

Bite (1999)



A choreographic work by Peter Chin

Mystical and sensual, rich and enigmatic, *Bite* is a journey toward transformation. The work unfolds as a succession of solo dances. Links among the elements of imagery, movement, music and costume give *Bite* a mysterious wholeness.

Bite reflects the diverse sources which inform Peter Chin's creative life. Movement is inspired by Indonesian ritual dance and other forms of Asian dance. The music for *Bite*, with its bass rumblings and unearthly throat-singing sounds, draws on Tibetan sources, while the rhythms of the percussion instruments are drawn from Korean ritual.

Peter Chin's desire is to create authentic rituals in which the artists perform their truths -- emotional, physical and psychic. In creating *Bite* he worked closely with his performers, drawing on their dream lives, on what is present in their waking lives, and through the connection of being in the rehearsal studio with them. The solos were created with this palette of intuition and presence.

Katherine Duncanson, the still figure in *Bite*, is a point of reference, a conduit, says Peter Chin. She becomes a symbol of the work - she does not look directly at what is going on around her; she perceives in other ways, sensing, feeling, hearing what swirls and sounds through the performing space. *Bite* opens with a series of incantations. One by one, the dancers appear. They speak in 'discovered language', poetry which Peter Chin asked them to create.

The second, longer section of the work is the sequence of solo dances. Individually and collectively they are powerful statements. There is a tension between the earthy physicality of the movement and the spiritual search it expresses. There is a sense throughout of a classical, decorative Asian influence. The space immediately around the dancer's body is described with a range of gestures -- from delicate to incisive. In each of the solos, the dancer's body is a centre of energy. The dancers smile or grimace or flicker their eyes or fingers. Animal imagery appears as they curve through the performing space like charging beasts or serpents. Points of entry and exit from the body - eyes, veins, mouth - become focal. Images of openings in the body, metaphors of the penetration of truth or awareness, recur in the solos.

Each solo is characterized by idiosyncratic rhythms, yet the solos resonate with one another through imagery and the dancers' concentration. Mark Johnson marks territory with bow and arrows. Gestures arc out of his body in an organic way. Yvonne Ng moves as though planting her tears. Learie McNicholls bites the air, a rhythm of the hunt returning through his dance. Little fingers join, completing a circuit. Michael Sean Marye

dances with weighted grace, recreating images of circles, hands joining, spinning. Carolyn Woods caroms through the space with fierce creature-like attack; her off-centred turns speak of a search for balance.

The dancers are contained within the shape of the ritual, safe to push at the bounds of their wildness. Protected within this ceremonial formality, each dancer has a moment of stillness - a moment of staring at their palm, a moment of self-realization, a new awareness of some profound, powerful truth about themselves. Each dancer bites. They bite out of a desire to satisfy the hunger to move forward, to grow in spirit. When the dancers open their mouths, the dance seems to leap out, as though the shape of what is going on inside is pushing out, claiming expression. The elusive cycles of sound created by the throat-singers, the cacophony of percussion, the soar of the singers and violin, are a raw sonic counterpoint to the physical imagery of the dance.

Bite is both a work of theatre and a ritual of transformation. The work speaks of Peter Chin's fluid vision, eloquently revealing the inner landscapes of the performers.

Carol Anderson

Image: Peter Chin by Cylla von Tiedemann

Four Solos / Four Cities (2000)

A choreographic work by **Lola MacLaughlin**



Like compelling travel writing, *Four Solos/Four Cities* is at once informative, personal and philosophical. Investigating her fascination with the idea of the city as a metaphor for the self, Lola MacLaughlin symbolizes each one of the four cities as an aspect of the self - Berlin is the intellectual, Vienna the physical, Venice the spiritual and Brussels the emotional.

MacLaughlin's meticulous attention to the elements of design, and to creating exact imagery through costuming and movement, paints four distinct portraits. While each solo exists in its own world of visual and danced language, there are shared elements among them. The solos are complex and richly layered with nuances of the cities' histories, works of visual art and spirits of place, filtered through the choreographer's acute observations. The white floor gives the work the look of a gallery setting.

