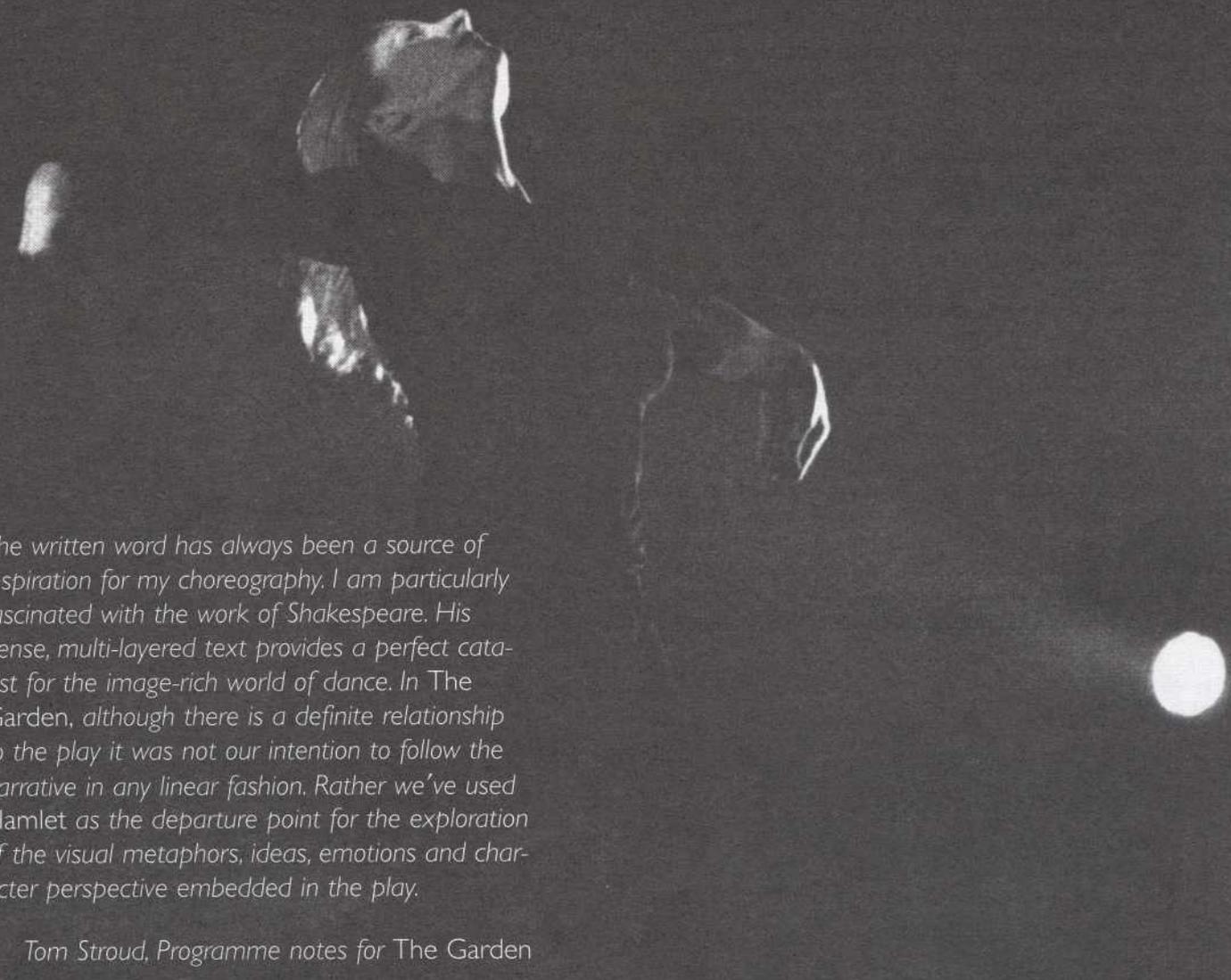


Dancing With Shakespeare

Tom Stroud and Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers

by MARK FORTIER

Stroud fought against *Hamlet's* misogyny by allowing Gertrude (Nina Battison, below) and Ophelia spaces to express themselves.
PHOTO BY IAN MCCAUSLAND



