

Great Vibrations

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Sydney is tripping the light fantastic at a festival dancing with music, acrobatics and optimism.

By Ashley Hay

Go to the basement of the Scientia building at the University of New South Wales. Collect a pair of yellow plastic-framed glasses from a box, walk along a dark corridor and enter an even darker, cavernous space. Four metres high, by 10 metres across, you have entered T_Visionarium, the world's first 360-degree stereoscopic projection cinema. With the aid of one remote control – a white button, and a green one – you can navigate a database of more than 20,000 video clips, gleaned from a week's worth of Australian television and ready to be reorganised and reconstructed however you desire.

At first the hundreds of images sit like familiar TV-rectangles around the dark walls, but when you put on your glasses, they fly out to fill three dimensions, slices of stories that you can rearrange, replay, link and loop. Organise them by emotion – anger behind you, happiness in front; by their people; by their dominant colour, to create a strange televisual rainbow. Each time you select a new frame, the entire set zooms around you, over you, through you, combining in a new pattern to make a new set of conversations. A documentary about Sadaam's Iraq floats towards you, aligning itself with old black-and-white Western footage. A Dickensian conversation, brown costumes and fruity language, darts straight through someone in the audience, and his head snaps round to watch it settle next to a familiar American hospital drama. And each intersection makes a new and complementary narrative, like the cliché about wholes and sums of parts, like little epiphanies.

The brainchild of UNSW's iCinema centre, T_Visionarium is not only part of the Sydney Festival's 2008 program; it is perhaps its perfect metaphor.

It was in another cavernous space, the Sydney Opera House's Studio, that Fergus Linehan began to talk about his 2008 plans last November. As he ran through the events in a rush of names and superlatives – Spanish dance, Scottish theatre, the Spiegeltent, Brian Wilson, a cacophony of Australian singers and choreographers – huge images flashed behind him like his own T_Visionarium blocks. You could feel them rushing towards each other too. Follow indigenous storytelling through the first week's tribute to Kev Carmody, through *Ngapartji Ngapartji* (until Feb 10), Big hART's powerful story of the Cold War's collision with the Pitjantjatara people of the South Australian desert, and on to *Murundak*, an evening of indigenous Australian protest songs performed by the Black Arm Band (Jan 22, 23) and new danceworks by Bangarra's Frances Rings (*Into*; Jan 16-20) and Stephen Page (*Kin*; Jan 23-26). Follow circus through the open-hearted imagination and free-wheeling acrobatics of James Thierre's *Au Revoir Parapluie* (until Jan 27), and Johan Le Guillerm's one-man Cirque Ici *Secret* (until Jan 26), to the reprise and revision of last year's hit *La Clique* (until Feb 3), and Ilotopie's floating fantasy *Water Fools* (Jan 18-19). Follow the current conversations in Australian dance through Page and Rings, through new work by Shaun Parker, Gideon Orbanazek, Lucy Guerin, to Kate Champion's *The Age I'm In*, and Tanje Liedtke's

Construct, the exhilarating intersection of movement, malleability and humour with a perfect soundtrack (DJ Tr!pP) that was the last piece she choreographed before her death last August. Like the underlying principle of T_Visionarium, one piece could link, however unexpectedly, to another.

But what Linehan wanted before any of those intersections began was something he described as “transformative”, a massive free opening-night event that would put paid to his sense of the very private opening this very public festival usually enjoyed with its one invitation-only party.

And so, on the first Saturday in January, under a sporadically inclement sky, he commandeered a large chunk of the CBD for music, dance, bars and catering – and some perfect gestures of optimism and hopefulness, a flock of papercranes made by Sydney’s children and inscribed with their wishes (for “everyone to be smiling”; that “we can all be friends”), and three weddings. He put Paul Kelly and Brian Wilson’s Beach Boys’ incarnation into the Domain, swing bands including Pink Martini into Hyde Park, hours of different dance music into Phillip Street, Martin Place and their laneways.

“What’s happening over there?” asked one man, looking over his shoulder as he came through Hyde Park during the afternoon. “Should we go back?” Sydney never likes missing a party and 200,000 people turned up, despite the on-and-off rain, to be part of this one. When Brian Wilson kicked into *Good Vibrations* a few hours later, an audience whose ages spanned at least 50 years sang along with every word, skipping around on the grass and waving tiny blue lights. “I’m a bit overwhelmed,” Linehan said. “Sydney was sitting at home looking at rain slapping against its windows, and still 200,000 people came out.”

“Darling,” said one champagne-sipping lady, “I just think it’s so important to support the arts, don’t you?”

