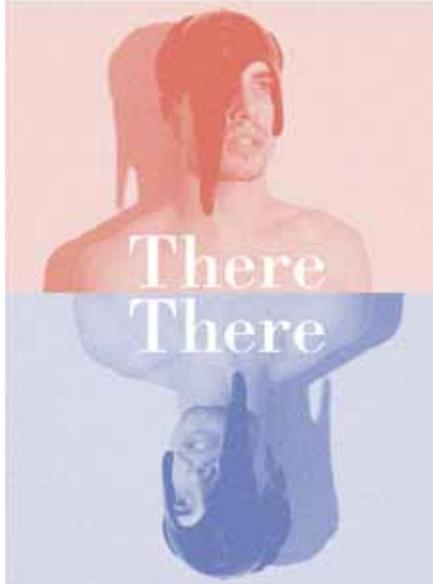


ThereThere

BEING ALIVE TO 'THE PRESENT' PROVIDES OPPORTUNITY FOR THE UNEXPECTED

By Francis Christeller

PHOTO: NATALIE THOMSON



I first met Antje Pfundtner in Guang-Zhou, China, and was immediately stunned by her energy and magnetism. Something drew me to her in life as well as in her performance. Antje is a German choreographer, based in Hamburg, and creates performance theatre. She tours internationally and is renowned for her solo dance work in particular. The simple fact that she was German appealed to me too, as I had become interested in learning about my own German heritage.

At the Guang-Dong Modern Dance Festival, Antje performed her solo *eigenSinn*. This work had been touring for five years and was enthralling for every minute of the hour. I laughed, cried and sat in awe of her focus and ability to lead the audience on a journey into a land of tall tales that revealed remarkable truths about her and ourselves.

Inspired by this I participated in a week of workshops with her and began to understand her philosophy towards improvisation and relating to an audience.

Then in 2009, when awarded the inaugural Eileen May Norris Dance Scholarship, I used it to spend two months working one-on-one with Antje, to further my training with her and to have her create a solo work on me. This solo took shape over nine weeks of rehearsals and is entitled *ThereThere*.

In the same way that Berlin's dance scene reflects its bohemian, laid back and cool image as a world-city, Hamburg's dance scene is more conservative and stable in a Germanic way, consistent with its history as an industrial city. The independent dance scene is small but fairly strong because of the state government's support of a number of artists and dance industry support organisations.

I benefitted, through Antje, from two such organisations with which Antje has a standing relationship. Tanz Initiative Hamburg provides free rehearsal space for choreographers, teachers and community dance organisations. As well as rehearsing in one of their spaces we had a month of space given to us by Kampnagel. This theatre complex is one of those massive German factories or warehouses that have been converted in the last 20 years into amazing arts spaces, theatres and development centres. Kampnagel is the biggest commissioning theatre in Germany. This means they have no full-time theatre

company or ballet company and instead continually commission new work from freelance artists and supplement the programme with international and touring shows.

Kampnagel is also home to the K3 choreographic development centre who presented the premiere of *ThereThere*.

While creating *ThereThere* Antje used themes and motifs from previous work. The piece is a step in the progression of her choreographic practice. Antje conducted a number of lengthy interviews with me to find out about my personal history and how the form of the solo had manifested itself in my life so far. Through these interviews and the amount of time we spent together she identified links and stories that found their way in one form or another into the final work.

Another creative tool we used was to round off each day with a solo consisting of material that we had been playing with. On Fridays we would look back over the week and collate bits and pieces into a solo, mapping where we were at that moment. This was invaluable for discovering connections and progressions in the material we were creating. We had the space and time to deeply explore ideas (conceptual or movement) and then decide whether to keep or discard them.



FRANCIS CHRISTELLER, 'THERETHERE'
PREMIERE PERFORMANCE
PHOTO: NATALIE THOMSON



FRANCIS IN HAMBURG

In improvisations, Antje encouraged me to keep a strong focus on and consciousness of each movement and idea as it came to me without zoning out and letting movements pass by in a splurge of movement diarrhoea. This makes me, as a performer, become more alive to the present and the opportunities that present themselves at any moment in time. It gives me the consciousness that can allow me to change my mind at any moment and take the phrase into a different space. Being more aware of what you are doing gives you much more control over the dynamics and variety of the movement vocabulary. This sounds reasonably elementary, but it really changed the way I moved in improvised sections of *ThereThere*.

Creating *ThereThere* Antje developed themes used in her previous work; combining fact and fiction, story-telling and my personal history. A headless man who waltzes through life, a dwarf, animate and inanimate objects all play a role in delivering this story. There is a sense of progression as I construct and deconstruct little worlds in the space that is, by the end of the show, littered with a visual timeline of what has been.

This trip was a really great opportunity to grow as an artist. I saw many performances by European artists that gave me an idea of the breadth of work being made, bursting beyond my expectations of dance and theatre and where they meet. I enjoyed taking classes with choreographers and teachers who I hadn't met before, in Germany, the Netherlands, Scandinavia and the UK. The combination of the things I did and saw has sparked an interest in choreography that I have realised since returning to New Zealand through a short duet, *Double Blind*, commissioned by Footnote Dance Company for our tour to London and our national tour. Being in Europe gave me the opportunity to continue feeding my practice with new ways of moving and thinking about moving.

I return from this experience with an improved awareness of myself as a performer, more experience in improvisation as well as a really in-depth understanding of Antje's own particular improvisation style.

Last year was also a time of personal growth for me and I'd like to finish with a quote from Antje that I think is valid to everyone.

'No matter what you are doing, no matter how deeply in something you are, no matter how committed to something you are, you can always change your mind'.

Thank you to the Eileen May Norris Dance Scholarship, the Goethe Institute, Kampnagel, K3 choreographic centre and Tanz Initiative Hamburg. ■

Francis Christeller will be performing a section of *ThereThere* in Auckland as part of *Tempo* Dance Festival's *Prime Cuts* season. Performances are on Wednesday 5 October at 10pm and Thursday 6 October at 8pm in The Loft at Q Theatre.

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