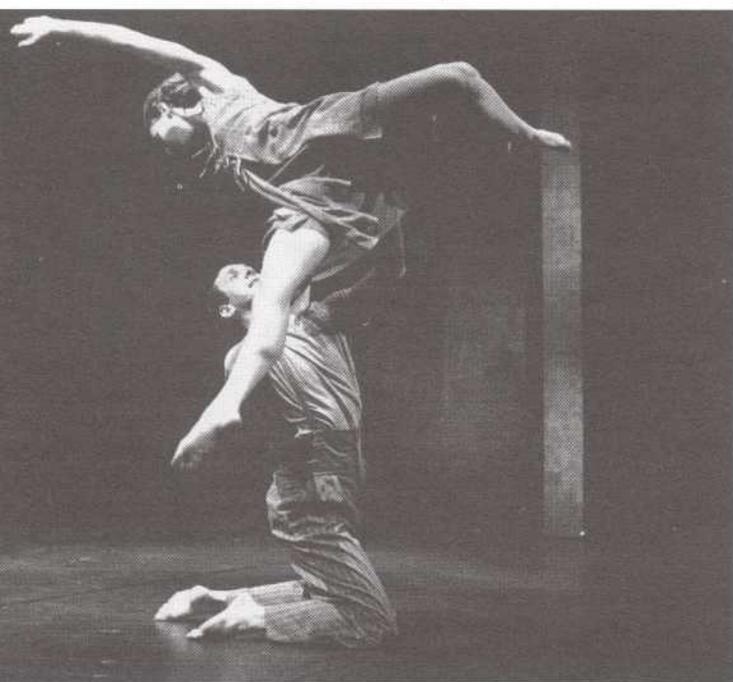
*The written word has always been a source of inspiration for my choreography. I am particularly fascinated with the work of Shakespeare. His dense, multi-layered text provides a perfect catalyst for the image-rich world of dance. In *The Garden*, although there is a definite relationship to the play it was not our intention to follow the narrative in any linear fashion. Rather we've used *Hamlet* as the departure point for the exploration of the visual metaphors, ideas, emotions and character perspective embedded in the play.*

*Tom Stroud, Programme notes for *The Garden**

In 2001, Tom Stroud celebrated his tenth anniversary as artistic director of Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers. In that period he has created a number of performances in which dance and theatre intertwine in the use of verbal text as inspiration for dance movement. As a choreographer, Stroud is often dissatisfied with "pure dance," in which movement has no context or connection to ideas. For him, text makes movement specific and adds a psychological dimension to dance, while dance embodies ideas and allows access to the emotional heart of the textual material. His approach to text and theatre is not so much narrative as "poetic": his dance presents a series of images around a set of themes that arise in the chosen text. In this way, dance "makes a statement," but this statement is in the oracular form of images that allow for audience members to make their own contemplative connections. Stroud invokes Pina Bausch as one of his precursors who have united theatre and dance. In a Canadian context it is easy to be reminded of Montreal's Carbone 14.

Among the textual material from which Stroud has drawn inspiration are the plays of Shakespeare: *Romeo and Juliet*, for *R & J ... 21 scenes for Romeo and Juliet*, which was performed around Canada from 1994 to 1998, and *Hamlet*, for *The*

Garden, staged at the Gas Station theatre in Winnipeg in 2001. Stroud finds a number of extremely useful aspects in Shakespeare's work for dance: images that resonate and unfold in complex patterns; high emotional drama; large language that corresponds with the large gestures of dance; and a clear sense of structure. On this last point, although Stroud's Shakespearean works do not follow the story line, they do follow the general chronology of the plays. The story is there in the background, its events resonating with the images and emotions. In his approach to Shakespeare, Stroud draws upon Peter Brook's idea that Shakespeare's work presents codified theatrical impulses, so that the choreographer's job is to translate those impulses, verbalized in Shakespeare, into movement.



Stroud took the verbal closeness of *Romeo and Juliet* and the way they seem to complete each others movements and created a duet where they rolled over top of each other on the floor, completing each other's movements.

PHOTO BY LYDIA PAWELAK

R & J focused its attention on the ideal love the play presents, asking such questions as "Would you die for love?" and exploring the complexities, for a late twentieth-century audience, of an invocation to trust in your heart. To this end it combined lines and speeches from Shakespeare (Queen Mab, of course, made her inevitable appearance) with texts both written by Stroud and director Chris Pinker-Gerrard and arising from the performers' improvisations. Sometimes excerpts from Shakespeare stood alone, sometimes they banded back and forth with the new. Here the text was dispersed to all the dancers, who sometimes had to dance and speak lines simultaneously, and a sense of multiple points-of-view, often in conflict, was created.

