

Underscoring vulnerability to a pointe



DANCE **ROS WARBY MONUMENTAL**

Playhouse, Arts Centre, October 13 to 15. Running time: 60 minutes
Hilary Crampton Reviewer

MONUMENTAL — it's a big word, suggesting edifices, power and stability. Yet the prevailing impression of Ros Warby's stunning solo is of vulnerability, fragility and transience.

Drawing on two enduring icons of classical ballet, the swan and the soldier, Warby excavates beneath the stereotypical surface

revealing contrasting layers of associated meaning.

She begins in shadow — a barely visible figure framed in the familiar white tutu off to one side, away from the powerful centre of the stage. She fixes us with an intense, bird-like gaze. This is a creature of nature, not of balletic artifice — she reverses our tendency to impose human qualities, going instead to the source of the bird-like imagery, which has become such an enduring icon of ballet.

Her actions echo ballet's beauty of line and shape but

never quite arrive. Instead they dissolve, sliding away from the certainty of familiar poses.

She approaches us, exhorting us with a powerful voice, sobbing, speaking from the heart in a strange language that nevertheless seems familiar, giving the traditionally voiceless ballerina a voice — it feels shocking, funny and poignant.

Her soldier is in contrasting black, a compact figure that briefly assumes the idealistic heroic pose, but quickly diversifies, conveying ferocity, fear and valour in turn.

Margie Medlin supports Warby's action with subtly focused lighting and black-and-white film. Grainy scratched documentaries of bird life show flight, massed flocks, and death. Hugely magnified close-ups of Warby's face emphasise the intensity of her gaze, or show us the fine detail of the dancer's legs and feet — dwarfing her real life presence and increasing the sense of her vulnerability.

Helen Mountfort's humming, resonant cello score adds strength, urgency, power and tonal quality, enhancing the

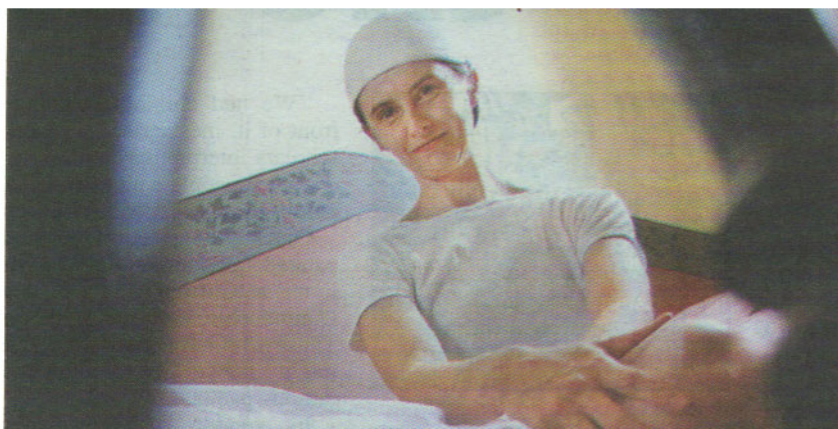
multi-layered emotional landscape.

Ambiguity, allusion and inference are Warby's principal tools. This means her audience must also work, delving into their own store of images to build meaning. Warby is fearless and uncompromising, venturing into performance strategies that take her and us out of safe and familiar territory.

But the accumulated result is profoundly moving. Like coming to the end of a strange journey through dream territory. It is a monumental performance.

Ros Warby's solo in *Monumental* is direct and confronting as she levels her gaze at the audience.

PICTURE: JOHN SONES



Swan takes flight: choreographer Ros Warby is virtuosic in *Monumental*.

Herald Sun, Tuesday, October 17, 2006 **71**

MONUMENTAL

Where: Playhouse,
Friday
Reviewer: Stephanie
Glickman

MELBOURNE choreographer Ros Warby pulls off this ambitious solo work with stunning success with great support from lighting/set designer Margie Medlin and composer Helen Mountfort.

Playing with balletic images of the swan and the soldier in two distinct sections, *Monumental* is a dense piece in black and white, which retains a sense of humour amid the explorations.

