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Morphing through dance

The Saturday Paper, Melbourne

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On his company's 10th anniversary, Shaun Parker – one of the stalwarts of Australian contemporary dance – looks over his shapeshifting career.

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Dancer and choreographer Shaun Parker.
Shaun Parker & Company

Kate Holden

is the author of the memoirs *In My Skin* and *The Romantic: Italian Nights and Days*.

For someone who barely spoke until he was seven, who works in a primarily non-verbal art form, and who has been up until 6am writing a grant application and is now hunched bleakly under a black hoodie in front of a laptop and Zoom screen, Shaun Parker is unexpectedly garrulous.

He's had six hours' sleep, he assures me, but – fading out for a moment – apologises for yawning. On a grey Tuesday afternoon the modern white kitchen behind him is bleakly dim, and the man is evidently exhausted. It's September, six months into the era of Covid-19. His dance company's programming has been swiped sideways, his dancers are wobbling away on JobKeeper, and there's been the recent sucker punch of Create NSW's withdrawal of multi-year funding for many arts companies, including his. But he's happy to talk about his career and Shaun Parker & Company, and an hour-and-a-half later you'd say this man is fighting fit, even fired up.

The company is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, having emerged from Parker's impatience to create his own choreography after years as a professional dancer. A decade ago it debuted with *Happy as Larry*, a supercharged mix of contemporary

dance, ballet, breakdance, rollerskating and the psychological concept of the Enneagram, representing the work of Chilean psychiatrist Claudio Naranjo. Its fusion of intellectual preoccupation, pop culture and exciting movement has come to be one of Parker's hallmarks. "I was struggling with success and failure. I'm a type-3 personality structure, which is based around performance. Failure isn't an option for me," he says casually. "It's all about success, because that's how I got love or felt worthwhile growing up. If you're not aware of those patterns that form like a shell, that helped you survive in this tough world in the first place, those neural pathways can get set, in that they can limit you and your happiness." He'd studied Naranjo's work for years and wanted to express it to others. "That was the genesis of *Happy as Larry*, about the nine ego structures and how they define your happiness and self-worth."

It's apt that this piece was the company's debut. For Parker, it's a career high point, from its premiere to great reviews at London's Sadler's Wells, and it will soon be revived as part of a post- or mid-coronavirus recovery. Success and swerves have contoured Parker's performing life since childhood, and any artist who's prepared to spend 10 years investigating his sensitivity to failure is one who will enjoy a reprise of a major turning point in his journey.

Since *Larry*'s incarnation of Parker's full vision, he has focused zealously on producing a company and a body of work that perform at the highest level. That ethos includes a robust

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capacity for zigzag. The company's next production was *The Yard* (2011), developed with young non-professional street dancers from across Western Sydney, and concerned with the pragmatic topic of bullying. The krumping, popping and social pragmatism was well received by young people and school staff. "The five original dancers are now in their mid-20s; they've graduated, working with me for 10 years, and they're now adults teaching younger kids *The Yard*. We're still touring it, because bullying, unfortunately, is always a problem."

Parker knows about bullying: it happened to him as a child. As a farm kid in Mildura, he suffered from speech impediments so severe he could barely express himself. Trapped by his own mouth, reduced to furious tears and flinging himself against walls, he was stricken with self-consciousness that only made the situation worse. He couldn't talk. But his mother walked into a room when Parker was four to find him singing along with Jemima on *Play School* in perfect clear sentences. The thoughts, he explains nearly 50 years later, were attached to melody, "placed in space", as it were, rather than battled as words.

A few years later an unorthodox speech pathologist put a kind of viewfinder on his face and asked him to describe the diorama within. Blocking out the rest of the world, unable to see expectant gazes and exasperated stares, he opened his mouth and began to fluently describe the farmyard in his vision. "I felt like everything opened," he recounts. "I started to be able to explain things." It was a transformative moment. "I remember thinking this was the key. This is what you do, you have to block everything out. Take no notice of anyone else and just concentrate on what you're interested in."

Soon after he was singing as a boy soprano and joined the Mildura Little Theatre, run by an older couple for local youth. Again, he found a revelatory displacement: character. It was much easier being someone else, he explains. He and his sister would perform jokey skits between the main performance pieces. A musical aptitude test scored high: his encouraging parents took him to the local instrument shop to choose. He yearned for a piano but he had overheard arguments and sensed his parents' financial stress. Quietly, he asked for a guitar, learnt it for a few years, then put it away.

His singing came to a halt at 15. He was told, "Give up, your balls are going to drop." By 20 he was at Monash University studying

science. It was on campus, however, that the obstinate genie of destiny directed him to the third of his performing talents, in a student dance society. Soon, Parker was studying at the Victorian College of the Arts. He was then swept into international touring, as part of renowned choreographer Meryl Tankard's corps with the Australian Dance Theatre, where eventually he became a principal dancer. When Tankard was removed from her post, Parker too resigned. Then came work with Sasha Waltz in Berlin, multidisciplinary artist Meredith Monk in New York, dance with Opera Australia and the Victorian Opera, appearances in films and theatre productions such as *Moulin Rouge!*, *The Book of Revelation* and *The Wind in the Willows*, and his own ventures into short film and solo dance.

