

Expressions Dance Company

A one-dimensional exploration of narcissism and love

Andrea Peters
15 August 2001

Expressions Dance Company, one of Australia's principal modern dance troupes, brought the newest work of company director Maggi Sietsma to Sydney at the end of July. While drawing a small crowd for this performance of *Vanities Crossing*, the company has gained international recognition since its debut in 1985 and maintains a worldwide touring schedule.

Performed by a cast of three women and four men, the work presented at the Parramatta Riverside Theatre is part of a genre known as "Dance Theatre". The term is often used to refer to dances that make dramatic use of spoken text, set design, and other visual or auditory elements. German choreographer Pina Bausch is the best-known exponent of this type of dance.

Drawing upon an idea contained within the Greek myth "Pygmalion"—a tale about a sculptor who falls in love with a female statue of his own creation— *Vanities Crossing* is, according to Sietsma, an exploration of narcissism in relationships. The work revolves around a series of male-female duets performed by three different couples. Depicted from the perspective of one of the individuals, the first half of the performance focuses on the experience of the "sculptor" or lover, and the latter half on the "statue" or loved one.

Vanities Crossing is a conceptually limited work. The basic premise of the piece—that people mould each other in relationships according to their own selfish desires—is far too meagre an understanding of romantic relations to support a dance that spans an entire evening. While there are points at which the performance transcends the inherent limitations of the piece, the choreography, staging, sequence, and overall development of *Vanities Crossing* either reflect or are trapped by the dance's conceptual confines.

The duets that form the core of *Vanities Crossing* are interspersed and overlap with a number of group sections and solos. Unfolding quite rapidly, the sequence of different scenes is very difficult to follow. Images run into one another, either disappearing or with a new element being added before anything coherent establishes itself onstage. This weakens the impact which the ideas depicted in a particular scene have on the audience.

The psychological domination of a male figure by his female partner formed the thematic and choreographic core of a series of duets by one of the couples. Sietsma portrayed the nature of this relationship bluntly in a scene in which the man struggles around the stage with his partner on his back. She is yelling some sort of

triumphant but sickly call. The self-satisfied and aggressive demeanor of the female dancer, while appropriate and communicative up to a point, never changes from the beginning to the end of the dance.

The dancing of one couple, Ryan Males and Terri-Lee Milne, underwent a somewhat more complex evolution. In their first appearance, the man approaches the woman. With one motion, he plunges his sleeveless gray shirt over her head. The woman is encased—her arms pinned down to her sides by the fabric. She reacts sharply, pulling the shirt off and giving it back to her male partner. He strides over to her again. The shirt stays on this time. With tentativeness and naiveté, she yields to him. Soft and delicate limbs fold the dancers into each other. They seem drawn together by genuine, if unhealthy, feelings. During the second half of the performance, driven by a hint of anxiety, there is more caution and hesitancy in the woman's actions. Eventually, as the man aggressively pursues her, she fearfully attempts to flee his grasp.

The dedicated and sensitive performances of the dancers added a further level of subtlety to the relationship. Unfortunately, the end point for this couple is the same as that of the others. All relationships, it seems, are propelled by the selfishness of the dominant member. The other person is bewitched. Human closeness is confining and miserable. And above all, there is no way out.

Sietsma's work appears to draw upon "Release Technique"—a modern dance style whose origins lie in the experimental work undertaken by choreographers during the 1960s and 1970s. Modern dance is comprised of a great variety of different techniques, which reflect the numerous contributions since the art form first emerged as a reaction to ballet at the beginning of the 20th century. Rebellious physically, theoretically and methodologically against the codified, constrained movements that make up the ballet vocabulary, modern dance demanded freedom for the body's movement and the right to explore abstract ideas and feelings in performance, as opposed to simply telling a story.

Release Technique is based on relaxing tension in the muscles during movement—as opposed to intensifying muscular effort—so as to allow the body greater ease in its actions. In addition, the technique aims at increasing flexibility and looseness in the joints, in contradistinction to limiting their range. These two factors allow the dancer to use the momentum created by the dancing to place

emphasis on transitions between movement instead of reaching set positions. While initially developed during a period in which many choreographers were rejecting the use of technically complex dance in favor of more pedestrian body motions, Release Technique has evolved over the past several decades to incorporate and expand upon increasingly difficult movements.

