

NZ Listener

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Another ingredient in the mix

by Francesca Horsley

Suzanne Cowan's works celebrate the creative possibilities of disability.

Dancer/choreographer Suzanne Cowan is impish – and not averse to a joke, at times at her own expense, at other times playing with the audience. A natural subversive, she spent most of Sean Curham's *Bedrock* obscured under thick wads of cotton wool. In her acclaimed *Grotteschi*, she is an enchanting spider-woman: a femme fatale who turns the tango tables on her uber-flexi mantis-man – with devastating consequences.

In 2008, Cowan was a winner at the inaugural Attitude Awards for New Zealanders with a disability, claiming both the Arts and Supreme Award. She is a highly articulate choreographer whose works explore the dance “otherness” of the disabled body, celebrate the point of difference.

“It's tied up around cultural aesthetics and expectations, cultural ideas of beauty,” she says. “Traditionally, the ‘classical’ virtues of dancers require them to be elegant, able and upright. Disabled dancers fail to meet these tenets, and are invariably viewed as asymmetrical, clumsy, often floor or wheelchair-bound.”

But disability, rather than being a negative, fuels Cowan's imagination, provides the creative platform. “What is perceived as a disability can become another ingredient in the mix,” she says. “My interest is how you make the most of that ingredient; make it really interesting and creative.”

In Cowan's powerful 2005 work, *Hephaestus and Ares*, two Greek gods struggle in an unequal battle. Disabled Hephaestus, with unflinching determination, speed and ingenuity, initially staves off his seething brother, Ares, the God of War. His

defeat is represented as a pyrrhic victory for Ares.

When I arrive at Cowan's home in Auckland, she is quickly settling in after a six-month residency at the University of Otago. She is to begin rehearsals the next day with choreographer Jeremy Nelson for the new Touch Compass season, *Triple Bill*, which includes a revival of the 2008 *Grotteschi*.

During her Caroline Plummer residency at Otago, Cowan worked with the blind and sight-impaired community. "Initially, I questioned how to make my choreography more accessible, then I decided to make a piece driven by their stories and unique perspectives."

She created *The House of Memories*: seven rooms of a Dunedin villa, each telling a story for someone with visual impairment. The audience moved through the house in small groups, viewing works such as the memories of an old-time dance hall and an intense solo by a woman recalling her family's Canterbury woolshed.

"A lot of people are not completely blind, they have some sight, and have a perspective of the world that we don't recognise, but which has great value. They notice other things because often their aural and kinesthetic senses are heightened. We are incredibly visually dominated. If you take that away or turn the volume down, then the volume turns up on other aspects which we overlook. Helen Keller commented that sighted people miss so much because they're so completely tuned into the visual."

Cowan took dance classes through to her teenage years. In Canada, while she was on holiday from the University of Canterbury, a car accident on an icy road left her with critical spine injuries. Sport was an important part of her rehabilitation and after seeing an early Touch Compass performance in 1998 she joined the company for a season.

Travelling once more, she joined British integrated dance company Candoco, touring internationally for more than three years. The company allowed Cowan to work with top choreographers. It also opened her eyes to how the disabled body was received by audiences: from sympathy – "Oh, those poor people" – to the reviewer who expressed acute distaste at seeing an imperfect dancer's body on stage, all the while ignoring the artistry.

Cowan started thinking about how people with disabilities had progressed in their

participation and inclusiveness; where did they fit into society? On her return to New Zealand, she rejoined Touch Compass, and began choreographing.

She wrote about historical perceptions of the disabled body. Her research revealed that the disabled were often considered “grotesque” (with good and bad connotations) and were popular freak-show attractions. Inspired, she created the duet *Grotteschi*. “The grotesque, by nature, has a subversive element to it. It’s dark, awkward and interesting, with endless possibilities for innovation. In *Grotteschi*, I voyaged into my personal relationship with the concept; I looked at my body and the so-called disabled parts of my body.

“But *Grotteschi* is a comical piece, it’s not meant to be dead serious,” she says, laughing. “I see it as a celebration of diversity. It sounds like a cliché, but all our bodies are unique. My dance partner, Adrian Smith, has a unique body and movement style – so do I. That I don’t have the voluntary use of my legs is just another factor.

“In contemporary dance, what can happen with dancers with disabilities is almost unconsciously we try to minimise the disability. It’s an attempt to reinstate the classical body into the disabled body; to reinstate that particular aesthetic and way of moving.

“By just being around, insisting on being in dance and making dance, I think I am challenging this perception.

“I won’t go home,” she says, laughing. “Can’t send me home.”

TRIPLE BILL, including *Grotteschi*, Touch Compass, Auckland Town Hall, August 18-21.

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