With orange banners brighter than even the brightest Sydney summer day, and those arbiters of engagement – bloggers and taxi drivers – spruiking the festival more than ever, with inquirers three- and four-deep every time you passed a Festival information booth, it seemed Linehan was closer to finding out just how big the Festival would have to be to take over the town.

The shows began, the celebrity spotting began: there was a relaxed-mode, polo-shirted Malcolm Turnbull boogeying with his sparkles-wearing partner, Lucy Hughes, to Brian Wilson’s new song cycle. There were Gough and Margaret Whitlam enjoying the next standing ovation, the next night, for the opening of Thierree’s *Au Revoir Parapluie*.

Which was about when media reports of muttering began: did people really like the program? Why wasn’t there more theatre? Where was the classical music? Was it popular, or populist? And had Linehan programmed so much contemporary indie music – from The Spanish Harlem Orchestra, The National (Jan 21-23), and performance artist Meow Meow (Jan 22-26), through Australians including Joanna Newsom (Jan 25, 26) and Brisbane wunderkind Operator Please, to the show-stopping Bjork (who closes the Festival on Australia Day) – that he’d alienated ticket buyers?

It seemed not. By the Festival's fourth day, box-office takings had passed 2007's \$5.71m-total record and looked on track to reach \$6m. Programming Sydney's summer, Linehan had said before Christmas, requires "a very fine balance ... The odd thing with this year is I really do think it's a Festival's that's going to grow on people."

And he'd had a feeling about its likely hits. "*Black Watch* will be huge," he predicted about this story of Scottish deployment to Iraq. "It's not auteur theatre; it's just one of those pieces that people go to and then they want to go back to again and buy tickets for people. And I think there's going to be momentum around the Australian dance season."

In terms of programming, he conceded it was "quite radical" to program eight Australian choreographers. "When I see Australian theatre, I can't necessarily see something that would make me say, this is absolutely the way theatre in Australia is at this particular time, whereas there is a genuine shared aesthetic among people like Stephen Page and Gideon Obarzanek and Kate Champion: it has a kind of humanist optimism, you know, coupled with almost a strange kind of melancholy."

This month, in Sydney, everybody was out, in bars, restaurants, hotel foyers. The Beck's Festival Bar at Hyde Park Barracks had reached capacity, but a group of musicians had come into the street to drum up a storm for willing dancers under the stern-faced statue of Queen Victorias consort, Albert the Good. In the next block, in Hyde Park's Samsung Mobile party garden, Tim Finn chatted and one of *Parapluie's* performers slipped by. "Everything on that entire site was sold out before it opened," said Linehan. "La Clique, Cirque Ici, all the music in the Spiegeltent." And across town, *Black Watch* marched in with its pipes, eliciting another standing ovation. As the stage lit up, early on, two soldiers cut their way out of seclusion in a space you'd have sworn was empty, and you knew you'd been thrown into an alien, dangerous world.

Through your 3D yellow-framed glasses, you could join its charismatic cast to the charismatic Trevor Jamieson, *Ngapartji Ngapartji's* fulcrum, and Urban Theatre Project's powerful *Last Highway*, which premieres this week at a Bankstown service station (Jan 16-26). Through your glasses, you could join the arcs described by Nacho Duato and his dancers through and over water as they closed *Alas*, to David O'Mer's famous bathtub acrobatics in *La Clique*, and the gentle epiphany of evening rain – dancers with hands and faces turned up to the sky – at the end of Kate Champion's beguiling *The Age I'm In*. *Parapluie's* mad machines, all fine wire and impossible size, met mad machines made by American artist Tim Hawkinson at the Museum of Contemporary Art's *Mapping the Marvellous* (until Mar 9) – and his *Drip* machine shunted your imagination, so easily, back towards that other dancing water and Duato, O'Mer, Champion.

There's a particular thrill, a particular anticipation, in sitting in those dark rooms before any performance: it's like the moment before sleep, wondering what you might dream, where your imagination might go. On a good night, you find an image to remember – on a great one, some collision of stories or memories jolt you into an epiphany.

A festival takes you on the kind of trip where the best part is not knowing where you're going, and even when you can, occasionally, pause, orient yourself, predict what's coming, it's still tremendous. It was like *Cannot Buy My Soul*, the multi-muso tribute to Kev Carmody that included Steve Kilbey's elegantly fierce *Images of London* and

the power of Dan Sultan's and Paul Kelly's *This Land is Mine*. As Kelly and Carmody led twenty-something artists – and a crowd of 2000 – into *From Little Things Big Things Grow*, there was something inevitable yet still utterly fabulous about it. As those thousands jumping and singing through *Good Vibrations* had known right back on the first night.