As though illuminated with the light of memory, the solos unfold as times and places revisited. Projected animal imagery is a link among the solos; the lion of Venice; the white stallion of Vienna, echoed in the dancer's prancing steps. The image of a rabbit in an Old Master still life is a glance at mortality, a reference to artistic craft. The wolf in Brussels suggests the fearsome creature of European fairy tales. Each city has a particular

dance reference. Berlin has a sharp, tense look - an allusion, perhaps, to postmodern ballet vocabulary. Vienna refers to traditional modern dance, echoing the city's conservative refinement; Venice is regal, and Brussels evokes the timbre of the work of Belgian choreographer Anna Teresa de Keersmaecker - intense and dramatic.

Accompaniment for the solos is eclectic. MacLaughlin has selected music which ranges from elegant classical compositions to raw contemporary narrative. Each solo incorporates its own stage setting. For Berlin the set is a moveable series of pieces inspired by military barricades. Projected three-letter words hint at MacLaughlin's view of Berlin as an intellectual centre.

For Vienna the set, a machine-like structure with a skull resting on top, is a symbol of the material, the temporal; the costume also becomes a set piece when stripped off to reveal the unadorned body.

In Venice the dancer wears a pair of extremely high-soled shoes, reminiscent of the chaupines worn by 15th century Venetian ladies who walked assisted by long poles or servants. The set is a miniature waterway, with a tiny regatta recalling the city's gondolas.

The tower in Brussels was inspired by the beauty of the architecture in the city's Great Square, and pays tribute to an enduring appreciation of fine craft, to the co-existence of history and the present.

Throughout *Four Solos/Four Cities* the reversal of scale in the sets - Susan Elliott atop the tower in the final images of the work - suggests the sense of displacement which jolts travellers toward new awareness. The dancers are highly significant to *Four Solos/Four Cities*. MacLaughlin selected the women for their individual qualities, which personify characteristics of the cities. Hope Terry's stature and strength give Vienna a dimension of luscious physicality. Jennifer Murray projects edge intensity. Andrea Gunnlaugson personifies the ethereal vitality of a Venetian painting, and Susan Elliott moves through lightning-fast gestures with open-faced wonder, exploding into space as if propelled by the fullness of her heart.

Carol Anderson

Images: by David Cooper

Interiors (2007)



A choreographic work by **Laurence Lemieux**

Interiors explores the symmetry of a family – the mother and father, the little girl and boy – a narrative that encompasses children on the eve of change. Lemieux has structured her work simply – in the first section the family members appear one by one; the second is a duet for Laurence Lemieux and Bill Coleman, while the third section is danced by their children,

eleven-year-old Jimmy, and eight-year-old Juliette. They move through recurring partnerings, dancing sometimes alone, at times together, mother and daughter, father and son, husband and wife. This structural elegance evokes an underlying complexity, projections backward and forward through time, provoking us to wonder, from whom do the memories flow? The family members are archetypal characters, claims of love and responsibility binding them.

Their shared language is dancing, as natural as walking might be to others.

Interiors sings a mysterious refrain of genetics – how rare to see a family of four dancers – and observing the Coleman/Lemieuxs, we see, beyond resemblance, a world of dynamic shaping, shared DNA, messages and codes; the arch of a foot, the proportion of bone to bone, the exact calibration of shape and the interior of the joints. When they move, the children etch echoing calligraphies, matching traces left by their parents.

In the midst of apparent domestic disorder, family members move on their own paths, up and down the stage. Laurence's solo at the end of the first section spirals and coils around a centre; the red floor seems reminiscent of a log cabin quilt's middle square, the hearth, the family heart.

The line between reality and art in *Interiors* is mutable.

Lemieux notes, "... I can't develop a sophisticated vocabulary with the kids – it is more about how they innately move and about who they are." So we see the deftness of the eight-year-old, the incisive swiftness of the eleven-year-old – the children's physicality is quick and light; and within the overall work, metaphors hover and resolve, resonant and poignant.

When Jimmy and Bill dance together, the movement is playful and supportive, revealing dad's gravity and care and the awakening, responsive balancing by his son. Adult knowledge, vigilant, hidden from children, is there, the choreographer says, in part as contrast, "so the children's world is more radiant."

