

Theatreview, 23 June 2018

PROFOUND... AND WONDERFULLY CRAFTED

MEREMERE

Creation/Performance: Rodney Bell

Direction: Malia Johnston

Music: Eden Mulholland

AV: Rowan Pierce

Produced By: Movement of the Human and Rodney Bell

at Circa One, Wellington

From 22 Jun 2018 to 30 Jun 2018

[1 hour]

Reviewed by Sam Trubridge, 23 Jun 2018

Circa Theatre should be commended for making space on its main stage for a work as profound and wonderfully crafted as *Meremere*, an autobiographical performance by Rodney Bell, presented by Movement of the Human (Malia Johnston, Eden Mulholland, Rowan Pierce, and Ian Hammond) in partnership with Touch Compass Dance. After their hit of the NZ Festival this year, *Rushes*, it is great to have MOTH back with another equally stand-out production.

Rodney Bell speaks softly and gently. He has an innocence and an enthusiasm that has somehow survived a motorcycle accident in his youth and living rough on the streets of San Francisco after his contract expired with Axis Dance Company a few years ago. Hardship often makes hard men, but instead Bell has embraced some other part of himself to give him strength and survive the challenges life has thrown him. He makes friends with a one-legged seagull, he invents tricks to play in his wheelchair so that he can make money on the street, and he puts feathers in his shoes... His wide eyes miss nothing, so that when he witnesses someone being stabbed in front of him in a night-shelter over a chair, he knows how much people will fight for the smallest thing that they may call their own.

His performance is embraced by a breathtaking production, which is choreographer Malia Johnston and her collaborators' gift to the story. Johnston is a choreographer who can weave movement, light, sound, and text together with amazing fluency and sensitivity to each element of her composition. Visual, material, textual, and kinetic dramaturgies all become choreography to her. The result is a stunningly moving performance from across all media, which owes as much to the amazing team that she has assembled. Rowan Pierce is an AV designer who paints with light, colour, and image – using the projector with masterful subtlety to adjust the space, sometimes just beyond detection of the eye. Thus a shadow will break off from Bell's own shadow on the wall, washes of texture or colour will tint the stage, or lines scan the space. At other times he plunges us into environments, with his imagery filling the white walls and white floors of John Verryt's set. Eden Mulholland's live instrumentation, mixing, and vocalising lends another palette to the experience –

with drifting guitar soundscapes, whispering voices, and a final bittersweet song. The soundtrack is brilliant, and it is great to see Mulholland and Johnston still working together, more than ten years since the blisteringly cool *Dark Tourists*. The beautifully designed programme by Ian Hammond provides a lasting artefact of the performance, honouring this sophisticated work with an equally sophisticated arrangement of text and image about the show.

The combined result of these elements is a production that is skilfully composed down to the finest detail to create moments of pure stage magic – a book that Bell opens on stage to reveal video of his dance career in the USA, the stage that becomes a map of his home town Te Kuiti, and finally the wings that open to fly him home to Aotearoa. Perhaps here we can see the strength that has sustained Bell through the difficulties that he shares with us: the power of his flights of imagination and his boundless joy. It also gives a clue to the meaning of the title. The ‘meremere’ is either a shoulder feather, or a short weapon, like a cleaver.

The latter is usually made from pounamu but in this story, Bell’s weapon for facing adversity is soft and gentle, like a feather: his disarming optimism and hopefulness. Bell, Johnston, and her team disarm us all with this *Meremere*, that starts gently, slowly weaving a story that gathers emotional weight through the persuasive power of all the media working in unison. At one pivotal moment Bell invites a dancer (Briedi Colquhoun) from the auditorium to join him on stage. We see him navigating her world, where legs go, where they move around each other, above and below, in a dance of negotiating space and multiple directions. But we also see him elevate her, turn her, carry her, and move her in the way that the male dancer does for the ballerina in classical dance – on his back, on his shoulders. Video projection shows him soaring high on wires, on his own or in similar partnering. It would be great to see some of this on stage as well, but the projected imagery is just as moving and exciting.

Meremere is a small but beautifully formed production that takes us on a journey of undiminished hope and wonder. It is fantastic that its tour has also included several small towns and Hawkes Bay Regional Prison. It is a deftly woven story and a spellbinding performance that deserves to be seen and loved by many. So with only a week’s season at Circa Theatre I encourage all to catch this outstanding show while it is here.