Tankard once gave each of her dancers a project, to develop a piece inspired by an image. Scholarly Parker took his painting of a mediaeval parade to a university department of early music. A chance conversation led to him singing, and he discovered he had perfect pitch. "I hadn't done music for years, because I was a dancer," he says, "but it was still in me." Academic Lesley Lewis encouraged him and he learnt repertoire, singing in the Adelaide Town Hall with her music students. In Europe he auditioned as a countertenor and was told that, although his voice was excellent in its natural state, it would need devoted conditioning to become professional.

Faced with a choice between obedient singing and expressive dance, he decided. "I chose dance and creativity, even though I wish I had another life; had done countertenor as well. So I still sing a little bit in my shows here, but I need to dance and I need to create." He wasn't quite done, however: he sang with the Sydney Theatre Company, amid Robyn Nevin, Cate Blanchett and Pamela Rabe. His own comedic *Blue Love* (2015), created with Jo Stone, starred Parker dancing, acting and singing pop songs.

In New York, when he was working with Monk, he performed vocals for an audience that included Björk. "Are you serious? Björk was here?" he remembers thinking. "It was my dream come true, basically." It's curious that a boy stricken to muteness by self-consciousness could open his mouth in front of an idol, but he did. "It's weird, I didn't like it. I *loved* it. You'd think I'd be more terrified, but I think, beginning to sing or dance or act, you're becoming another role. I love that feeling of becoming someone else."

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The years of silence, too, had stayed with him. As a boy, he says, “I used to look at people’s gestures a lot. I would communicate a lot with gestures. It’s almost like I heightened my ability to analyse movement and to communicate through movement, because I had a block with text.” When, in his mid-30s and after 17 years of dancing with Australian Dance Theatre and other companies, he began to fret for the chance to improve on the choreography he’d been given, his vocabulary of silent communication was well honed. “A lot of my choreography uses hands and arms.” His production *Am I* (2014) opens with dancers top-lit to emphasise their snapping, flexing hands and forearms; frequently, his performers arrest most of their body, while fingers and wrists say everything.

His work since, he feels, is shaped by a combination of intellectual curiosity – the science background, the innovative work of mentors such as Waltz and Monk, the pop culture and political worlds of his teenage daughter, the experience of psychology – and a sharp sense of humanist ethics.

“I make my work for people, for humans,” he says. “I don’t make it for the arts community, or trendy choreography, I make it for humanity. I just want to get back to the guts, the instinct, the heart of it; the human psychology within it. All of those elements are what draw me back to work. Then I really get excited.” A boffiny spark of curiosity flares up; the self-described dork dives into research.

“Thank god my Monash science days have helped. A lot of the quantum physics and maths and zoology and anthropology I did at university has fed into the works. I never thought they would. But they have, without my realising at the time.” *Am I*, a mature work featuring Indian dancer Shantala Shivalingappa simultaneously dancing and delivering ruminations on neural structures and identity, also concerns faith, quantum physics and spirituality. *King* (2019) he describes as “an essay” dealing with masculinity, sexuality and power; the new work *In the Zone*, being performed this month at Sydney’s Seymour Centre, features Libby Montilla as a young boy encountering game technology, its seductive powers, potential claustrophobia, and its conduit to a deeper understanding of nature and shared responsibility in the era of climate crisis.

Parker’s global perspective is very much part of his humanism. Shaun Parker & Company has made several visits not only to Europe but also to Taiwan, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Palestine, collaborating and networking with local artists. And mentorship

is still important. From the days of gathering more than a hundred young people from disadvantaged communities to learn from their street dance practice, he now helps youths apply for grants, develop work and shape their careers. He first met Montilla at 16; he’s now a main company member. Parker is currently collaborating with 22-year-old Kenyan–Sri Lankan rapper JamarzOnMarz through his Queer Bites program to mentor emerging artists. A film clip made with Parker’s assistance will be fed into a stage performance, then reinvented in slam poetry: mutual support and production.

Parker’s world is crammed with projects, a dizzying mixture of community engagement, social impact, school workshops, collaborations with musicians and technology developers. They include the Taiwanese “bubble artist” and Guinness World Records holder Su Chung-Tai; another emerging work titled *Spirit Fingers* about religion that drolly emphasises kitsch theatre devices such as strobe lights, trapdoors, glitter cannons and costume reveals; the development of Covid-19-friendly solo works and a revival of outdoor, socially distanced *Trolleys* (2012), a whirl of dancers and frantic supermarket trolleys; and a new narrative inspired by Greta Thunberg.

“One must morph!” he says, laughing. He’s fully awake by now. He can’t wait for what’s coming up. “I wanted to have a big Hollywood movie on my CV: I want to do everything. I don’t want to be boxed into avant-garde contemporary dance, or conceptual visual theatre, or whatever. One day I want to choreograph a Bollywood movie. I just want to do everything!”

Looking back on 30 years working in dance and a decade of Shaun Parker & Company, he’s satisfied. “I’m reasonably proud of them because I did my *absolute* best, and that’s really important,” he says, and you can hear the boy Shaun here, his earnest young voice, “really important to do your absolute best.” In any case, he believes in slow-burn, forward trajectory. “A mistake can turn into something beautiful. A mistake is a gift. Use it.” ●

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