While his father dances, Jimmy is writing, and later he creates a path of paper along which his parents walk. Their dance evolves from describing "the mechanics of marriage", into idiosyncratic expressions of deliberation, accommodation, inner necessity and tenderness within their twining solitudes.

Schubert's poignant piano music threads through the dance with sepia-toned emotion, music from another time that pervades an evolving present. At the end, the children play, liberated and safe within their home, suspended in a floating world of possibility. *Interiors* exists in a glimmer of ghostly time warp, the children cocooned in the secret night, eternally young yet poised on the imminence of change. The choreographer muses that she has created *Interiors* to capture the importance and significance of this beautiful moment in her family, because, she says, "We know, in the children's transformation, that part of our lives will disappear."

Carol Anderson

A Constellation of Bones (2006)



A choreographic work by **Santee Smith**

A Constellation of Bones fuses influences from choreographer Santee Smith's Mohawk tradition, writer KateriAkiwenzie-Damm's Anishnabe roots and composer DeanHapeta's Maori background and traditions. The work blends traditional stories and creation myths with contemporary expression to create poetic and kinetic images of men and women, earth and sky – a constellation of bones.

In Mohawk tradition, the first people were originally sky beings. In Maori creation myth, the sky is the male father, the earth the mother. Their children became light, longing for one another and wanting to be together. The two couples in *A Constellation of Bones* represent aspects of these creation stories. They evoke states of being, the dynamics of their interactions conjuring vivid images of intimacy and yearning.

One couple is conflicted, their movement divisive and angry, loss of identity or spiritual connection seeming to keep them apart, despite their desire to be together. The other couple is close, dancing in sensuous harmony.

The movement itself is a marriage of forms and forces. The choreography is deeply grounded, frequently using the upper body in a way that refers to contemporary dance. Much of the movement is connected to indigenous dance steps, with the centre of gravity low in the body. Other aspects of Ojibway dance enter Santee Smith's choreography in the appearance of distinctive Grass Dance footwork, steps that spiral around the spine, down into the earth. There are references to traditional "haka" or Maori dance in the dancers' hands; they shimmer and shake with swift, accelerating energy.

The dancers' eyes sometimes spurt out darts of energy, and their breath is quick and percussive.

The work unfolds as a series of duets; often, the two couples dance simultaneously. The conflicted couple's movement is full of thrown lifts and falls to the floor, alternate moments of agonized separation and ferocious partnering. The close couple's attention is rapt and intimate, and they often dance in unison. Powerful stances low to the ground are contrasted to their upward reaching arms – movement at once earthy and ecstatic. The two women dance together, while the men perform a strong, strident, earthbound duet, dominating, retreating, testing strength – male force balanced by female strength. Beats pulse through the dancers' torsos; they braid their bodies together, sculpting erotic shapes. Circles and spirals, shapes important in traditional form, are fundamental to the design of *A Constellation of Bones* and are highlighted in the choreography, the costumes and the lighting.

Dean Hapeta's score is densely layered with spoken word. The sound is urban, strongly rhythmic; instrumentation and chant threaded through with beautiful images of sky, stars, storms, earth, struggle and light, words both spoken and projected.

A Constellation of Bones is relentlessly energized, propelled to a dimension where the dancers seem conduits for energies as forceful as lightning. They dance between earth and sky, caught in the play of pattern and light.

Carol Anderson

Image: Cylla von Tiedemann

REDD (2006)



A choreographic work by **Tedd Robinson**

Within this imagistic meditation on solitude, with bats and bears and mice for company, Tedd Robinson creates a canvas of his life. In the three sections of *Redd*, he muses on art and isolation, escapes into fantasy, and explores a new relationship with reality.

The opening image of the work reveals him balancing a stick on his shoulders. Then he takes a stylized walk, through his woods perhaps – a whiff of the country gentleman in his belted coat and soft cap, moving across ground scattered with large squares of light and fabric.

The autobiographical text in the first section is part of the stage environment and Robinson says he merely “follows the rules.” This text becomes the set, the imagery, costume and sound of the work – his body becomes the story. Reading the words from various surfaces, sometimes from the fabric in which he wraps himself, he unfolds tales of moving to the country, his neighbours, caution and wariness – bears in the woods! He reflects that an artist is someone whose “defining attribute is to bring to reality that which is not.” The activities of the work become the dance; as he recalls smoking out seventeen bats from a hole in his new home, for instance, he reads and tosses aside strips of words with rhythmic, formalized gestures.

