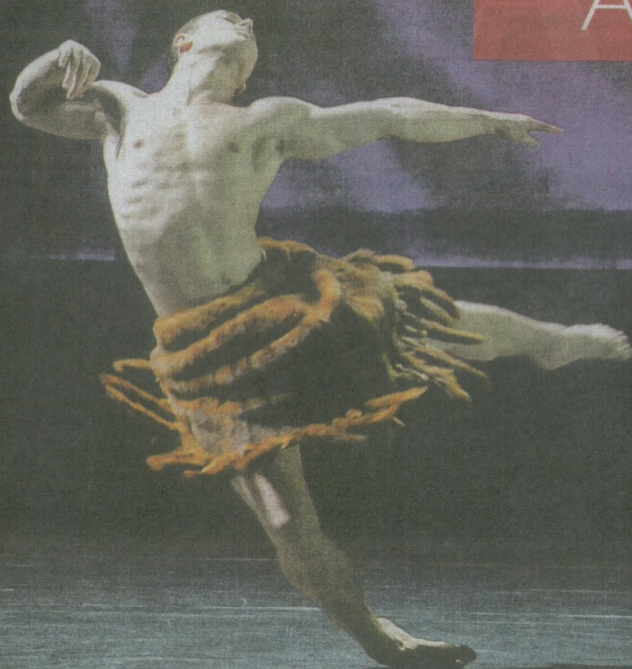


Paul White in Meryl Tankard's signature work, *The Oracle*. Photo: Regis Lansac

ARTS



Our ambassador of dance

Choreographer Meryl Tankard is the toast of the artistic world. **Michelle Potter** writes

Meryl Tankard rarely does anything by halves. In 2009 she created *The Oracle*, a solo work for dancer Paul White set to Igor Stravinsky's uncompromising score. *The Rite of Spring*. It opened in Sydney as part of the city's inaugural Spring Dance season. The next year *The Oracle* won two gongs at the 2010 Australian Dance Awards: one for outstanding achievement in choreography and one for White for outstanding performance by a male dancer. Since then *The Oracle* has become a signature work for Tankard, a former ACT Citizen of the Year, and since 2011 the show has toured to a variety of dance festivals in France, Holland and Switzerland.

The Oracle is both a triumph as a work of art and a tour de force for the collaborative team. It shows Tankard at her finest as a choreographer, as a creator of intimate and individualistic choreography that is also far reaching in its ability to make allusions and arouse memories. In *The Oracle* there are, for example, emotive allusions to the celebrated dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, who first gave choreographic expression to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in 1913. Such allusions are noticeable in some of Tankard's choreographic

phrases, which seem to refer back to Nijinsky's movements created for his own *Rite of Spring*. They are also noticeable in those moments when White appears to be lost in a surreal world, which recall Nijinsky's descent into mental illness in the later years of his life.

As well, *The Oracle* reveals White as an extraordinary performer with exceptional physical strength and intensity of focus. Introverted movements, sometimes executed with the dancer's back to the audience or with his head shrouded in a chocolate-coloured length of velvety cloth, contrast with steps of exceptional virtuosity, exuberance and extroversion. *The Oracle* has become a signature work for White too and he has consistently received outstanding reviews in Europe for his performances. The other members of the team – set and video designer Regis Lansac and lighting designers Damien Cooper and Matt Cox – have a shared vision for how the piece should look and work single-mindedly to produce a collaboration of the highest order.

Now negotiations are under way for *The Oracle* to tour extensively across the United States. If things develop well, the tour will take in Princeton, New York, Boston, Syracuse, Denver, Austin, Urbana and Irvine with other venues in the planning stage. Most

of the venues for performances of *The Oracle* are on campuses of colleges with strong performing and visual arts faculties and all these venues are part of a strong dance touring circuit in the US. In Princeton, for example, Tankard will precede the Mark Morris Dance Group into the McCarter Theatre. New York-based Morris is well-known for having extended the scope of dance as an art form, as indeed has Tankard. At the Bass Concert Hall in Austin, Texas, *The Oracle* follows a season by a major American company, the Joffrey Ballet of Chicago. Then, Tankard's program shares the Irvine Barclay Theatre's 2012-2013 season with dance luminaries who include the British-Indian choreographer Akram Khan and the adventurous American dance maker Stephen Petronio. In such venues Tankard will also conduct workshops and be part of wider programs in the arts.

Tankard is a major ambassador for the arts in Australia and the works she creates with her team are significant cultural exports. In Princeton Tankard is being publicised on the McCarter Theatre website as "Australia's iconic choreographer". The New York University venue also notes the Australian connection

Continued Page 17

From Page 15

with the comment "Australian choreographer Meryl Tankard returns to New York with one of her most gripping works to date". Tankard may not describe her opening nights as gala events for ambassadors and other dignitaries, nor be promoted as stopping the traffic in New York. But it is not easy to think of another Australian artist whose works are shown at so many festivals and in so many countries outside Australia, and which are performed across the US lining up alongside major American and European dance companies.

Tankard has been working as an independent artist since 1999 when she moved on, in somewhat unhappy circumstances, from her position as artistic director of Australian Dance Theatre in Adelaide. Apart from her forthcoming touring activities in the US, over the past 12 years or so she has worked for the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games, made works for several dance companies in Holland, France and Germany and restaged works from her existing repertoire in a number of European countries including more than once in Sweden. She has also had commissions from high-end commercial clients, such as the New York-based jewellery firm, Tiffany & Co; from filmmakers, including the provocative Australian director Ana Kokkinos; from youth theatre, including the Australian Theatre for Young People; and from a range of respected international production companies, including Disney Theatrical Productions and Andrew Lloyd Webber's Really Useful Theatre Company.

While independence suits Tankard in many ways, and while she is now moving successfully into filmmaking with one of her short films having being screened recently at the Cannes Film Festival, it is nevertheless regrettable that she has so few opportunities to make new work and to tour works from her repertoire in Australia. As a world-wide cultural ambassador for the arts in Australia, one for whom artistic production rather than self-glorification is paramount, I can't help feeling she plays a disturbingly minor role in the dance culture of her own country.

SATURDAY, JULY 28, 2012, THE CANBERRA TIMES – PANORAMA – 17