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Māori dance artist's life-affirming dance work brings audience to its feet

Ann Hunt • 10:53, Jun 24 2018



SUPPLIED

Rodney Bell tells us his hopes and dreams with self-effacing charm

Meremere, Movement of the Human, Circa Theatre, Wellington, June 22-30

Reviewed by Ann Hunt

Meremere is a unique solo work performed by Māori dance artist Rodney Bell, (Ngati Maniapoto.)

This autobiographical, multi-disciplinary and life-affirming survival story drew the cheering opening night audience to its feet.

Director/choreographer Malia Johnston is part of the project-based, cross-discipline company, Movement of the Human. Their creative collaboration here is stunningly unified.

Totally in sync are John Verryt's minimal yet versatile and intimate set; Ruby Reihana-Wilson's striking lighting design with its clever use of shadows; the superb AV and graphic designs by Rowan Pierce and Ian Hammond, and the lynchpin composition, live playing and singing of the brilliant Eden Mulholland, *Meremere* is inspiring.

Assisted by dramaturg Emma Willis, their superb collaboration with Bell illuminates his extraordinary story of how a motorcycle accident in 1991, left him with a broken back and wheelchair bound. Far from being defeated he established an integrated dance career in New Zealand with Touch Compass, and with various similar companies in America.

But after being let go by Axis Dance Company, Bell found himself penniless on the streets in San Francisco. Down but not out, he played harmonica and devised his winning six-trick combo street act, with a blackboard and three dice, earning him the name of "Para-dice", or "Dice".

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Meremere is the autobiographical show by award winning dancer and performer Rodney Bell.

His life on the street, taught him not only how to survive, but also how to look and to see. Collecting feathers from a one-legged seagull he named Moana and stuffing them in his shoes, he began to imagine crossing the sea to New Zealand, and coming home to Te Kuiti.

In a sequence of skilfully calibrated dance and spoken word passages, Bell plays a mean blues harmonica and tells us his hopes and dreams with self-effacing charm, intense energy and generosity of spirit.

A highlight is the beautifully crafted duet with guest dancer Brydie Colquhoun, which shows us perhaps the greatest strength of integrated dance: that we can live and work together harmoniously, beyond difference.

On June 23 there was a New Zealand Sign Language Interpreted performance.

Stuff



Radio New Zealand Theatre Review (Jesse Mulligan 28 June, 2018)

http://www.radionz.co.nz/audio/player?audio_id=2018651305

TV3 The Café

<https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=The%20Cafe%20rodney%20Bell>

Newshub:

<https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2018/06/formerly-homeless-paraplegic-dancer-tells-his-incredible-life-story-through-dance.html>

Meremere in Northern Regional Corrections re: (TV3 social media)

<https://www.facebook.com/renewsnz/videos/347945302405640/>

The Ruminator, 25 June 2018

Review: Meremere: a multi-media performance memoir by Rodney Bell

Posted by [The Reviewer](#) × June 25, 2018 at 8:51 am

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I'm never sure when I'm reviewing a piece how much to find out about it in advance. My approach in general is to let the performers have first dibs on telling me the story and to read as little as possible.

So when I set out to see Meremere, I knew only what the blurb on the website said: which was that *"Meremere brings to you the incredible journey and story of Rodney Bell (Ngati Maniapoto) from an international career in integrated dance, through years of homelessness in America, to returning home to Te Kuiti Aotearoa"*

I'm usually a little leery of superlatives like "incredible", but this 'multi-media performance memoir' was mesmerising.

Staged in Circa One, the audience took their seats in a dry ice haze that evoked both the fog of San Francisco, and the King Country mists of artist Rodney Bell's hometown (Te Kuiti). The set was designed with white walls and floor in a diamond shape, with a carving (I think a tekoteko) on the floor at its apex. This became the canvas for a stunning play with light, and video, evoking the realities of houses and homelessness, and myriad places, literal and metaphysical.

The evening began with a karakia, mihi whakatau, and waiata, bringing the audience together in the space (we were later referred to by the memoirist as his "whanau for the night"). Sometimes it can feel like mihi in events are run through as a formality, and at such pace that they're meant to be said for form's sake rather than understood and communicated. That wasn't the case here. The speaker's diction was crisp, and he was speaking to an audience who were listening and who understood. My own reo is limited and I was surprised that I followed so much – due I suspect to a passive increase in understanding coming from the rise of everyday reo around me (in public sector Wellington and in the media).