The text of *R & J* was sometimes spoken live by the actors while they moved or while they stood in front of microphones, and sometimes it was part of a pre-recorded soundtrack. Stroud found various ways to embody Shakespeare's words in movement. In one scene, Romeo's

passion was played with frenetic movement in contrast to the sceptical and relaxed gestures of Mercutio. Also, Stroud took the verbal closeness of *Romeo and Juliet*, (the way they seem to complete each other's sentences, for instance), and created a duet in which they rolled over top of each other on the floor, completing each other's movements. Although the scenes of the dance gave relatively little of the plot of Shakespeare's play, the chronology was visible underneath, and the performance began and ended with the sonnets of induction and epilogue as in Shakespeare.

The Garden, Stroud's more recent, *Hamlet*-inspired work, takes as its themes a number of ideas from Shakespeare. On one level, the theme is destiny and the statement is the need to trust in destiny. This is not exactly a happy trust, however, since another major theme is decay. The most striking aspect of *The Garden* is that it was performed on a stage covered in dirt – *Hamlet*'s unweeded garden, the graveyard, the quintessence of dust. The dancers moved in a particular way because they were dancing on dirt, and they were most often low and close to the ground, like Claudius's thoughts that cannot to heaven go. The dirt was scooped, kicked, hurled, wallowed in. It filled the scene with a murky light. The air was so heavy and thick you could cut it with a bare bodkin. *The Garden* ended with the dancers slowly decaying, falling languidly limb by limb down and into the earth for a few final twitches of life.

Unlike *R & J*, *The Garden* uses no text outside of Shakespeare, drawing all its verbal language from *Hamlet*. Shakespeare's text is presented here like arias, and the text has the feel of listening to a recording of highlights from an opera. The speeches used are high-profile and familiar:

So oft it chances in particular men [...]
 That it should come to this [...]
 What a piece of work is a man [...]
 What's he to Hecuba [...]
 To be or not to be [...]
 Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners [...]
 Doubt thou the stars are fire [...]
 My offence is rank [...]
 Mother, you have my father much offended [...]
 The readiness is all [...]
 The rest is silence.

All the text, except for one speech ("My offence is rank," of course, is spoken by Claudius) are *Hamlet*'s words and most of the text in the performance is spoken by *Hamlet* in grand and emotive style, not as an actor would deliver the lines, but as a singer might if he were speaking the way he sings.

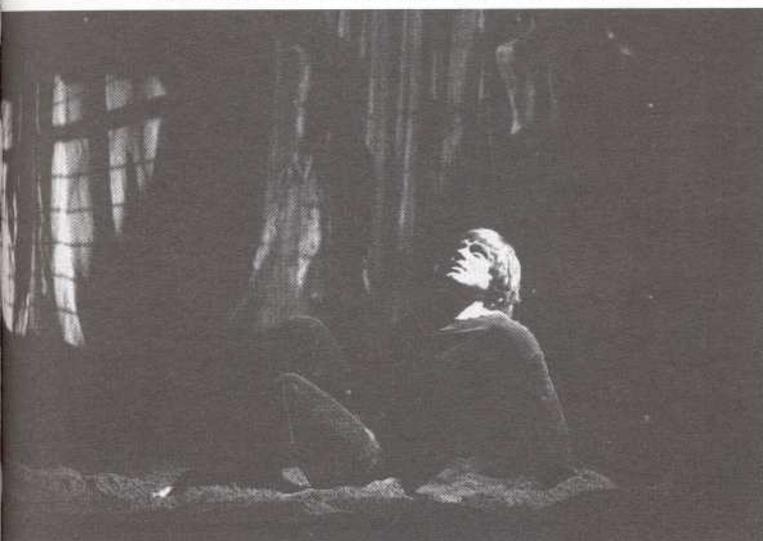
The speeches from *Hamlet* are all more or less truncated. What is of interest for Stroud are the grand philosophical statements rather than the particulars of circumstance. Like *R & J*, *The Garden* does not present the details of Shakespeare's plot, although the movements and words follow in general the chronology of *Hamlet*.

So, in *The Garden* we are strictly limited to Shakespeare's texts and to the words of one character. For Stroud, this is because *Hamlet* dominates Shakespeare's play, and because Dan Wild, the dancer playing *Hamlet*, was hobbled by a knee injury that kept him from doing

much dancing. The result, for reasons of vicissitude and theme, was that the other characters danced around Hamlet as he spoke, reacting to his words and attacks, sometimes going over his words for themselves. Hamlet's arias set a tone, an energy, a rhythm (often in counterpoint) for the dancers. Certain movements occurred over and over again – for instance, outstretched arms frequently ended in clasped hands, which for Stroud combines gestures of praying and swordplay. There was, in multiple ways, a sense of being trapped, inside Shakespeare's play, inside Hamlet's words and psyche.

