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Perpetual motion

Having conquered Edinburgh, Chunky Move has the world at its feet, writes Matthew Westwood | *September 13, 2008*

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WHEN Gideon Obarzanek called his dance company Chunky Move, the name was meant to evoke everything that classical ballet wasn't. Obarzanek had trained at the Australian Ballet School but his career had taken him far from ballet's clean lines and idealised beauty. Instead, the choreographer and artistic director wanted to make dance that was more like the experience of real people. Life can have its moments of transcendence and wonder, but more often it is rough around the edges, bewildering and a little embarrassing.



Dancer Antony Hamilton in Chunky Move's *Mortal Engine*

So Chunky Move it was. But in a way, the name doesn't adequately represent what Obarzanek's company is about. Chunky can also suggest immovable, unpolished, dead weight. It certainly doesn't capture the movement, for example, of Sara Black, one of Obarzanek's preferred dancers, whose malleability can leave the viewer wondering if she is moving of her own volition, or being manipulated by some external force.

Nor does Chunky Move indicate the distance this company has come since Obarzanek founded it in Sydney in 1995. In 1997 it won a tender from the Victorian government to set up shop in Melbourne as the state's resident contemporary dance company. With Obarzanek as artistic director and creator of most of its dance works, Chunky Move has presented shows in Melbourne, at interstate arts festivals and increasingly overseas, sometimes picking up awards along the way. Last July, Black and Chunky Move won Helpmann Awards for *Glow*: a virtuosic piece Obarzanek created for solo dancer and a dazzling hi-tech lighting design.

Obarzanek's most recent creation, *Mortal Engine*, is an evolution of that concept, this time an hour-long work for six dancers, and with an even more elaborate array of lighting effects. Using specially designed software, called *Kalypso*, infrared cameras capture the dancers' movements on stage, then translate those movements into real-time video projections. The effect is stunning and a little eerie: white shadows moving in darkness, shooting sparks and dissolving into abstract pattern. Obarzanek says it's like making the invisible visible, the "ghost in the machine".

Mortal Engine had its world premiere at the Sydney Festival in January. But before that, Jonathan Mills saw it in rehearsal and invited Chunky Move to take it to the Edinburgh International Festival, where the Australian-born Mills is director. The company was thrilled, thinking Edinburgh 2009. But no, Mills wanted it this year, as a counterpoint to - of all things - the mystical dance of Turkey's Whirling Dervishes. So, last month, Chunky Move upped sticks and headed to Edinburgh, home of the world's greatest arts festival.

Mortal Engine is not, as they say in dance parlance, merely a "lights and tights" show. The stage is a raked platform with pneumatic ramps; it had to be packed in a shipping container and sent by sea freight. The show requires delicate infrared cameras, a laser and special video projector, and laptop computers to drive them. It needs smoke machines and a sound system.

The tights are perhaps the least hi-tech part of the show, but even these are specially designed: sheer and tight-fitting so that the cameras can accurately scan the dancers' bodies.

Because of this gadgetry, *Mortal Engine* requires more technical support than Chunky Move's other shows. The Edinburgh tour has a party of 13. Six are dancers; the rest are management and technical crew, including laser artist Robin Fox. The German engineer whose software makes the magical illuminations happen, Frieder Weiss - a technical wizard with a glint of mischief in the eye - has come along for the ride.

The show is playing for three nights at the Edinburgh Playhouse theatre, and the entire company is staying in a hotel across the road. By now the stage has been installed and the dancers are rehearsing with Obarzanek, "finding their feet again" on the sharply inclined stage.

But not everything is going to plan. Obarzanek is unhappy that the enormous 1920s theatre, which seats 3000, has too much ambient light in the auditorium, when total darkness would be better for the show's industrial chic.

There are problems, too, with the video projector. It has been installed on a rig above the stage, but now needs to be easily accessed by a technician so it can be calibrated. The theatre doesn't have a mechanical lift that can be operated on the stage, however, and instead a temporary scaffold has been erected, a far-from-satisfactory solution.

Over breakfast in the hotel, the day before opening night, the crew is discussing the projector and the inflexible work hours at the theatre: circumstances that are threatening to put the show behind schedule. There is talk of a delegation to festival headquarters. "I'm wondering if I should chuck a spaz," says Obarzanek, whose offer of a brief and intense show of anger won't be necessary. Instead, the company's executive producer, Rachael Azzopardi, makes a call to the festival's operations director, who gives Chunky Move the overtime in the theatre it needs before curtain-up. Eventually a lift is found so that, high above the stage, a technician can ensure the projector is working correctly.

