

Paige Gordon

Observing Life in Canberra and Beyond

Michelle Potter celebrates the work of this exciting young choreographer and the particular influence Canberra has had on her recent work

I was going for a night drive in the Hunter Valley,' Canberra-based choreographer Paige Gordon explains. 'It was winter, freezing, really cold, but I noticed all these little lights on down the back of people's houses, a bare light bulb on down the back. Inside, the houses looked warm; there was smoke coming out the chimneys. But there were still these little lights down the back. House after house after house.'

This Hunter Valley experience kindled an idea. Gordon began to reflect on the notion of male space because the lights she noticed clearly came from that great Aussie male sanctuary, the backyard shed. Then, as she started talking to friends, she discovered that they all had a 'shed experience' to share with her. Everyone had a father, a brother, an uncle, some male relative who spent time working down the back in the shed. Gordon's own father was no exception. 'He went down there when he was angry,' she says, 'and he still works in the shed, which is now practically bigger than his house, even though the rest of the family has moved away.'

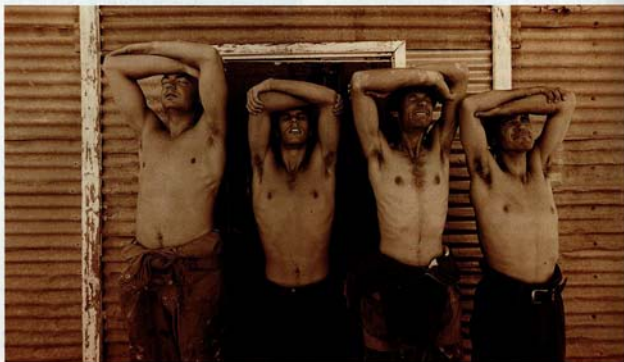
What eventually emerged from Gordon's musings was *Shed*, a dance work that premiered in Canberra in 1994 and that Gordon remounted in Canberra last year as part of the National Festival of Australian Theatre. Subtitled *a place where men can dance*, the work explores the idea

that the backyard shed is a place where men go to be creative, a place where they can be themselves and emerge refreshed and emotionally strengthened.

Part of the inherent interest of *Shed* centres on the fact that it has an all-male cast. 'A lot of the work I'd made or had been involved in was female. It was female-inspired or the dancers were all female,' Gordon says. 'I wanted to do a show that was all male, and I wanted to come up with something that was as emotionally moving as the all-female shows I'd been connected with. But I wanted there to be a reason for it to be like that. With the idea of the shed, I'd found it.' Much of the acclaim *Shed* received in both its inaugural and subsequent seasons, however, has to do with the fact that it is a very Australian work which reveals Gordon as a perceptive observer of life.

Shed begins slightly chaotically. The four performers dressed in paint-spattered overalls hammer, saw, plane, paint and chisel loudly and with undisguised enthusiasm. There can be no mistake. They are unpretentious Aussie blokes in the shed down the back, making things. The chaos subsides and the opening activities give way to a work in which dance sequences and spoken 'shed stories' sometimes alternate and sometimes occur simultaneously. Some of the stories are about anger and frustration,

Shed, Paige Gordon and Performance Group, 1996
Directed by Paige Gordon
(left to right) James Berlyn, Jonathan Rees Osborne,
John Hunt, Martin O'Callaghan
Photography by Robin Thompson





projects gone wrong and the need for catharsis. Other stories are deeply moving. One concerns the pressure to be a good provider; another is about a father crafting an assortment of things for his children. And in this episode about a father using his hands a tall, lanky performer with a winning expression that suggests he could talk his way out of anything suddenly reveals himself as vulnerable, even romantic, with an innate capacity for tenderness. It is a display of vulnerability beneath a kind of superficial bravado. It speaks clearly and strongly about the emotional contradictions of the Australian male.

There is also something laconic about the piece. The movements are concise and to the point; dance and storytelling comment on each other. As that tall, lanky Aussie bloke tells his story about a father using his hands, two performers roll from one side of the performing space to the other, pausing occasionally to engage in gentle and intricate movements that focus on the hands. They clench together, they press onto the floor, they cut through the air. Gordon says much of the movement vocabulary emerged for practical reasons as she was working with two dancers and two actors without any dance training and needed to tailor the movement to this combination of performers. But the economy that characterises the movement has a peculiarly Australian feel to it.

