
SASHA WALTZ AND GUESTS AT THE MELBOURNE INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL

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It had been years in the making – the Australian debut of acclaimed German choreographer Sasha Waltz. Festival director Brett Sheehy had been trying to bring out a work of hers for almost ten years. It wasn't until last year, however, that he finally succeeded and was able to present Waltz's company Sasha Waltz & Guests as part of the 2009 Melbourne International Arts Festival, the first under his direction. The long wait paid off, as Sheehy managed to secure not one but two Waltz productions for his festival - the choreographic opera *Medea* (2007) and the hugely successful *Körper* (2000), considered to be a milestone of European dance theatre. With Waltz' excellent reputation of being one of the most important European dance theatre makers since Pina Bausch, expectations before the Melbourne Festival were high. So, one wonders, have they been met?

Largely yes, it seems. The performances were well attended, audience responses generally positive and the reviews, more often than not, glowing. The Age paid so much attention to the festival opener, *Medea*, they printed two reviews on consecutive days, one by an opera critic and one by a dance reviewer.

MELBOURNE FESTIVAL

To call *Medea* spectacular is almost an understatement. With a score by French composer Pascal Dusapin on the basis of Heiner Müller's text *Medeamaterial*, the work is a large-scale opera extravaganza featuring renowned mezzo-soprano Caroline Stein in the title role. She is joined on stage by 17 dancers, 20 singers from the choir Vocalconsort Berlin and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. It's the first time the company has collaborated with local musicians. Waltz's pieces are often celebrated for their memorable images. And there are plenty of those in this one. They include an enormous red curtain plummeting to the ground, stone figures on a wall frieze suddenly coming to life and the performers' epic struggle against the wind power of six industrial fans.

Körper (Bodies) is a different affair altogether. Best known for its monumental sculptures of the dancers' half-naked bodies piled on top of each other, it celebrates the human body in all its shapes and forms, addressing issues such as genetic manipulation, the quest for immortality and the dream for the perfect body. Since its premiere

in 2000, the piece went on to become one of the most acclaimed European dance theatre productions of the new millennium. By putting the body at the centre of its exploration, it is credited with braking new ground for the genre of dance theatre, traditionally concerned with expressing emotions physically and the deconstruction of narrative.

SUPPORT OF NEW CHOREOGRAPHERS

Sasha Waltz & Guests was founded by Waltz and Jochen Sandig, her partner in business and life, in Berlin in 1993. The company is now considered to be one of Germany's most successful international cultural enterprises. Key to its longevity, one suspects, is the flexibility that comes with the fact they are more of an artistic collective than a conventional company. Strongly encouraging the choreographic ambitions of the dancers they work with, Waltz and Sandig have presented work by new choreographers under the company's banner since 2000. One of them is Spanish-born Juan Kruz Diaz de Garaio Esnaola. Originally studying Old Music in Spain and The Netherlands, he joined Sasha Waltz & Guests in 1996. In addition to being a featured dancer in most of Waltz' work over the last 13 years, he is also a sought after teacher, works as rehearsal director on the company's remounts, occasionally assists Waltz choreographically and has even developed musical concepts and contributed own compositions for some of her works. He has also created a handsome body of work as choreographer, consisting of more than half a dozen pieces. Some of them are still in the company's repertoire and continue to be shown internationally. In conversation, Diaz de Garaio Esnaola explains that it is the constant shifting of roles, which marks his work with Sasha Waltz & Guests, that has ensured his growth as an artist. He believes in the cross-fertilisation between his various roles as he feels the reflecting on and questioning of each one results in all of them benefiting from each other. Due to the range of opportunities provided by the company for him to explore his various artistic facets, Diaz Garaio de Esnaola says he has never felt the urge to leave Sasha Waltz & Guests and sees the company as his artistic home.

INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

When looking at reasons for the continuing success of Sasha Waltz & Guests, the influence of Waltz' partner, Jochen Sandig, cannot be underestimated. Co-director of the company, he is responsible for the business side of things and has shown great talent in constantly finding new international presenting partners and negotiating profitable deals. Even the early productions of Sasha Waltz & Guests extensively toured Europe, Asia and the US, often with the assistance of the Goethe-Institut – a rare achievement for a young company. In addition to Sandig's involvement with Sasha Waltz & Guests, he is also, together with Folkert Uhde, the co-director of Radialsystem V, a new venue for contemporary arts in Berlin. Since 2006, it is the artistic home of Sasha Waltz & Guests, one of its resident companies.

Interestingly, practically exactly at the same time when Sasha Waltz & Guests opened the Melbourne Festival, back in Berlin, Radialsystem V, kicked off the Hybrid Arts Fest Australia. Curated by Lisa Stepf, the 10-day festival also featured various dance events. Among the works presented was Twelfth Floor by German-born choreographer Tanja Liedtke and Chunky Move's Glow, a collaboration between its artistic director Gideon Orbazanek and German software artist Frieder Weiss. Anthony Hamilton, Melbourne-based choreographer and dancer, presented samples of work he developed during a residency at Radialsystem V which was made possible through his being awarded the first Tanja Liedtke fellowship.

Sandig acknowledges that at this stage there are no concrete plans for Sasha Waltz & Guests to return to Australia. Considering the positive response to the company's work and Sandig's newly made Australian connections, one can only hope though their Melbourne performances were not the last Australian audiences will get to see of this impressive company.

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