

the country inside me
Critical response by Megan Spencer



Alien nation...

Writer and performance maker Dani Powell says she drew on her family's Scottish/Irish immigrant past – plus those of others – to explore identity and 'sense of place' in *the country inside me* (1).

It is a multi-disciplinary work that includes live dance, projection and exploratory music/sound montage, and movable staging. Powell presents four personal stories that flow into and around each other, within and without the Lot 19 performance space. (The conclusion of the show is staged outside in the 'real world'.)

In *tcim* Powell deploys the same stylised 'documentary'⁽²⁾ investigation of 'country' that she developed through her work with Alice Springs non-traditional theatre collective, Red Shoes Performance Makers. (Powell was artistic director/creative producer from 2001 until her recent move to Castlemaine.)

In Central Australia Powell explored and contrasted 'country' as it pertains to both the Indigenous communities of the region ('the far-reaching historical relationship between the earliest inhabitants and the land'⁽³⁾), and non-Indigenous 'newcomers' (migrants), with a distinctly different sense of place and identity.

She asked how and why do these 'geographic, cultural and psychological inheritances'⁽⁴⁾ affect such newcomers/immigrants, and also 'shape' the new country they are in?

What do they hang onto and what do they let go?

Powell focuses on this latter aspect in *the country inside me*. Using her 'non-theatrical' template, she digs into the European and Asian immigrant experience that dwells inside the contemporary country of Central Victoria.

She invites us to listen to a further four 'newcomer' stories: those of a Scottish immigrant who grew up here; a WWII Hungarian-Jew (as told by his daughter); a Sri Lankan/Tamil refugee and a Chinese-Indonesian migrant. All made their way to Australia over oceans and eras, experiencing varying

degrees of difficulty – from fleeing war and persecution, to being raised under the pall of a parent struggling to leave the ‘old country’ behind.

These tales of displacement are told with humour, intimacy, emotion and remembrance, and from the ‘alien’ perspective of a visitor who’s come from ‘somewhere else’.

While the stories alone were compelling - and charged with the current angry Australian cultural climate and debate around the legitimacy of immigration and refugees - it was the way they were told and staged that made them particularly powerful, authentic and effective.

A ‘faceless dancer’ (Fina Po) occupies the darkened space. Dressed in white, projections illustrate her body and movements over the course of 32 minutes. Soundscapes also envelope the room. While various interviews are broadcast, the dancer moves throughout, augmenting the stories with various props: piles of dirt, weathered suitcases and paper dress patterns cling to white walls, illustrating the spectrum of the ‘alien’ experience and the stories at hand.

Eventually the dancer reveals her face and utters words in unison with the voice of the Chinese/Indonesian immigrant. Now she is no longer an anonymous cypher who ‘stands in’ for any one of us, but a real flesh and blood human with her own story and identity.

After being offered green tea, we follow her outside and watch as she washes in public, eventually dousing herself violently in buckets of water, then wandering off into the anonymous, silent night. It is in this moment and this space we are presented with what can only be the spectacle of a refugee washing in a camp or detention centre - in public, without the privacy and dignity we take so for granted here, in *our* homes. Now we’re in temporary housing, not theatre. Our dancer, Po, is on display, displaced from home with no prospect of ever going back.

The whole world’s watching.

It was a compassionate finale to a show that attempted to insert us into the hearts and minds of others. Powell insists we imagine this experience for ourselves - what might it be like to for us to make our homes somewhere unfamiliar? Whether by choice, or worse, because you have no choice...

What do you do with that country inside of you?

The country inside me was an immersive, graceful experience that engaged both mind and senses. While text and voice carried the narrative, sound, projection and dance communicated the affect via metaphor and performance. Notions of displacement and remembrance manifested in projections on objects like the old suitcases. The piles of dirt were sites for

'the dancer' to leave her mark, albeit until swept away. Here *tcim* communicated the transience and ephemerality so intrinsic to the immigrant experience – and the importance of memory in shaping identity and sense of place.

The ocean – so integral to our current debate around asylum seekers – was front and centre, in both the aural stories and the projections.

This piece has chops. Powell and her collaborators – video artist Jim Coad, sound designer/musician Damian Mason and dancer/choreographer Fina Po – are certainly onto something. With perhaps further consideration given towards:

- a) The possible inclusion of more dancers throughout the piece,
- b) A less furtive/fleeting confrontation between dancer and audience once her identity is revealed, and
- c) Beefing up the 'washroom finale' in the 'real world' space even more strongly,

the country inside me has the makings of a major work that will undoubtedly lend itself to arts programming and various festivals across the country, right about now.

References:

- (1) TCIM production notes
- (2) TCIM production notes
- (3) RealTime arts magazine online, issue 110.
- (4) TCIM production notes