

Daniel Jaber's Nought (2013)

REVIEWS

Daniel Jaber's 'Nought' for Australian Dance Theatre is beautiful, meticulous, astonishing

- PETER BURDON
- THE ADVERTISER

An important occasion at the Samstag Gallery for the premiere by Australian Dance Theatre of Daniel Jaber's *Nought*.

Important on a number of grounds, not the least of which are that it's Jaber's first full-length work, and all the more remarkable for him being a continuing member of ADT, the first to be commissioned to create for the company.

It is set in the unique environment of the Samstag Gallery, where the space is large, white, and very brightly lit. The dancers are already warming up as the audience enters, and in the space of perhaps 10 minutes the chitchat dies and the mind focuses on the dancers, their lithe bodies, and Catherine Ziersch's beautiful costumes. As the piece proper begins, you realise why such a warm up was necessary.

An aura of improvised movement cannot conceal meticulous choreography that is sometimes extremely complex. A great number of patterns have been written on each dancer, and the recollection of these alone, let alone their combination, is an amazing feat.

There are cues to be taken from the gravelly score by Thomas Jeker, to be sure, but the dancers' concentration is so fixed that sounds heard out of sight become important, and there is real excitement as they throw themselves into moves relying entirely on being exactly where they ought. It's a quite astonishing achievement.

Jaber draws widely on both contemporary and classical styles, including a substantial section on pointe. The seven dancers are uniformly superb, especially Kimball Wong and Natalie Allen.

ALAN BRISSENDEN **The Adelaide Review**

In this centenary year of Vaslav Nijinsky's *Rite of Spring* to Stravinsky's shattering score, it is well to remember the absolute necessity of counting in dance.

The uproar, that erupted at its premiere almost as soon as the curtain went up, drowned out the music to such an extent that Nijinsky stood on a chair in the wings shouting himself hoarse counting out the difficult rhythms. Nothing like that happened at the premiere of rising choreographer **Daniel Jaber's** *Nought*, of course – much of the work is danced with the only sounds the dancers' breathing, some choreographed slapping of hands on the floor and the soft noise of their feet, in socks, landing, until a final section in which two dancers appear in black pointe shoes, whose hard blocked tips rap out in sharp percussive contrast.

The very precise sound of the pointe shoes emphasises the significance of counting in the work, which is divided into sections, one of the dancers calling out a number from one to eight to initiate a new section. In his program note, Jaber writes that "Numerical logic has formed the 'script' for the work", and this demarcation provides an indicator for change, often subtle, in the style of movement. There is great variety in the inventive choreography, which has a strong foundation in classical technique on which Jaber builds contemporary athleticism and modern fluency. This is not a work about emotion or narrative, but about the body's movement and human capability to form and control movement so that it becomes dance.

Bosco Shaw incorporates LED lighting from above and has banks of lights at each corner of the stage, sometimes linked to bursts of sound from **Thomas Jeker's** sparse score. The eight dancers, in **Catherine Zierch's** flesh-coloured costumes, most of them of light, flimsy materials – the striking exceptions are for the two in pointe shoes, who wear flesh-coloured tights with symmetrical tattoos from calf to neck – are exposed against a white floorcloth and backdrop, with the audience on three sides. They perform with confident enthusiasm, and the counting going on in

their heads can only be imagined. Charismatic Kimball Wong leads the cast with stamina and authority. *Nought* marks a major advance in Jaber's burgeoning choreographic career.

[Australian Dance Theatre - Nought](#)

MAGGIE TONKIN
Dance Australia

Dan Jaber is the first choreographer commissioned to make a full-length work on ADT since Garry Stewart became artistic director back in 1999. For almost 10 years Jaber has been a dancer in the company, which has thus far featured Stewart's choreography exclusively. The test for Jaber, just as with any choreographer emerging from under the wing of another, is to show that he an individual voice and aesthetic. On this score, *Nought* succeeds brilliantly.

The seven dancers from ADT, four women and three men, are warming up as the audience enters the performance space, which consists of a white floor in the open space of the very bright, white-walled Samstag museum. The audience is seated along two sides of the large rectangular floor in extremely close proximity to the dancers. Dressed in an assortment of flesh-coloured shorts, skirts, chiffon tops and socks by fashion designer Catherine Ziersch, the dancers continue stretching and marking movement sequences until a sudden electronic noise sounds, and what is seemingly the real piece begins. Dancer Kimball Wong shouts out "One", and very complex sequences of movements ensue. As the piece progresses, the dancers take turns to call out the numbers from one to eight, which, along with Thomas Jeker's minimalist electronic score, act as cues for changes of sequence.

That said, the actual movement structure is almost impossible to describe, because the seven dancers are all on stage in almost constant motion throughout, and they form and reform in an endless succession of intricate combinations. Jaber draws on a range of contemporary and ballet movements: posé turns, développés à la seconde and pointe work are interwoven with headstands, barrel jumps and contact improvisation. Several motifs reoccur repeatedly, such as the characteristic pose of left hand grasping the right elbow with the right hand holding the side of the face, and straight arm movements reminiscent of semaphore code. Nathalie Allen performs an extremely precise balletic solo superbly, and Samantha Hines performs a shuddering, convulsive sequence with great control. There is a long pause - too long - whilst the five dancers line up at the back of the stage to await the entry of Allen and Jessica Hesketh, who go off for a costume change and return in whitish unitards with striking black embroidery and black pointe shoes to perform a balletic duet. But otherwise the motion keeps going relentlessly.