Although *Shed* is undoubtedly a work that is strongly male in its orientation, it crosses gender boundaries too. If Australian men can recognise themselves, Australian women can recognise their predicament. *Shed* is redolent of an Australian girlhood when fathers and brothers closeted themselves in the shed on weekends. Perhaps, too, it is redolent of an Australian womanhood when men, now husbands and sons, behave in a similar way, although Gordon never proclaims a negative attitude to the shed phenomenon. 'It was somewhere we were never allowed to go,' she says. 'We were always shooed away from it. We weren't even allowed in the backyard if Dad was welding. But I used to love the shed. It used to smell so different

Shed, Paige Gordon and Performance Group, 1996
Dancers: James Berlyn, Jonathan Rees Osborne,
John Hunt, Martin O'Callaghan
Photography by Loui Seseja

from the house. You know, the oils, the jars, the outlines of the tools. I used to wander round and go "Wow, I wonder what Dad does around here?"

Gordon currently thinks of herself as a Canberran as much as she sees herself as an Australian choreographer making Australian work. She grew up in Perth and she learnt to dance there too, taking lessons from the remarkable and indomitable Kira Bousloff, founder of the West Australian Ballet. She was initially drawn to Canberra by what she had heard about the work of choreographer Meryl Tankard, who had been lured to Canberra in 1989 to direct the city's professional dance company. Gordon joined the Meryl Tankard Company as a dancer in 1990 and became one of Tankard's most admired performers. When Tankard moved to Adelaide in 1992, Gordon stayed in Canberra and launched into the precarious career of an independent choreographer.

'Canberra is where I live now and I plan to stay here for a bit longer anyway. Canberra is where I have made all my work as an independent artist. I want to tour my works, regionally and nationally, and I want to be able to say "That was made in Canberra". I have set up a board for my company, Paige Gordon and Performance Group. I have found myself a studio. I have worked from project to project to project. And basically I like it here. The seasons are fantastic. You've got the snow, the coast, and a thriving arts community alongside the bureaucracy. It's a university town. There's also a grunge element. The lifestyle choices are amazing.'

Since she began working independently, Gordon has made a conscious effort to choreograph pieces that draw on the diversity she sees in Canberra's lifestyle and reflect the features that characterise the city as a unique place to



live and work. *Paper City*, made in 1996, looked at the way our lives are overwhelmed by bureaucratic procedures and the paper they generate. It was especially close to the heart of those who work in Canberra as public servants. *The Coast* was made in 1995 in response to the unique Canberra phenomenon of going 'down the coast' on the weekend. "The coast" was an expression I hadn't heard until I came to Canberra," Gordon remarks. "That yearning that everyone has to go to the coast on the weekend is part of the Canberra psyche. I wanted to explore that."

She has also been inspired by the seasons, which she sees as being very distinct in Canberra. *Three Trees*, also made in 1995 and presented just as Canberra was at its autumnal best, was about the old coming off and the new coming through. It was also what Gordon calls a 'transportable piece'. Using only three dancers and requiring very little space it was performed in shopping centres and other public places as a free event. She has an

The Coast, Paige Gordon and Performance Group, 1995
 Directed by Paige Gordon
 (left to right) Sandi Twist, Paige Gordon, Aida Amirkhaniyan
 Photography by Michelle Hunt
 (left) Paige Gordon in *Aves*, 1997
 Photography by Anthony King

urge to take dance to the people, to make it accessible to those who might not otherwise see dance because they don't go to the theatre as a matter of course. And this urge was also behind *Aves* presented in the Australian National Botanic Gardens early in 1997. 'I'm not sure the gardeners were impressed,' she comments, 'but I wanted to do a dance outdoors and I wanted a new tactic for the Canberra summer holiday season.'

Gordon is always looking for new themes, new spaces in which to show her work and new audiences. She once said that she was in the business of dancing and making dances 'for the long haul'. She still feels like that even though the work of a choreographer never gets any easier. 'You're personally on the line,' she says. 'It's hard, there's pressure for the next show to be as good as the last.' There is also a touch of reality in her reactions to Canberra: 'It's a really itinerant city and things are tough here.' But so far Gordon has made a special contribution to the local arts scene. That she lives where she works, that she participates in the city's activities, that she looks for Canberra's individuality is clearly as much a part of her success as an artist as the fact that she is an astute observer of life beyond the national capital.

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