Tedd Robinson's head is a focus of attention throughout *Redd*; he swaths it, balances sticks on it, dons glasses, and speaks about his search for coherence between inner and outer experience.

He talks about how being alone has replaced his fantasy of a perfect love with a far more practical idea: the need for someone to hold the ladder while he climbs onto the roof. Still, he laments the loss of dreams; paradoxically, isolation has made him realize that he cannot escape the world in which we live.

Precarious acts play with notions of risk and control, while Robinson's identity shifts and changes. In the central section of the dance, fantasy glides in a glittering "robe", then this imagined being of light morphs into an antic gnome-like creature who jumps through a rhythmic dance. The music is a collage of wailing pipes, opera and rhythmic song – genres colliding in his epic imagination.

The final section shows *Redd* (a clever title, at once anagram and wry comment) as the creator of his own "exotic island". He unrolls a long spool of fabric, walking and turning while balancing a huge stick on his head, revisiting an earlier metaphor. He cocoons himself in the fabric of his thoughts and his being. In an image of balance and support, he resumes the journey of this dance, then comes to rest in a meditative pose.

Continuity in contemplation; the elegant simplicity and multilayered imagery of *Redd* is reflective. Both melancholy and wistful, this soliloquy of middle years illuminates the realities of relinquishing fantasy and dreams.

Carol Anderson

Image: Tedd Robinson by Don Hall

NO EXIT (2007)



A choreographic work by **Denise Fujiwara**

Denise Fujiwara's *No Exit* unfolds in a place beyond time as three characters realize the misery of the hell their lives have entered. "Hell is other people," said Jean-Paul Sartre, author of the play from which Fujiwara's work takes its name and inspiration. In Fujiwara's vision, hell is a sitting room with three chairs, a table with a knife on it, and no exit.

One by one the performers appear. Their hard shoes and slightly old-fashioned clothes, in a palette of brown, beige and white, are colourless and ordinary. Miko Sobriera, whose character is vampirish, rakish, enters first. An aura of dislocation emanates from him and a sense of disrupted inner rhythm erupts in his facial ticks and twitches. He reaches for the knife. We wonder...what is the story? why has he come to this place? Sasha Ivanochko, the first woman to enter, looks at the man with fire in her eyes, fixing him with a blazing, hateful gaze.

Each character seems locked in a way of being and moving. As the work unfolds, recurring pain shrinks and distorts Ivanochko's body, twisting her face into a grimace. Hope Terry's character is provocative and prowling and offers pathetic hints of her death; she holds out her wrists, coughs and subsides, and skitters about – a woman without a centre. Sobriera blinks and convulses, poses grotesquely, or is thrown backward, racked with

violent spasms. These tormented characters see a dimension beyond their room, but are unable to it; repeatedly they peer into the space beyond. The rules of gravity, space and sound seem altered in this limbo. At one point Terry falls across Sobriera's back, and dangles as if weightless, while he does not appear to notice her. The characters "speak" but no one can hear them... soundless screams are expressed through their bodies.

Penetrating one another's space, they attempt to touch, but cannot. Their torture is in not being able to act out their own inner drives – Terry's promiscuous woman is rejected by the man; Ivanochko's advances are rejected by Terry; Sobriera's character is predatory but cannot make contact. He torments Ivanochko and slides evasively away from Terry.

Episodes of rage and despair cut through the work. Zombie-like, the performers pull on one another's energies, viciously suppress and push one another down. Attractions that cannot lead to touching, and hatred that has no conclusion, swirl among them. At separate points in *No Exit* each of the performers picks up the knife from the table. When Terry's character attacks her, Ivanochko laughs a ghastly laugh – with no material body, the blows have no effect. But the violence aimed at her does and she writhes through a gruesome psychic attack, a hideous joke.

A rhythmic clunking, a woman's voice, a call, laughter, a cry, all echo and recur with disturbing monotony inside this haunted place. The work's conclusion makes clear the infinity of the characters' bleak horror.

Carol Anderson

Image: Hope Terry, Miko Sobriera and Sasha Ivanochko by John Lauener