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Hamburg:

Das Magazin aus der Metropole

Ganz nach oben

Wie Hamburgs Kulturszene abhebt

Ganz weit vorne

Karen Duve und Dendemann
über Dichtung im hohen Norden

Ganz schön was los

Tipps für das perfekte
Wochenende an der Elbe

DAS KULTUR-HEFT





Tänzerin und Choreografin Antje Pfundtner spricht mit Kulturstaatsminister Bernd Neumann über ihre Arbeit. Kerstin Evert vom K3-Zentrum (2. von l.), Amelie Deuflhard und Karin von Welck (r.) lauschen.

FOTO: LAIRLE

Dance

Working with mistakes

Erin Brannigan interviews German choreographer Antje Pfundtner



Antje Pfundtner, *eigenSinn*, photo: Iris Terzka

Choreographer Antje Pfundtner has spent the last 18 months touring her highly acclaimed solo *eigenSinn* throughout Europe and South America, and presenting her first ensemble work, *selbstinschuld*, in 3 German cities. Previously she worked in Europe and the United States with artists such as Michele Anne de Mey, Stephen Koplowitz, Felix Ruckert, Tony Vezich and David Hernandez and studied in New York with David Dorfman and company and Edith Meeks. She has received many scholarships including a prestigious 12 month award from Kunststiftung NRW. Pfundtner was in Sydney in August to run a workshop for Critical Path. From Sydney she goes on to a research project in Poland and then a tour of China and Tokyo.

As this is the end of your first day at the Critical Path workshop, can you talk about how you are running the workshop, your approach to choreography there and in general.

In my work I use a lot of text and movement together, so that's

what I have started to introduce. I think that it's important to know that my work comes from an autobiographical background, so I get the participants to pick a subject or a story and ask what their personal relationship is to that story. Not that it's therapy—'this is what I need to talk about'—but finding a subject that you can talk about and finding a distance from it that can be interesting. It's perfectly legitimate to pick something abstract and external to yourself, but for me if you want to talk about or present something on stage I think it's best if you have a personal connection to it. So if you were going to make a piece about accidents I would immediately ask if you have had one or seen one, what they mean to you—even if it does shift onto an abstract level. And then I will introduce some movement material into the workshop, but I am mostly interested in how they personally move.

What are the obsessions and interests of yours that are obviously clicking with audiences? Or is it how you present them?

I think it's a combination...because I don't think what I'm saying is particularly new! The solo *eigenSinn* is a play on words. The title translates as 'your own sense or meaning', but it can also be meant in a negative way, that you are very stubborn ['have it your own way', Eds]. I tell tall stories in the performance and there is a fairytale of the Brothers Grimm that leads the piece to one particular theme. It's about a child who wants to develop his own sense of things, and will never do what his mother wishes. God punishes it, it dies and is buried. Then one arm comes out of the grave and they try to put the arm down again, and in the end the mother has to hit the arm with a rock until, finally, the child drags his arm in and has peace. It's such a brutal fairytale to tell to kids. Of course, in the 'old school' it wasn't wished that a child would think for itself. Whereas now, it's all about developing your own thoughts, questioning things and positioning yourself. And I connect this to personal stories.

When I was born I couldn't move at all and people gave up on me and told my mother to buy a wheelchair, that I would never be able to move. But my mother wouldn't listen and found a physiotherapist who was willing to work with me and 5 times a day for a year she exercised with me so that I could crawl. And then I had another session to teach me to stop crawling!

So the work is about creating your own world. And then there are other stories that are about failure and success, and fake heroism...and it's not clear if the stories are true or not. So I think they are very human subjects that everybody can connect to. And it works on many levels, on the personal side as well as how artists see themselves, because they really have to find their own position in the world. I demonstrate this in different ways, for example wearing a disco ball on my head—how you want to be the centre of the world and glitter for everyone and in the end you're just reflecting yourself. I think if you can talk about something without preaching about it then people have the chance

to connect with it—or not—it's still a matter of taste. I think that's the goal of theatre—that the audience wants to find a part of themselves in the work.

So how does the movement quality illustrate or elaborate on these themes you've described?