After a sunny crisp mid-winter's day, coming off the joy of being a New Zealander in a week of tragedy overseas and hope at home (the PM had her baby girl the previous day) it felt absolutely right that public story-telling and art should begin like this.

Structurally the piece, coming in at around an hour, worked brilliantly. It blended story-telling, soliloquy, music, dance, duet, video, humour, and clever interweaving of video, props and live performance.

The story telling was non-linear, and the more powerful for it, allowing Rodney's stories and videos of award-winning dance performances to take their place amidst his life at home, and time on the streets of San Francisco. A friend afterwards said each segment left her wanting more.

The staging and extremely clever choreography of music, light, dancer/s chair and props, must have been hugely complex, and endlessly rehearsed, but overall the piece maintained a gentle stripped-back honesty.

Different people will have taken different things from the performance (it was certainly met with universal acclaim from the opening night audience). As a child of the King Country, and having spent time a few months back walking the Mission area in San Francisco with people working with the homeless, it had a very specific resonance for me: I'd seen those streets, and heard stories from the outside, but didn't truly feel the impact until Rodney shared his own experience, and linked it to Te Ao Māori and his wider artistic life.

Reflecting now, it has brought home to me the value and power of first-person narratives: people telling their **own** stories, with their contexts, in the way that they choose.

The show includes some deliberately random elements, Rodney threw light-up dice to determine which trick from his busking days he performed (we got lucky and saw an interpretation of the Jackson moonwalk. Very cool).

An audience member was invited to throw the dice, which the story of Rodney (or Dice, his name on the streets) and one of his nights in a homeless shelter, where those lucky enough to get a chair had to sit on it, upright and careful: a taste of Rodney's wheelchair life. Having heard that story, I remarked to my friend that it felt a bit weird joining the standing ovation at the end, as a "sitting-up straight" ovation felt more true to the work. She had felt the same.

Overall, I found Rodney's memoir affecting and powerful, gentle and strong, and simultaneously heart-rending and joyous. He and his collaborating artists (dance duet, music, lighting, dramaturgy, matauranga Māori and tikanga) have created a work of rare grace.

You can see it in Wellington for only a few performances, at the end of a North Island Tour. Get a ticket if you can.

Movement of the Human presents Meremere: a multi-media performance memoir by Rodney Bell.

Collaborating Artists include Rowan Pierce (Audio Visual), Tui Matir Ranapiri-Ransfield (Tikanga, Te Reo, Matauranga Maori Dramaturg), Emma Willis (Dramaturgy) John Verryll (Set Design), Ruby Reihana-Wilson (Lighting), Ian Hammond (Graphic Design).

The Wellingtonista, 25 June 2018

The Wellingtonista

Random stuff about Wellington since 2005

Review: Meremere

by JESS on JUNE 25, 2018 in DANCE, REVIEW, THEATRE

Simply put, *Meremere* is a memoir come to life. I don't feel qualified to 'review' the piece and the rich layers of culture, history, identity, and art contained within. It's not quite dance, nor a film or a play – there's a rawness that will appeal to those well-versed in the performing arts as much as those who aren't 'theatre people.'

Bell's story meanders, not entirely seamlessly, but always authentically, between comedy and drama, whimsy and profundity, as he recounts his journey from Aotearoa to the United States and back again. The narrative has not been sanitised for our comfort, and those confronting moments about race and disability will haunt you.

Meremere has all the flawless technical production of a well-funded stage production, but the gritty passion of a solo confessional. I mean that in the best way possible – there's something to impress everyone here. [Movement of the Human](#), the company behind *Rushes* at the NZ Festival earlier this year, has done an incredible job complementing Bell's story with light, projection, and sound. The music is so perfectly timed to the movement that it's easy to forget there is a composer standing there, making it all happen live. And the projection is a work of art unto itself, adding an enthralling layer to an incredible story.

Seeing the love and admiration between all of the collaborators on opening night really drove home how much this story means to those bringing it to life. There was a lot of love in that room, and it was a privilege to be surrounded by it. Some things defy description or review, and *Meremere* is definitely one of them.

Meremere is a poignant reminder that there's always more lying beneath the surface. How many other beautiful stories have we overlooked because of our assumptions about the narrator?

***Meremere* is on at [Circa Theatre until 30 June](#).**