

Fig.a. Sue Cheeseman in "Bloom" Photograph by Reg Graham



# Kiwiana Culture with a Difference

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Who am I, woman, researcher-choreographer, performer, traveler, teacher and academic with twenty years experience in dance (Refer fig. a). "Bloom" the solo dance I wish to focus on today has a programme note that reads *Books by its cover* and *House by its garden*.... This solo was devised and performed by myself this year in a week long series at Allen Hall Theatre, University of Otago, Dunedin in July 1996 and was funded from a Creative New Zealand grant. This grant enabled me to commission a writer and a costume designer.

I would describe this dance theatre piece as full of pedestrian movements, recognisable gestures and posturing on the spot intersected by larger phrases of movement: running, walking, rolling. A more stylised movement phrase is varied and repeated several times forcing new engagement with similar material.

Unlike previous works where I had predominantly used commissioned music I wanted to work with text, in other words a word score. I am interested in the interplay between text and movement and the range of possibilities of multiple meanings.

One of the questions I began with was to see if the ambiguity in dance was reduced for the audience or are the movement meaning puzzles, even more compounded by the addition of language bringing another set of baggage's? Furthermore was I reinforcing a mind/body split and by implication calling into question the possibility that dance cannot speak for itself.

The text is constructed from two main stream icons of Kiwiana culture - *Yates Gardening Guide*<sup>7</sup> and *Edmonds Cookery Book*.<sup>8</sup> From these two sources the text was constructed by Richard Huber a writer, actor, academic and friend. There was considerable dialogue between us as we negotiated the rises and of our individual but closely linked creative endeavors. Sliced into the body of the gardening score are words and short phrases from the cook book. For example:

A young couple may need a garden mainly for laying in the sun or entertaining and would want a layout which needed little attention / A subtropical garden featuring the bold and succulent leaves of a fruit salad.. is always a talking point / the arrival of roly poly pudding creates children /

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<sup>7</sup> Yates, Arthur. (1995) *Yates Gardening Guide*. Auckland: Yates New Zealand Ltd

<sup>8</sup> Edmonds, Elizabeth. (1968) *Edmonds Cookery Book*. Christchurch: T.J. Edmonds Ltd

and a need for tricycle runs surrounded with upside down ginger  
bread/Nutty joys and play areas for yoyos

Embedded in its substratum is a social commentary on body image. Moreover, the piece attempts to subvert the notion of female as nature. Phrases in to text, fluid fertile they symbolise the process of gardens, highlighting the way gardens appear natural but are constantly controlled. I am reminded of visiting many a home where often the comment is tossed out "please excuse the garden it is such a mess!" However the individual has probably spent many hours tending and nurturing the garden they refer to as untidy.

At times during the piece fleeting images of the "real" world are portrayed but fragmented and eclectic. However I neither garden nor cook in the piece. Text and movement do not go hand in hand but have an associative relationship. Two different kinds of cultural production interact but are not contained and operate within their own modes and codes of practice. There are moments when I am still and the audience engages with the texts that is the audio and the embodied texts.

Fig b. Choreographer/Performer Sue Cheeseman in "Bloom"  
Photograph by Reg Graham

At this point (Refer to Fig b) I am still in this shape while the spoken audio text continues-

Draw the thighs close to the body / cross the legs over the tail / tie firmly  
with string / fold the wings backwards and inwards over the neck / leaving  
room for the pudding to swell / alternatively strips of bacon may be laid on  
top

The intent was to embody the multiple associations of woman as meat, biological function, genealogical specimen, virgin and whore. The meanings shift and slide as the text and the still image leave their traces.

On other occasions the two female voices on tape are silent and I directly engage the audience through my own speaking singing voice or the rustle of my dress and or the sounds of my feet running fill the gaps. Coupled with the above there is no single author. The voices are heard against one another and at times at counterpoint to the action of the performer.

As the choreographer, questions arose: how does each verbal female authoritative voice on tape relate to the performer? Is it a commentary, is it a train of consciousness, is it a dialogue between my self and the performance?

Who is talking to who? Movement, texts and sounds interset. There are moments of synthesis yet each retains its own identities with different but telling narratives.

At several points in the piece I pose in strong shapes. These sculpt the space and draw attention the notion that woman in post colonial patricial society are regarded as object. Through the devices of exaggeration and distortion these shapes which have direct references to body building, the aerobics plastered on smile, and fashion industries adverts for female clothing are placed out of context at radical juxtaposition to one another. Appropriation of these physical images shifts these meanings and attempts to subvert the subject object relationship. A muscular woman in a ballgown does not belong in a manicured garden.

In the studio the first time I rehearsed in the red ballgown with all its layers of petticoats and yards of fabric I skipped, twirled, rustled, fiddled, paraded and spun around the space / the seduction of the red dress. During the piece it smothers me, binds me, moves with me and against me and even demanded its own suitcase to travel to this conference. The dress has its own narrative, pleases society and is wrapped up in the blood of woman.

The red dress and I have traveled an interesting and captivating journey. Along the way many more questions have arisen and perhaps for me the choreographer - researcher the answers are in the next movements.

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