Well, I like to work with my mistakes and to promote them. The new ensemble piece, *selbstinschuld*, had a working title which was, 'If you can't fix it, feature it.' I think it's what you have to do when you are a dancer. If you do a lot of ballet, for instance, you are always confronted with things that are wrong: you're not turned out enough etc. You are limited in some way, and I think that those limitations are your strongest points often connected to private things. I develop a lot of what some people call "ugly movement"—it has a very distinct aesthetic. And I mix a lot and 'break' a lot of movements. I always tell dancers not to deny where they come from. They would say, "Oh, I used to do ballet and then I did karate but now I only do contemporary." I always tell them in their improvisations, "Well, let me see that you used to do those things because it would make the contemporary really interesting for me, a way that only you could do it." So I don't think you should deny the roots that are in your body and the connections and information they have for you.

So what are the special things about your history that inform your way of moving?

I've been lucky that I worked with choreographers who encouraged me to find my own way of moving, to use what I had. Some parts of my body are over-extended and I was encouraged to show that rather than correct it. You can develop a new style from this—you might have arms that are too long but you can do amazing things with those arms, create a new aesthetic. I didn't limit myself because I didn't have a certain aesthetic in my mind.

Is there something about popular culture or entertainment that informs your work?

I see a lot of movies and I always try to go and see a lot of other art forms. I have a big friendship circle and a lot of them aren't artists, and I was always a very normal teenager even when I was training hard. I do what 99% of the population do—I watch every TV show that is on and I think I get a lot of information out of that. That's why you might get that popular culture connection with my work, because I'm in touch with these things.

So how does it feel now being supported by the Goethe Institut and touring your work around the world?

The international touring really started at the beginning of last year. I had been working freelance for various people and companies, travelling around a lot with them, and since 2001 I also started to do my own work. Then *eigenSinn* in February 2003 was a success—Ballet Tanz reviewed it and there were other

articles written on the work. But I wasn't really pushing or trying to sell my work. And then exactly a year later, someone saw it and put it in the German dance platform. The international producers who come don't care if you are well known at home or not. And there was such a reaction—one producer takes it and then others do and it's out there. It was really funny because it was a year old and a lot of people had it on their desk already. So of course you feel like something comes back but at the same time, you realise how absurd it is

.Sydney dancer-choreographer Martin del Amo describes his experience of the Antje Pfundtner workshop for Critical Path on Artshub, www.artshub.com.au

Jacqueline Pascoe discovers an untoward magic
in the work and character of visiting German
dancer-choreographer Antje Pfundtner.

PHOTO: IRIS TERZKA



Having it
her way

ON A broad stage empty but for one or two incidentals – a small table, the music system – a young woman spins, flips, rolls, contorts and gestures fluently, mysteriously, now and then with comic clarity. Sometimes she makes us wait, watching the thoughts flit across her expressive, intelligent face – clouds and sun, struggle and impulse, laughter and uncertainty. Sometimes there is music; it might be Tom Waits, it might be an obscure instrumental version of a Kraftwerk song; often there is nothing but the sound of the woman moving, breathing, her bare feet on the floor. Now and then, between accompanying body narrations, she delivers quixotic anecdotes of experience in excellent, airy English.

I could be describing either Antje Pfundtner's internationally acclaimed solo *eigenSinn* or an informal presentation by the young German dancer-choreographer in a Sydney studio on a cold August night – although in fact the two events are quite different works. The presentation was an improvised insight into how Pfundtner creates work and an idea of the content of her pieces – an improvisation powerfully influenced by the week she had just spent sharing processes with a dozen Australian independent choreographers. Lee Pemberton, Martin Kwasner, Darren Green, Paul Cordeiro, Kay Armstrong, Fiona Malone, Calista Sinclair, Annalouise Paul, Kimberley McIntyre, Anton, Martin del Amo and Pauline Quinteros – all established local dance

artists – had spent the week workshopping with Pfundtner at the Drill, the studios of the choreographic support initiative Critical Path, right next to the City Yacht Club on Rushcutters Bay. In these idyllic surrounds a small crowd gathered on the Friday night to drink wine and review the week, the work and the woman. Responses were unanimously positive.

