective of people via the projection, his family, his friends. There are familiar figures in there and I know that the dance community is his family. As we get to know more about Bell, I begin to understand him beyond his performative self. It is a remarkable feat that a performer can be so completely vulnerable that we see all of him, on a deeper level than every talented performer, we see him. An audience member enters the space, dancer Sean MacDonald, and begins a duet with Bell. It is choreographed, but the moment appears spontaneous, entirely natural, as if it could have been anyone in the audience standing to offer a response and because of this my connection with Bell strengthens, as if MacDonald's movement is speaking my thoughts, as if he was embodying the idea of meeting someone new and instantly becoming friends.

He also is never alone as his production team are as present throughout the performance as he is. We watch Eden Mulholland layer live vocals, keys and electric guitar to prerecorded music. It is a haunting soundscape of memories; emotions of love, loss and hope; ideas of loneliness, struggle and triumph. Mulholland is a gentle performer, gracious in his shaping of the piece. Bell contributes too to the score through a stunning harmonica solo, and using the microphone to capture the rhythm of his movement. AV designer Rowan Pierce's projections add incredible depth to the stories and images of Bell's journey. Projection brings to life Bell's depiction of his home, brings others into the space, brings landscapes and cityscapes to the walls of the theatre. A most striking moment is Bell's opening of a large book to a page full of projected video of his previous performances, a diary of his life, brought to life. Ruby Reihana-Wilson's lighting is soft, circles on the ground, sunlight on Bell, street lamps on the pavement.

Under artistic direction from Malia Johnston, this is a powerfully dynamic team. They understand each other's craft well and it would not be the work if any of those parts were missing; it is an incredibly moving autobiographical work. Emma Willis' dramaturgical work allows us to hear the stories as they appear in Bell's memory, rather than in a linear timeline. It's extremely well crafted, a natural conversation, emulating the tide of our memories, and events in my own life flick in and out of consciousness. Bell carries out sawdust and dumps it off his lap, he dumps everything he shares with us tonight. He sprinkles them over his body, traces tracks through the floor as if he is parting his thoughts, shifting them, shaping them, reorganising his memories as a mode of reflection and evaluation. His generous offering to the audience is met with gratitude and thrilled applause.

This successful premiere most definitely deserves a return season.

Sign language interpretation and audio description are available on the 16th October. Audio description includes touch tour. To confirm a place, email audiodescribedaotearoa@gmail.com



**Meremere - Rodney Bell &
Movement of the Human
14 October 2016, Q Theatre,
Auckland
TEMPO Dance Festival**

**Reviewed by Jenny Stevenson For
DANZ**

Central to the multi-disciplinary work *Meremere* is the voice of dancer Rodney Bell – manifested both in a literal and figurative sense. Throughout the work Bell relates his personal stories through dance and the spoken word, with the dance segments being supplementary to the dialogue, or acting as an exposition of Bell's awakened sense of self. As a wheelchair dancer, Bell uses his expressive upper body with particular emphasis on the arms and hands when creating the movement which is underscored through the freewheeling momentum and spatial patterning of the chair being manipulated in differing directions.

The work marks Bell's return to Aotearoa after many years spent performing and living in San Francisco and focuses on the survival mode he employed during time spent as a homeless person on the streets. He uses the imagery of bird feathers to express his yearning for freedom and his desire to return to his homeland. The carving of a meremere when he finally made it back home became a conduit for the memories to resurface.

Bell's performance is moving, honest and disingenuous. He is a genuine kiwi raconteur using self-deprecating humour to smooth out the edges of what is in fact a quite harrowing story. His ability to accept the deal that life has dealt him without rancour is obviously his greatest strength. He likens his own sense of loss to the wood shavings that were shed as he began carving the meremere, so that it became his mission to gather them up and return them to their natural surroundings. At the conclusion of the work he throws a handful of shavings onto the floor in a gesture that resonates far

beyond the spoken word. His use of props throughout the work vests the objects with symbolism as the audience becomes privy to their inherent meaning to Bell.

A team of artists convened by Director/Producer Malia Johnston under the aegis of MOTH (Movement of the Human), has worked with Bell to realise his vision in an innovative manner. John Verryt has created a blank canvas in his triangulated white set which appears to be modelled on the shape of te wharehau with the tekoteko at the apex of the triangle. It enables both projections and shadow theatre to come into play. Rowan Pierce has conjured up evocative images in his AV design that set the scene for each short vignette – providing additional potent commentary such as the supine Statue of Liberty - rather than mere illustration. Ruby Reihana-Wilson's highly innovative lighting design sees the light literally travel around the set - mirroring the trajectory of the wheelchair.

Musician Eden Mulholland is an outstanding onstage presence throughout, working with a close connection to Bell that enables an effective exchange of energy between the two. The music reverberates to fill the small space of Loft Theatre so that the audience is immersed in the sound. A strong graphic design of the programme by Ian Hammond underscores the focus on self and also of collaboration in the work, by inverting the “me” of “meremere” to become “we”. Dancer Sean MacDonald steps out of the audience to dance a short but powerful duet with Bell that magnifies Bell's ability to interact with others to create moments of great beauty.

It is to be hoped that Bell is able to realise his ambition to tour *Meremere* next year as it is an intrinsically New Zealand story of great courage and achievement that deserves a wider viewing than is possible under the umbrella of Tempo Dance Festival.

By Raewyn Whyte for the NEW ZEALAND HERALD Tuesday 18th October 2016

Performer extraordinaire Rodney Bell has been away from New Zealand for 12 years performing with American integrated dance companies.

Dance fans here will remember him from the early years of dance company Touch Compass when his spin turns and derring-do flying wheelchair were a highlight, but just as many will remember him for the sensitivity of his dancing.

Bell has now returned and celebrates his homecoming in *Meremere*, a beautifully crafted hour of beguiling story-telling interspersed with gentle audience interaction, wheelchair tricks, dancing with shadows and interactive lines of light or against video clips, with a continuous stream of gorgeous live music from Eden Mulholland.

In *Meremere*, Rodney shares stories from his life; these are never very long, just enough to convey the essence. There are incidents from his years in San Francisco, especially the final three when he lived on the street, struggling to find food and shelter and keep up his medical insurance.

He shares the highs and the lows, the small triumphs, everyday routines, the joy of winning of a coveted Isadora Duncan award for his dancing, the inspiration of Moana the one-legged seagull, the surprise of being a reporter from the streets on CNN. Homecoming stories also feature, stories of family and whanau in Te Kuiti.

His dancing is moving and absorbing, sculptural and full of emotion, and his blues harp playing is as soulful as ever. His commitment to making a better life for others is firm and ongoing.

Billed as a solo, *Meremere* is a complex work of art where design, AV and lighting play as significant a role as story-telling, music and dance. It has been developed by Movement of the Human, a dream team comprised of designer John Verryt, AV producer Rowan Pierce, lighting designer Ruby Reihana Wilson, musician Eden Mulholland, director Malia Johnston, dramaturg Emma Willis and Te Mātauranga Māori dramaturg Tui Matira Ranapiri-Ransfield.

It could be presented in a number of formats and lengths to suit the space of performance and is bound to be presented in many venues.

What: Meremere by Rodney Bell and Eden Mulholland with Movement of the Human

Where & when: Q Theatre Loft, 14 & 16 October