



poetry in motion

Black Milk is bound to perplex, confront – even shock. **Felicity Monk** talks to the three dancers who have returned from overseas to star in the latest offering by acclaimed New Zealand choreographer Douglas Wright

In a large airy dance studio at Auckland's Unitec campus a collection of heaving, sinewy bodies are scattered across the floor in various poses. What I'm watching is a work in progress. At the time of writing, contemporary dance performance *Black Milk* doesn't start for another two weeks and it could change a hundred different ways before then. Nudity, scissors and long rubber tongues feature today, but tomorrow? It's anybody's guess. It all depends on how it "evolves" before the premiere in Invercargill on March 25. From there it travels to Dunedin, Christchurch, Auckland and Wellington.

One thing is for certain, *Black Milk* for many could be possibly confusing, probably shocking and definitely confrontational. Made with the support of a \$165,000 Creative New Zealand grant, the full-length production is the latest in a long line of works spanning acclaimed New Zealand choreographer Douglas Wright's 25-year career. Despite being diagnosed with HIV in 1989, Wright – once a spectacularly athletic and unforgettable dancer himself – appears remarkably strong.

At his invitation, three of New Zealand's leading dancers are returning home – Craig Bary, Claire O'Neil and Sarah-Jayne Howard have been based overseas for a number of years. Each has their own distinct style. O'Neil is like a lick of fire with her wild red curls and explosive moves; Bary is graceful and measured and a pleasure to watch; and Howard, strong and fierce, dances like she never had a choice.

SARAH-JAYNE HOWARD

Watching Howard dance is watching someone whose entire life has been in preparation for this one performance, this one movement, this one moment. Her focus and abandon is breathtaking. She holds nothing back. Her face is expressionless, but her movement contains a fierceness and passion that's utterly captivating.

PHOTOGRAPHS: JOHN MACDERMOTT

Strong and solid like an ox, Howard has broad shoulders and a pair of biceps boys could only wish for. Her eyes are milky and pale; her eyebrows even paler. Professional for 10 years, the 29-year-old has danced her way from Alaska to Arizona, and places in between. Now settled in Sydney's Bondi Beach, where she lives with her actor boyfriend, she freelance dances and teaches, and on her days off frolics in the sand.

Born in South Africa, the youngest of five, Howard probably danced her way out of the womb: "I didn't ever make a decision [to dance], it was always really ingrained." Tap dancing lessons began when she was four years old, and two years later, following her family's emigration to Stratford, jazz and ballet were added.

She left New Plymouth Girls' High School at 16 – "there wasn't any stopping me" – and was immediately accepted into the New Zealand School of Dance in Wellington (now called Te Whaea). After graduating in 1995 at the ripe old age of 18 she then auditioned for Meryl Tankard Australian Dance Theatre in Adelaide. Some initial fibbing (when asked about her age she "implied" she was 23) and a day-long audition that clearly impressed saw her being offered a place in the company.

For the next four-and-a-half years, Howard saw the world. She performed in New York suspended on swinging ropes, abseiled down the Sydney Opera House main sail for the millennium eve celebrations and danced for "Moose-hat wearing Alaskans" and "Chevrolet-driving Arizonans".

In 2002 she was nominated to apply for the inaugural Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative, which she describes as a "kind of strange complicated little number." Every two years, Rolex sponsors a programme that pairs gifted young artists with established mentors across a range of artistic disciplines – dance being one of those.

Howard was one of three in the world selected to go to Frankfurt to meet with acclaimed choreographer William Forsythe, who had been appointed the mentor for that year. The winner would get to spend a year working with Forsythe and while Howard missed out on the prize, Forsythe did tell her he'd like to work with her in the future.

Since becoming a freelance dancer, Howard still frequently tours with a number of different companies (mainly ADT, Chunky Move, Force Majeure). She is away, on average, three months of the year but is trying to keep a limit on it: "I've travelled so much, now I choose to weigh it up as to whether I really like the work. It's very rare that I think, well, it's Paris. It's about whether I really want to dance in that piece."

Freelancing also means long breaks without work. So is it hard to make a living? Howard says while the wage is good, it's the in-between times and the frequent travelling that make it difficult. "It's finding a way of balancing that. In Australia you've got a system where pay goes up in levels. Since I've been professional for 10 years I get the top wage. But I don't think they have it in New Zealand. Here it's contract to contract."

