

The Gift: Dancing Leichhardt

Monica Haagen-Wulff

Leichhardt's first expedition, as performed on the dance floor of what Marie Louise Pratt calls the "Contact Zone".¹ It is a dance negotiated between the agents of empire and Indigenous Australia. No one leaves this space unchanged.

Stage Set 1:

To the far left side of the stage hangs the carcass of half a cow on a butcher's hook. A butcher in a blue-striped apron is cutting the carcass into pieces and then into strips that he hangs on a drying rack. Then he begins to fry some of the pieces of meat. The scent fills the performance space. This process is recorded and projected onto selected screens throughout the performance.

Stage Set 2:

Propped against a tree stump to the right of the stage is a man in period expedition costume who is writing out Leichhardt's diaries on his laptop, the words projected on to one of the screens. The material he writes correlates roughly with the scenes taking place, but not exclusively.

Choreography One: Waltzing Leichhardt

Under the expanse of the starry Southern Cross, I lay my hand in his and feel the calloused, bony, expanse of it envelope my own. His other hand rests lightly on my waist. I move closer and smell the scent of sweat, a hint of cumin and stale smoked wood. I am on eye level with his chest and detect tiny salt crystals on the base of his neck between a few protruding chest hairs. Crystals formed from long days sweating out in the open sun. He turns me now, entering into a slow waltz, accompanied a Chopin Nocturne.² He is shy, reticent and a little clumsy to start with. As the music gains momentum he forgets his tall, gangly, frame and moves with fluidity and grace. Letting go of his hand I turn myself free and watch him dance his delight with the stars, the tress, the rocks and his companions who have come out of their tents to behold the night sky. They move in sweeping circles and undulating waves, expressing their wonderment until gradually, one by one, they settle back into their tents or stretch out under the stars. Images of the Southern Hemisphere's starry night sky are projected on to multiple screens around the stage.

Choreography Two: The Wilderness

A dance of all members of the expedition, including Harry Brown and Charley in European clothes, with back slapping and bravado to the orchestral accompaniment of God Save the Queen.³ Underpinning this music is the faint sound of clap sticks and Aboriginal voices singing. Images of cattle, men on horses riding through the Australian bush, incomplete maps showing the empty white spaces of unexplored territory, pages of Leichhardt's diary and botanical drawings are projected onto the stage screens.

Choreography Three: In the Contact Zone

Leichhardt's entourage enters, heads down, marching forward in a repetitive choreography of surging ahead and a pulling back. This continues to clap stick percussion, until there is a change, an occasional tripping, getting up and shoving. Charley and Brown are sent to the front and pulled back again; they become exhausted, defend themselves. Then they leave the group. Next we see them with Aboriginal people sharing food, exchanging songs and dancing together. Projected onto the screens is archival film of European men filming, surveying, inspecting, measuring, as well as images of traditional Indigenous Australian tools and objects.

On the other side of the stage the European men are setting up camp. We hear clunking metal from the horse's harnesses, chains and stirrups and pots being clanged together. This percussion evolves into a dance that uses the movements of the various tasks the members of the group had to perform each night.⁴ Interrupting the percussion are calls and singing from the Aboriginal camp to the other side of the stage, tussles between Charley, Brown and their indigenous hosts begin to break out there as well. The calls are responded to by warning shots from the expedition party. Eventually Charley and Brown return to Leichhardt's group. They settle down for the night singing their corroboree songs in a low hum, lulling Leichhardt's group into sleep.⁵

Choreography Four: The Turning Point

The stage is darkened/blacked except for a lamp lighting the butcher at work centre left stage. A film loop of smouldering coal is projected onto the performance screens. In the dim light figures quietly approach Leichhardt's sleeping party. Spears are projected shooting across the performance screens. Gilbert is fatally wounded: danced out in a violent choreography of

entangled bodies and grotesque movements evoking pain and loss on both sides. Wild percussion with drums and cries of agony accompany the climax of the scene. At the realisation of Gilbert's death, the music subtly changes into Chopin's Funeral March, which then fades leaving Charley and Brown whistling the tune as the lights fade to black.⁶

Choreography Five: Dancing Leichhardt Home

Leichhardt and his men enter the stage, bedraggled, leaning against one another and their local guides, accompanied by Arnhem Land singing and didgeridoo. This dance plays with a sense of weight and counterweight, forward stumbling and being caught just before the moment of fall. The indigenous men pivot the exhausted expedition members on their hips and backs, pulling and lifting, guiding and encouraging the entourage diagonally across the stage. Halfway across they stop and gently push the group to dance the rest of the way by themselves. This is performed with difficulty at first but with increasing energy and excitement as the destination comes into sight. Images of the settlement of Port Essington taken from the diaries and newspaper clippings are projected on the stage screens. The local guides are left standing upright centre stage watching Leichhardt's group depart. The didgeridoo music continues to play at full volume as the expedition members run into the audience embracing some members as they run down the aisles and out of the doors of the theatre. Eventually the horn of a ship is heard and the music slowly fades.

Notes

¹ Pratt, Marie Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Routledge: London and New York, 1992.

² Chopin. "Nocturne in F minor." Op 55. No.1, composed in 1844.

³ Leichhardt, Ludwig. "October 01, 1844." *Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia*. 1846. Adelaide: The University of Adelaide. Accessed 23 October 2013. <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/l/leichhardt/ludwig/152j/appendix.html>

⁴ The individual tasks of the expedition members are outlined in the dairies; cf. Ludwig Leichhardt. "May 01, 1845." *ibid*.

⁵ "Mr. Calvert entertains Roper with his conversation; John amuses Gilbert; Brown tunes up his corroborri songs, in which Charley, until their late quarrel, generally joined. Brown sings well, and his melodious plaintive voice lulls me to sleep, when otherwise I am not disposed." Ludwig Leichhardt. "May 01, 1845." *ibid*.

⁶ The choice of Chopin's "Funeral March – Piano Sonata" No. 2 in B-flat minor op. 35, was inspired by this diary entry sometime after Gilbert's death: "Brown had, either by accident, or influenced by an unconscious feeling of melancholy, fallen into the habit of almost constantly whistling and humming the soldier's death march, which had such a singularly depressing effect on my feelings, that I was frequently constrained to request him to change his tune." Ludwig Leichhardt. "October 16, 1845." *ibid*.