“But I wish you could see the solo. She really creates her own world and draws you into it,” said Chunky Move director Gideon Obarzanek. He saw Pfundtner's *eigenSinn* [which loosely translates as “having it her way”] while in Europe and began moves to get her out to Australia to perform. A five-day season in Melbourne fell through at the last minute, but by then the Critical

Path workshop had already been arranged. The Goethe Institute stepped in and brought Pfundtner out for the workshop, with time for networking and a little sightseeing as well. Judging by the cordiality of the reception, Antje (say Aunt-yeh) should tour her remarkable full-length evening solo to Australia in the next 12 months.

The workshop participants were all on an unmistakable high, and eager to discuss the events of the preceding week. “It was on the Thursday,” said Darren Green, “that the dynamic of all these independent and competitive creators finally merged in this magical way and we actually realised we were here for something bigger than our own work.” Said Paul Cordeiro: “Antje has different way of moving and an incredible fluid strength. It was wonderful to be challenged, and to be part of a group and not leading, which each of us normally does, and to be taken out of your comfort zone.” Others also used this phrase, and when I repeated it to Pfundtner she was delighted.

“When I work on something I try to get myself out of my own comfort zone, because I always think that there you might be able to really find something new, something that challenges you, that interests you. Otherwise it’s very easy to get stuck in your style, in the things you’re often doing, and as you get more experience you know what works and you can get lazy. I think if you can get out of your comfort zone there might be the potential to find something new.”

It’s one thing to take others from their safe spots but how does she do it for herself? Pfundtner tries to remain very critical of her own work, using an assistant when she can, and regularly videotaping herself and watching for her own personal cliches. “I’m used to seeing myself, I know what I always do, I know what my tics are, so I can really see when I’m stuck, even from the outside, and I go ‘okay, this is not really honest, this is where you always end up’. And then I have different tools to

try to force myself to get out of that, or to work with failure.”

Working with failure is a concept that comes up intriguingly often when this extraordinarily successful young choreographer discusses her work. Her innate awareness of life's paradoxical nature is clearly a major stimulus, and her recent group work, her first, is titled *Selbstinschuld*, which she translates idiomatically as *If you can't fix it – feature it*.

After a childhood in Dortmund where she studied ballet and contemporary dance, Pfundtner moved to Hamburg and became a participant in the German equivalent of the NEIS scheme, a small-business training system administrated in Australia through Centrelink. The seven-month process helped her set herself up as a small business, learning how to maintain an administrative structure and brainstorming ways of commercialising her product. Participants work together in groups, and as the only artist among IT boffins and budding restaurateurs, she found the process enormously stimulating,