Howard returned to New Zealand in 2002 to dance in Wright's *Inland*. And she didn't hesitate when he asked her to come back for *Black Milk*. Nor does she hesitate when I ask her why. "His work is beautiful and strong and he and

I seem to have a really good physical language with each other. Douglas is my favourite choreographer and I love working with him. I'd drop anything, actually." And *Black Milk*, she promises, is going to be an incredible work. "He isn't holding anything back; it's a really rich piece of dance and the people that he's chosen are amazing."

CRAIG BARY

In Bulls in the early 1980s there weren't too many boys into ballet dancing. Actually, it was just the one: Craig Bary. He was six years old when his nana noticed him mesmerised by his sister's dance recital. Next thing he knew he'd been bundled off to ballet class.

The dancing continued through his Palmerston North Boys' High years with modern dance added to his repertoire along the way. But it wasn't until he auditioned and was accepted into the New Zealand School of Dance that he realised it could be more than a passionate hobby.

It was here that he was first introduced to contemporary dance when he saw Douglas Wright's *Buried Venus*. And that, he says, was that. "I did one season with a ballet company at dance school [The Royal New Zealand Ballet] but after I saw *Buried Venus* I really just focused on being a contemporary dancer, changed my major and never looked back."

After graduating in 1998 Bary moved to Australia to join Gary Stewart's Thwack Dance Company in Sydney. Not long after, Stewart took over as director of Australian Dance Theatre (ADT) and took Bary with him.

Bary spent two years with ADT touring around the world, but it was a trip to New York two weeks after September 11 that has made the biggest impression. "It was an incredibly intense time to be there. The audience packed full houses every single night and they were so appreciative of the fact that we still came over and performed."

Bary says many of the audience stayed behind to thank the dancers. "It was a special time."

Twenty-eight-year-old Bary is tanned and lithe with an impish grin and infectious enthusiasm. Last year he finished a three-year stint as a resident dancer at Tasmania's TasDance before moving back to Adelaide where he now lives with his partner, also a dancer, and freelances for a number of different companies based

mostly in Adelaide, Sydney and New Zealand.

When Wright invited him to be a part of *Black Milk* Bary immediately accepted. He even postponed a scheduled performance at the Sydney Opera House because the dates clashed. "I wasn't going to give up on Douglas's show. I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

Douglas, he gushes, is the best choreographer he's worked with. "The way that he gets his dancers to work and create movement is second to none. It is so beautiful and you don't realise what you are doing until you are doing it."

Bary previously worked with Wright on *Inland* and has performed with seven of the nine dancers in *Black Milk*. Many of them he had watched in Wright's earlier works while still at dance school. "We were doing a class the other day and I looked down the bar at the other dancers and it just threw me for a second – I am actually dancing with the people that I idolised when I was at dance school. So to be put alongside them as their peer is an amazing feeling."



Craig, Claire and Sarah-Jayne



"It was an incredibly intense time to be there. The audience packed full houses every night and they were so appreciative of the fact that we still came over and performed. It was a special time"

But Bary can certainly stand tall at the bar among them. Recently, he was asked to apply for the 2006 Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative, the results of which he finds out any day now. And last year he was nominated for the "Most Outstanding Performance by a Male" at the Australian Dance Awards.

The *Black Milk* dancers have a comfortable connection with each other, says Bary. "It makes an intimate work so much easier to grasp and to let go of your self-consciousness and relax, as we are doing some quite confronting things in the show. There's a bit of nudity, so how it goes down is anyone's guess."

Rumour has it that Wright may appear briefly in the performance. "It's almost like he can't help himself," offers Bary.

"He says he can't dance any more but he gets up to demonstrate things and he is amazing, what he can do with his body I've never seen before. It is so inspiring – even now. He said to us the other day that when he's not creating he almost feels like he shouldn't be alive; that it is the only thing that is keeping him alive. What he does next will be really interesting to see, he's just got this new zest for creativity and writing especially – more than I'd seen in him for a long while. I hope he does more. I will always hope he does more."