Warby takes these figures into territory more emotional than historical and abstracts them in a way that their essence speaks to the audience and provides fertile material for interpretation.

Opening with Warby on the side of the stage in white tutu, she starts as if warming up for the ballet — a roll of the head, flick of the shoulder and undulation of torso that give way to awkwardness — a sense that this ballerina will never transform into a beautiful swan.

The second half uses the projection work of Medlin to great effect, with Warby dressed in sleek black suit and cap.

Monumental is clean, sure of its aesthetic and rich in ideas and imagery. Warby's performance is virtuosic and multi-dimensional, continually transforming throughout the piece.

The production values are top quality, Warby's physicality is unique and her collaborators are unified in their ideas.

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Written by Jess Taormina
Sunday, 15 October 2006

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Ros Warby is a one of a kind performer, who has become increasingly recognised for her unique style of contemporary dance – most notably for her acclaimed solo, *Swift*, which has taken her around the world.

With **Monumental**, Warby once again approaches her solo performance as a proudly and thoroughly collaborative process with her trusted creative team. Exploring 'the choreography between dance, film and sound', Warby describes her working relationship with these artists similar to how a choreographer works with dancers.

In **Monumental**, she embodies two of ballet's most iconic figures, the swan and the soldier, noting the parallels between the two – a balance between strength, innocence, naivety and fear.

Warby's presence is quietly commanding - her very absorbedness is absorbing to behold. She moves with remarkable intent, and appears endlessly curious about her own movement – perhaps a consequence of her choreographic process. While the structure and essence of **Monumental** is firmly in place, Warby's movement is unique from one performance to the next – she improvises within the bounds of her set 'choreographic instruction'.

Warby has confessed to having dreamt about improvising *Swan Lake*, and there is a definite balletic component to the work, revealing the classical foundation of her training. While there are choreographic allusions to *Swan Lake*, the bird-like mannerisms and movements are much more instinctive, at times even neurotic – Warby desperately flapping her swan-like arms and gathering up her 'feathers' as she pulls her tutu to her body.

Monumental certainly has its absurdist moments. Warby careers helplessly around the stage in a bewildered moment as the swan, and throughout the performance imparts monologues of gobbledygook that rise to a dramatic sort of chant at times – rather strained as the swan, more strident and irate as the soldier. Her turn as the soldier figure – a response to the current climate of war – is bizarre as it is hilarious, with Warby dressed in a black jumpsuit with subtle uniform detail, and every now and then breaking into a strutting little march.

The opening is unembellished but striking. Warby in a spot lit corner of the stage wearing a white, feathered tutu, a white helmet-like cap on her head. With a slightly knock-kneed stance, she performs controlled, precise and sinewy upper body movement with intense concentration.

From the purity of this opening sequence, **Monumental** goes on to incorporate elements of film and motion graphics to masterfully enhance the movement. Designer Margie Medlin and cinematographer Ben Speth have joined forces to create a monochrome yet sadly beautiful world for Warby's piece to come to life.

At times it is easy to forget this is a solo performance largely due to Warby's 'moving set'. She dances in alliance with projections of herself, shot from numerous angles and magnifying different parts of her body. Grainy film footage of birds, sourced from old documentaries, give a nostalgic, slightly haunted feel to the work.

The score from cellist-composer Helen Mountfort explores the many dynamic possibilities of composing for strings, and includes additional music from her string quartet DeFLOCKeD. At times the cello is so hushed you could hear a pin-drop, while at others the strokes of the bow are vigorous and relentless. Mountfort's music often has a looped, cyclical quality, creating an atmosphere of great focus, almost a hypnotic hum.

The history between the creative team, effortlessly operating on the same aesthetic wavelength, is obvious. Warby strives to perfect what she calls the 'musicality' of her work, that fine balance between each of the elements. This balance was exquisitely achieved – **Monumental** is strangely beautiful and stunning in its originality.