Taking a show of this complexity to Edinburgh is an ambitious exercise. With its combination of software and sophisticated equipment, the room for error is large. It doesn't help that the show is playing at the Edinburgh Festival - the world stage for performing arts - in only its second season. The risks are high, but so is the level of exposure. Seated in the Edinburgh audience will be agents and producers from leading arts centres in Europe, North America and Asia. Chunky Move is hoping they'll like *Mortal Engine* and want to take it into their own theatres.

OBARZANEK was born in Australia, but while still an infant, his Zionist father and mother moved to Israel, and his childhood was spent on a kibbutz. Later the family returned to Australia and Obarzanek grew up doing typical Australian things. He learned to surf in his early 20s, and with his dancer's suppleness and agility, he didn't have much trouble getting up on a board.

With flinty blue eyes and athletic poise, he gives the impression of remarkable self-possession, although not to the point of coolness. The day before the Edinburgh premiere, he will discuss his choreography and *Chunky Move* for an hour before revealing his anxiety about the problems his crew is having in the theatre.

Mortal Engine, he says, is not a dance work in the conventional sense; more a concert between dancers, sound and light. One of the criticisms of the piece, he says, is that for a quarter of its duration, there are no dancers on stage, just the video projections. He shrugs it off. "The video projection really is like choreography: it's like an extension of the body, of movement."

He doesn't audition dancers, he says, but picks talent he sees in other shows; often the dancers he selects are choreographers, or they are at least interested in dance and its possibilities for theatre.

Another quality Obarzanek seeks in his dancers might be compared to nakedness, an ability to remove mask and costume.

"There is a sense that they are revealing something about themselves on stage," he explains. "They don't play themselves, they are essentially just being themselves. I know that sounds very simple, but a lot of people find it very hard to be like that on stage. They feel they have to have a kind of persona. That's distracting."

In the past few years, Obarzanek has made dance works in two distinct styles: the hi-tech and super-cool; and the vernacular and quasi-documentary. On the flipside to *Glow* and *Mortal Engine* are such pieces as *I Want to Dance Better at Parties*, *Tense Dave* and *Wanted: Ballet for a Contemporary Democracy*, in which the dance was derived from survey results.

The next piece from *Chunky Move*, to have its premiere at the Melbourne International Arts Festival next month, is another of these, called *Two-Faced Bastard*. It makes a play of duplicity: a divided stage of halves, two audiences and, as part of the dance group, two performers who try to outdo each other.

"It sounds a bit dry, but it's actually very funny," Obarzanek says. "They both use the stage and the other performers around them to support their argument: to upstage, brutalise the other person. It's extremely low-tech. It has a curtain of vertical blinds, some stage lights, a microphone and a PA system to play music on."

After *Mortal Engine*, the absence of electronics is a relief to Obarzanek, who suggests he may take a step back from so much choreographic work. At 42, he says he's at an "unfashionable age for a choreographer". He wants *Chunky Move* to be a home for new talent, and not be locked into one generation or set of ideas. So after the premiere of *Two-Faced Bastard*, Obarzanek will give over the *Chunky Move* Studio, in Melbourne's Southbank, to a new work by Byron Perry and Antony Hamilton, one of the dancers in *Mortal Engine*.

Obarzanek says he wants to venture into documentary filmmaking, and explore some of the ideas that can only partially be expounded through dance. He is unlikely to remain far from the dance studio, however; his third new project for this year is to do the choreography for *Shane Warne: The Musical*, the latest creation of one of our bright musical satirists, Eddie Perfect.

But for now, there's an opening night to see to. The Playhouse theatre lacks the intimacy and exactly controlled conditions that Obarzanek would like, but its vast auditorium makes for a spectacular laser display. Indeed, with its combination of precision dance, lighting and techno soundtrack - and unexpected humour - *Mortal Engine* is given a roar of approval. On the second night, a larger crowd - boosted, apparently, by word of mouth - delays the start by 15 minutes.

After Edinburgh, *Chunky Move* will take *Mortal Engine* to a festival at Groningen in The Netherlands, where it will be staged in a tent: a venue with its own special set of problems.

But the tour has been worth it and, if tentative bookings are followed through, *Mortal Engine* could be seen in London and New York. *Chunky Move*, the funky dance company with the clunky name, really is going places.

Chunky Move presents *Two-Faced Bastard* at the Melbourne International Arts Festival, October 9-12; *Mortal Engine* is at the Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne, next March.

Matthew Westwood travelled to Edinburgh as a guest of *Chunky Move*.

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