The technique does not provide artists with an explicit set of actions with which to choreograph a dance. Rather, it is a theory about movement that serves as an approach to explore new movement possibilities and to provide a method for training dancers. Its practice has further expanded the expressive range of dancers by opening up new ways of connecting different body shapes and level changes, for example, from the floor, to a crouch, into a jump, and so on.

Conceptual problems

While beautifully performed by the members of Expressions Dance Company—highly skilled technicians who allow themselves to be driven by the forceful dynamic of the movement and yet still maintain control over it—the choreography in *Vanities Crossing* is severely overdeveloped. Limbs fly through the air as the dancers leap and dive, drop and spiral into the floor, pike into handstands. The dancers propel their bodies from the floor, into lifts, across the stage, in and out of intricate partnering, demonstrating a great ability to link together disparate movements involving numerous changes in direction and level.

However, there is no overall choreographic concept—a specific motion, pattern, spatial arrangement, or type of interaction between the dancers onstage—holding the piece together. Therefore, the piece lacks a visual thread that would help the viewer develop an emotional or intellectual relationship to the movement, and through this, to the idea behind the work as a whole.

The choreography was complimented by the excessive use of theatrical elements. Dancers yell, “Lover!”, “Why me?”, “I love you.” One male soloist sits on the corner of the stage, extolling the devil. A giant palette of red roses descends from ceiling. Small signs written in foreign languages, like a line of subtitles, flip up on the edge of the stage. The dancers run around, slapping them down. And on it goes.

Sietsma’s dance focuses entirely on one aspect of the Pygmalion myth. In the tale, the statue, the object of the sculptor’s love, comes to life through the intervention of the Greek goddess Aphrodite. It is at this point, when Pygmalion’s beloved is constituted as her own person, separate from him, that his love is fulfilled. Love, therefore, can have narcissistic origins, but can only be made real when it surpasses this inherently limited stage.

A viewer should expect that a dance will undergo some type of development of its formal components and thematic content. But this expectation is not fulfilled in *Vanities Crossing*. Dance is an art form that exists simultaneously in space and time. Through the exploration of these two dimensions, a dance evolves over the course of its performance. This process of maturation is the means by which a viable piece of choreography is constituted.

Different dance forms have dealt with this issue in a variety of ways. Because classical ballets such as *The Nutcracker* or *Swan Lake* are based upon a narrative, they have a developmental logic

naturally built into them. While choreographers are always reinterpreting the formal components of these works (and even at times breaking the boundaries of their classical themes), the existence of a story line within the dance provides a clear basis upon which an artist can structure the progress of the choreography. While some modern dances are based on stories, much of the work produced in this field deals with abstract themes. Therefore, the need for a dance to evolve cannot be tackled by drawing upon a previously set tale, but by expanding upon the initial idea, emotion, or mood the choreographer wishes to articulate through movement.

A well-known contemporary piece of modern dance choreography that provides a successful example is Doug Varone’s *Home*. An exploration of a relationship between a man and a woman, the dance reveals the conflicting character of the emotions that tie two people to each other. Two chairs serve as props. As the dancers, sit down, stand over, move around, pick up, and slam down these pieces of everyday furniture, the dance unfolds. Anger, confusion, anxiety, joy and love are created on the stage, ultimately establishing a deep sense of partnership between the dancers. In order for Varone to portray his conception, *Home* undergoes transformations in the dancers’ interactions and in their movement.

If relationships truly are as miserable as Sietsma portrays them, the choreographer must be able to elaborate upon this assessment in order to create a cohesive dance. But *Vanities Crossing* cannot develop because the choreographer’s approach to the cause of unhappiness in human relationships is quite shallow. The source of distress for Sietsma’s characters lies in their individual domination by their partners. This reality is never explored or questioned, it is merely accepted.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)