Melbourne International Arts Festival presents the World Premiere of
Monumental
Ros Warby

Venue: the Arts Centre, Playhouse

Dates/Times: Fri 13 – Sun 15 Oct at 8pm; Sun 15 Oct at 3pm (perf on Sat 14 Oct followed by a post-show Q & A)

Duration: 1hr no interval

Tickets: Full \$45, Conc \$33.75; Groups (8+) \$40.50; Student \$19; School Groups \$12

Bookings: Ticketmaster 1300 136 166 or www.melbournefestival.com.au

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A little piece of big

ONE of the opening acts of this year's Melbourne International Arts Festival is called *Monumental*. But though the title might make this work sound like a massive event, it's not: *Monumental* is a delicate solo dance performance by one of Melbourne's independent artists, Ros Warby.

Over the past six years Warby (pictured) has been touring the world with her solo show, *Swift*, to great acclaim (it has recently been made into a film by the ABC). *Monumental* has evolved from this earlier work, using a similar blend of film, dance and music, and the same trusted collaborators, filmmaker Margie Medlin and composer Helen Mountfort, who has created a score for solo acoustic cello.

But while *Swift* is a layered, coloured work, Warby says *Monumental* is sparer, "classic and formal", and draws parallels between two main "iconic" characters, the soldier and the swan of classical ballet.

Warby originally trained in classical ballet and, "though what I do with it now is quite 'other', I've never abandoned the technique and I still have an interest in the form". For Warby, the swan, that ultimate symbol of classical ballet, and the image of the young soldier, particularly in the face of today's world events, carry a great deal of resonance.

While *Monumental* is an intimate work, it draws on grand subjects of beauty, life and death, and explores how these subjects can be present in the smallest and most subtle of things. "I'm interested in the very small in the very big," Warby explains.

'Monumental' runs from Friday 14 to Sunday 15 October at the Victorian Arts Centre. See 'Limelight' on p.70 for an interview with Bill T. Jones, another featured artist at the Melbourne Festival.



Metro

SOLO, IN BLACK AND WHITE

Some eyebrows were raised when the Melbourne Festival director added her partner's work to this year's program. But, if Ros Warby's work is good enough for New York and London, why not for her home town? **Jo Roberts reports.**



FOR a moment, the dull click and whirr of the 35mm projector is the only sound in the darkened hall. Then Ros Warby appears from the side of the stage, her slight frame cinched by a white leotard and feathery tutu, a white skullcap pulled taut over her brunette hair.

As Warby begins to move, a single cello note swoons. Her head cocks and sweeps with the note, evoking the swan of *that* famous old ballet. The whirring sound disappears amid the hypnotic effect of dancer and music as Warby begins a run-through of her new work, *Monumental*, which premieres this Friday at the Melbourne International Arts Festival.

Monumental reunites Warby's long-standing creative team of film and lighting designer Margie Medlin and cellist-composer Helen Mountford (plus filmmaker Ben Speth). It follows the huge, and continued, success of Warby's 2003 work *Swift*, which has placed the solo artist firmly on the international map. But more on that later.

Monumental is a monochrome solo work inhabited by three characters — a ballerina, a soldier and a bird — juxtaposed against a grainy film-noir world created by Medlin and Speth.

When she was in her 20s, Warby, who is now 39, had a recurring dream in which she improvised her way through *Swan Lake*. "So this is a fall-out from that," she says. "Of that history in my system."

The work pays a gentle homage to the classical ballet, but not overtly. "Even though I'm referencing *Swan Lake*, I chose not to study it in depth. I did get a video out a couple of weeks ago, which was a perfect time to do it, when the piece was already formed."

Monumental was inspired in part by the elaborateness of *Swift*, and Medlin's interest in black-and-white film. She began work on the piece and the three characters that would occupy it began to raise their heads of their own accord.

The ballerina, bird and soldier are a dense mix of charm, complexity, fragility, bravery and hilarity; the bizarre monologues delivered by them (Warby is a born comic) are something to behold.

Warby says she was a "very solo sort of person" in high school, and she was inevitably drawn to solo dance. So much so, she says, that "choice" never came into it.

"The first chance I could get to take my ghetto blaster into the school hall by myself, I'd take it," she recalls. "Just loved it."