In his collaborators, Stroud found other ways of materializing Shakespeare's theatrical impulses. The music of Greg Lowe, with its overlapping time signatures, is for Stroud an embodiment of Shakespeare's notion of time being "out of joint." Props and costumes were designed by the visual artist Diana Thorneycroft, well-known for her controversial show *Monstrance*, which featured the carcasses of rabbits, and *The Body, its Lesson and Camouflage*, which featured photographs of herself with objects and costumes drawn from childhood, medicine and surgery, sexuality, torture and death. Stroud saw these photographs when they were exhibited at the Winnipeg Art Gallery and immediately said to himself, "That's Hamlet."

What Stroud and Thorneycroft saw as the connection between her work and *Hamlet* was a fascination with moral and physical destruction and decay, which was reinforced when Thorneycroft came across a scholarly article on *Hamlet* and the grotesque. Thorneycroft turned to films of *Hamlet* for inspiration, but found them all period-piece costume dramas, which is not her style. Her photographs, especially on the poster for *The Garden*, do bear a resemblance to the black and white cinematography of Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet*, and she did borrow the idea of Ophelia's straightjacket from Kenneth Branagh's film. Mostly, however, Thorneycroft turned to elements from her own work. The back of the set became adorned with fox skulls, animal traps painted gold, military harnesses and a scythe. She decorated a chair used prominently in the performance with fabric sewn on with an autopsy stitch. Animal bones and rabbit fur were sewn over the dancers' costumes.



The most striking aspect of Stroud's *Hamlet*-inspired *The Garden*, featuring Dan Wild as Hamlet, is that it is performed on a stage covered in dirt.

PHOTO BY IAN MCCAUSLAND

Crucifixes took over the prominence previously given to monstrosities in her work. Masks marked with crucifixes sit half buried in the dirt. Both Gertrude and Claudius wear a modified woman's bodice. Dolls are used at several moments. Thorneycroft also crafted devices to restrict the dancers in their basic drives. Gertrude's sexual need to touch and nurture is thwarted by two long cone-shaped prostheses which she wears on her arms; Claudius wears a bridle-like mouthpiece which turns his face into a snarl and curbs his appetite and ability to speak.

With its anguished *Hamlet*, its dirt, its murky light, its laden movements, bones, traps and prostheses, *The Garden* is inevitably a dark piece of work. Stroud did what he could to temper this tone. The performance opened with destiny comically playing out the murder of Hamlet's father with action figures, and at one point in the rehearsals a set of key words, derived from Shakespeare, was used to focus the performance: shame, elation, betrayal, revenge, whore, rage. These words brought out the passion in *Hamlet*, and Stroud was especially interested in elation or ecstasy, which he sees arising in the excitement of Hamlet's monologues. Stroud also fought against the misogyny the dancers felt in Hamlet's tirades by allowing Gertrude and Ophelia space to express themselves, if not in language then in movement.

Stroud realizes that the kind of hybrid performance in *The Garden* runs the risk of disappointing both those who come for dance and those who come for theatre. For the aficionado of theatre, for instance, the delivery of the lines was not always satisfying – for instance when "wantonness" sounded like "wonton-ness." Much of the production rode on Dan Wild's *Hamlet*, and he didn't speak the lines like a good actor would, with the subtlety of a rich and complex character. It should be noted, however, that an actor's delivery is not what the production calls for. Rather, an operatic approach, however unsatisfying as acting, provides the kind of high tone that the dancing requires. All in all, the production was well received by local critics – CBC arts correspondent Robert Enright gave it a rave review. The success of the show has inspired Tom Stroud to continue his work with text-based dance. His next work will feature twenty-four singers whose text will come from the poems of Octavio Paz. Down the line he is thinking of working with *Othello*.

There is a long history of adapting Shakespeare's works and specifically of setting them to music and dance. One thinks of Verdi's *Otello* and *Falstaff* and Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*. The Winnipeg Contemporary Dancers have added to that history in their own specific ways, Canadian and contemporary, continuing the work of remaking Shakespeare across genres, generations and geographies. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T.S. Eliot sees culture as a set of monuments that are continually added to and changed by new artists. Certainly Shakespeare is such a monument.

Acknowledgement

I wish to thank Tom Stroud and Diana Thorneycroft for talking with me about *The Garden*.

Mark Fortier is a member of the English Department at the University of Winnipeg and co-edited the Routledge anthology *Adaptations of Shakespeare* with Daniel Fischlin.