CLAIRE O'NEIL

It's a muggy day in Titirangi. O'Neil is running a little late to meet me. I don't know what she looks like so I am scrutinising every woman who arrives alone, seeing if I can pick her. Contemporary dancers can be difficult to identify. Much less obvious than, say, ballet and hip-hop. But as this is my third interview with a contemporary dancer I know what I'm looking for. And it's all in the feet.

The contemporary dancer walks as though her feet have a special connection to the earth, beyond the usual gravity thing. With each step, her foot is placed purposefully and knowingly. Perhaps it's because many dance barefoot. It's like a pre-historic relationship with the ground before the shoe came along and got in the way.

O'Neil arrives (not before I spot her of course) and orders coffee and toast with tomatoes.

Small and lean with firecracker hair and a clear complexion, she turns 35 this month but you wouldn't know it. She's been living in Brussels for five years now, dancing, teaching and choreographing, but makes an effort to come home every year to visit and work.

Eight years have passed since O'Neil and Wright last worked together and she's excited to be back. "Douglas has always been the most astounding male dancer. I remember being so inspired by his honest, expressive body and face. He's dynamite. He's amazing to watch and I aspire to that. I feel very proud to be working with my peers and old friends and feeling that lovely support and wonderful working environment."

It was because of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers that Wellington-born O'Neil decided to be a dancer when she was five years old. There was a brief flirtation with ballet (which she admits to being "useless" at) before the hyper-active child discovered the better-suited and less-restrictive disciplines of jazz and tap.

After graduating from Wellington's Sacred Heart College, she moved up to Auckland to attend the fledging Auckland Performing Arts School (now at Auckland's Unitec), which was just entering its

second year. "It was fresh and new and we were still guinea pigs but it was wonderful. It was really the most creative and mind-opening time for me."

Here, O'Neil was introduced to contemporary dance by the New Zealand elite; among them, Michael Parmenter, Douglas Wright, Shona McCullagh and Marian Schultz.

Over the next decade, O'Neil worked closely with many of these

choreographers, shifting between Wellington and Auckland depending on where the work was.

Along with her friend Nicole Bishop, the two set up Company Blue Vault – the name of which appeared to Bishop in a dream. A bad one perhaps. "We were very adventurous and fruity in what we were playing with in dance; a lot of quite quirky dance theatre. We also had a really beautiful movement quality with one another."

Then O'Neil recalls one of her less beautiful movement moments: performing in the Australian production of *Chess* the musical. She had thought it would be a good experience and the money was good. But alas: "It was crap. I hated it and it was horrible. I never, ever want to do it again. I think it's incredibly dated. The kind of dance that they do in those shows is all pointing and shoulders. It's not the same genre as contemporary dance so I sort of learnt my lesson there."

In 1999 O'Neil went to Europe to attend workshops in Vienna and Berlin. While there, she was invited to teach for Wim Vandekeybus, a big name choreographer from Brussels.

Job offer after job offer rolled in – including a career-defining moment choreographing for a performance at the Paris Opera House – so she decided to call Brussels home for a while and she's been there since. In 2002, O'Neil co-founded Fidget Company with her boyfriend, visual artist Francisco Rodriguez, and together they've worked on a number of smaller projects as well as creating the full-length work *Lost Property*, which they toured with to New Zealand last year.

"When I come home I really notice there's just such a beautiful attitude from the people here towards the arts. It's a fresh enthusiasm. I find it really positive. Sometimes in Europe it gets really heavy and serious; [the] people, and the way they are working, [is] too conceptual, too intellectual. Everything in moderation."

Will she ever return home to stay? O'Neil has a plan and she's glad I asked: "I'd like to share it with New Zealand because people seem to think I've gone off and I've abandoned my country, I've had comments..." She intends to move back to New Zealand in about two years and she will be bringing Fidget Company and Rodriguez back with her.

"I want to do more workshops and try and get some more international residencies over here from artists that I've met that I just love. I'm not interested in my own ego as 'Claire O'Neil Choreographer'. I'm already proud of what I've done and as a name in Brussels. Fidget's philosophy is to keep challenging it, keep working on it, keep the ideas moving forward. My plans are to not take on many other big company works and I also want to have a child, so that makes a big difference to how I plan the future."

Tour dates: Invercargill, 25 March; Dunedin, 28 March; Christchurch, 31 March; Auckland, 05-08 April; Wellington, 12-13 April.

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