After she finished her classical training, Warby spent the first



three years of her modern dance career with Dance Works, the 20-year-old Melbourne company that folded in June after losing its Australia Council funding. "I joined Dance Works because I loved their philosophy of nurturing choreographic talent," she says. "Every year I would make a solo. It was just how I always worked."

And there, from the outset, was the music of Mountford, providing a soundtrack to Warby's work. For her first Dance Works solo in 1990, Warby used music Mountford had composed with her band My Friend the Chocolate Cake.

"A mutual friend introduced us early on, and kind of got that we had some similar bent," Warby says with a laugh.

The following year Mountford performed live with Warby for her second solo. Also there for that second work was Margie Medlin, lighting Warby's work. What makes Warby keep coming back to this core team?

"A trust, an understanding, a continuity," she says. "They're people I'm attracted to in their work and their person. I find it very easy and fruitful to work with that sort of dynamic. And I respect and trust their own artwork. We really kind of know where our boundaries are, where we want to push them and where we don't. Not getting too off the map. Because once you get off the

map, I'm in territory where I just feel lost."

Warby knew from early on where her own map was. "I was pretty clear what dance practice I was interested in, so it was a matter of sourcing those people, looking for those artists who were taking the form beyond improvisation and producing dance in a more formal way."

She looked to such dancers as the Americans Dana Reitz, Lisa Nelson, Steve Paxton and Deborah Hay. Hay, in particular, has had a profound impact on Warby. "In the past 10 years she has steered my direction in a way I've really been able to harness," she says.

The last time Warby appeared in the Melbourne Festival was in 2003, with *Swift*. Re-framed, a reworking of *Swift*. Since then *Swift* has taken her overseas extensively.

In New York in January 2005, the director of Dance Umbrella saw *Swift* and invited Warby to the London-based festival. There wasn't enough time to organise the funding to make it happen, but this year Warby will take the show to the festival, one of Europe's biggest dance events.

Straight after her Melbourne Festival season she will head to London where, as only the fourth Australian ever to appear at the festival, she'll line up in a program

alongside such dance heavyweights as the William Forsythe, Merce Cunningham, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and Stephen Petronio companies.

"In terms of profile, it's a privilege, I'm thrilled. To be among that calibre of artists, I feel a bit humbled by it... I hope it goes OK."

Warby's partner, Melbourne Festival artistic director Kristy Edmunds, will join Warby and their two-year-old son, Malachi (clocking up his eighth international trip) for the last week of her European tour.

Edmunds and Warby met at the Adelaide Arts Market in 1998, where Warby was performing and Edmunds was scouting for artists in her role as founder and director of the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art. Warby went to Portland twice in the following year, once performing with Lucy Guerin and again when Edmunds offered her a residency to make a work. Edmunds added the resulting work to the following year's program.

"All that took about two years," Warby says. "And by then we were like, 'Hmmm, what are we going to do about this?' Neither of us could just pack up. But it was amazing, we just made it work."

It would be easy for festival onlookers to raise an eyebrow at Edmunds once again including her partner on the bill of a festival she curates. Warby says no one has made any comments to her, though she acknowledges "it's an obvious question, the conflict-of-interest thing."

"Kristy and I talked about it, before we decided to go ahead with it, because we knew it would be a possible issue," she adds. "It's sort of like this: I make a new work every two to three years, I didn't want to self-produce again in Melbourne, so I would have approached the festival whoever the director would have been. Then there's Kristy's interest in wanting to program Melbourne choreographers. She's like, 'If we weren't together I'd program you. Ultimately I feel like it's more of a crime not to program it than to program it and deal with the consequences of it if people have an issue about it.'"

As it was, the Festival board had the final say on Edmunds' program. "If it had been an issue, they would have brought it up way back when Kristy presented her initial draft program," Warby reasons.

Warby's burgeoning international profile — in particular her Dance Umbrella inclusion — is speaking for itself.

Monumental is at the Playhouse, Arts Centre, October 13-15.

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Dancer/choreographer Ros Warby in rehearsal for her solo show, *Monumental*.

PICTURES: EDDIE JIM