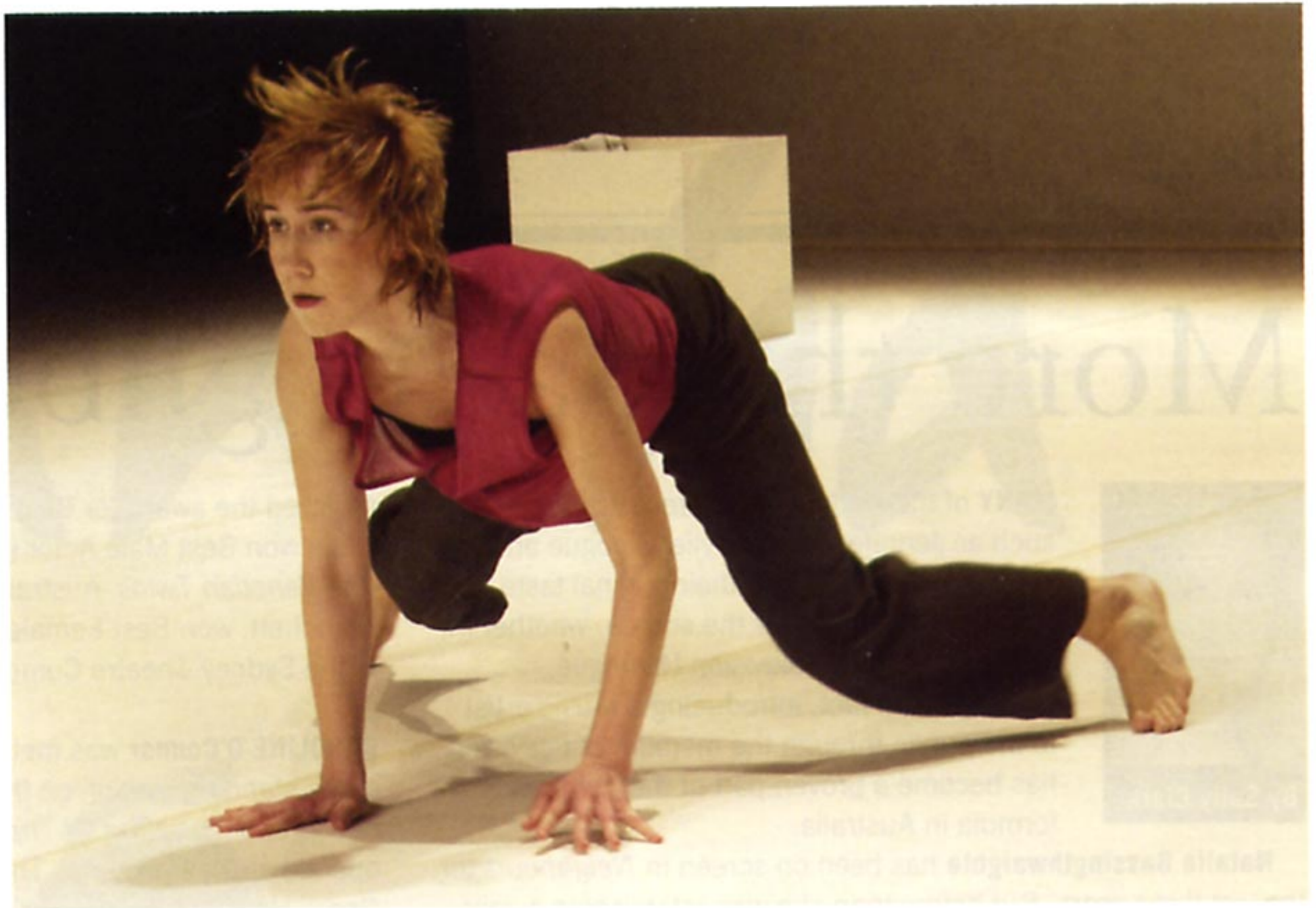
challenging and rewarding. Until recently she did all her own management, but with the success of *eigenSinn* has come the relative luxury of external management.

The dominant theme of Pfundtner's work is its autobiographical content. Her inspiration comes from the world at large: she sees a lot of films, goes to exhibitions, theatre shows and other dance works, and she has a wide circle of friends mostly outside the arts, whose company she finds relaxing. “But actually my biggest inspiration is just to meet people; as simple as it sounds.” In the informal presentation she tells a few short, pithy stories – one about saving a bus, another about an amusing conflict over a parking space, and another about her babyhood. In the question and answer session afterwards she cheerfully admits to having stolen two of the stories: her father saved the bus, and her mother insulted the fat couple who stole her parking space. But the story from her babyhood is by far the most remarkable, and all her own.

When Antje Pfundtner was born, something was wrong with the connection between her brain and her muscles, and she couldn't move at all. Doctors wrote her off as destined for a wheelchair, and only her mother's determined persistence opened a path to the future she was to have. After a year of intensive physiotherapy baby Antje began to crawl, but now she was constantly bumping into the furniture. Her mother called the physio again who said to bring her back for more exercises, because – as Pfundtner puts it in her engaging narrative – “it seems we had forgotten stopping.”

The paradox of a dancer-choreographer born immobile is not lost on her; in fact from this source she seems to derive much of her humour, her sense of blessing and her driving energy. Hopefully it won't be long before more of Australia gets the chance to experience this complex artist and her fluent, funny and fascinating work. ■

“Antje has different way of moving and
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Fluent and funny: two views of the visiting German choreographer Antje Pfundtner.