Being so close means that throughout the performance the audience becomes acutely conscious of the dancers as labouring bodies; we hear their increasingly strained breathing, see, smell (and even at time get showered with) their sweat, and see the muscular effort required at first hand. This, coupled with hearing the dancers counting aloud, has the effect of making the work of dancing - all that is usually hidden - highly visible. When Samantha Hines brings a mike onstage at the close of the piece and starts reciting some text by French philosopher Michael Serres about the dancer being a number, an unknown quantity, it becomes clear that this forced intimacy is an intentional strategy to make us aware, not only of the intense effort involved in dancing, but also the incredibly abstract nature of the art form.

The dancers are superb throughout, especially Kimball Wong, Natalie Allen and Jessica Hesketh, and the score, costuming and lighting (by Bosco Shaw) are beautifully integrated. With *Nought*, Jaber has made a challenging work for both dancers and audience alike, and demonstrated unequivocally that he has his own choreographic style. This is a work that deserves further showings; hopefully ADT will be able to tour it in the not too distant future.

Australian Dance Theatre's Nought

INDAILY
JENNY TOUNE

DANCE REVIEW | *Nought* presents as a blank canvas, the dancers' bodies etching themselves gradually into its weave.

The audience is left to find its own journey through the piece, either by following individual pathways or seeing the canvas as a whole.

Some bodies are prostrate, allowing subtle movements to infiltrate slowly, or else integrate purity of line with total release; others shred that canvas with frenetic movements.

This is contemporary dance without gimmicks. Integration of the dancers (costumed entirely in beige by local designer Catherine Ziersch) with the starkness of the set was reminiscent of American choreographer and dancer Merce Cunningham's work in its purity of form and presentation as a moving art work.

Nought is highly technical and very clean, stripped of emotion and presented as precisely as a mathematical equation. Adelaide choreographer Daniel Jaber is not afraid to allow silence and stillness their place in the choreography.

Jaber has made a smooth transition from dancer (he appeared in all of the Australian Dance Theatre's earlier works) to choreographer by allowing his work to explore the very personal question of what a dancer actually is. The piece demonstrates the strength and vulnerabilities of the dancer – from Kimball Wong and Jessica Hesketh's powerful pas de deux to the frenzied neurosis of Samantha Hines' solo.

Nought is the first full-length work to be commissioned by ADT and promoted under the company's banner. It's a step away from its usual aesthetic and I applaud director Garry Stewart for giving fresh vision and voice a breathing space.

Review: Nought At Samstag Museum Of Art

RIP IT UP Amelia Pinna

Contemporary dance and numerical logic might seem an unlikely combination, but according to choreographer **Daniel Jaber**, if the dancer's body were a number, it would be nought.

This sense of blankness is apparent the moment we enter the stark, void-like space of the **Samstag Museum**, where seven ethereal figures are placed at various points before us. With a glaring LED light overhead, the dancers are under our inspection, ticking away like electrically charged toys on repeat. They move as if being pulled and pushed by an outer force, and in the silence we hear the sporadic slapping of hands to the floor, and random cries of numbers one to eight.

But despite all this, the seven unbelievably talented dancers are powerfully human. Jaber's classical style is fused with an intense physicality typical of Garry Stewart's **Australian Dance Theatre**, providing the perfect midpoint between elegance and vulnerability. With most of the work performed in silence, the audience – seated only feet away – can hear every squeak of bare skin against the floor and every breath of exhaustion.

There was perhaps a little too much silence at times, and Thomas Jeker's sudden bursts of mechanical sound provided a welcome change, along with an eerie, violin theme and spoken words in the final scene.

Jaber describes his work as "a large choreographed game of Jenga" – and it's not hard to see why. Each element of the choreography is immaculately constructed, and each dancer a vital building block in an interlaced network of perfection. But the raw humanness they exude tells us they are just as fragile as a tower of blocks, ready to tumble if pushed too far.

The flesh-tones of **Catherine Ziersch's** beautifully crafted costumes further emphasise the nakedness of the dancing body, while the striking brocade-printed bodysuits worn by the two classical dancers depict the dancer as a work of art.

While *Nought* is Jaber's brainchild, much of the content was choreographed by the dancers themselves, and each brought their own unique style to the table. **Kimball Wong** and **Scott Ewen's** athleticism is wonderfully contrasted with **Jessica Hesketh** and **Natalie Allen's** classical grace.

In a world premiere so different to Australian Dance Theatre's signature style, Jaber offers a unique insight into the body and spirit of a dancer. *Nought* is certainly something.

GLAM ADELAIDE

Walking into the space at the **Samstag Museum of Art**, you would be forgiven for thinking you had gotten there too late, and that the production crew had already packed up the set. Bare white floors and walls await, with one overhanging light strip and what appears to be flood lights in the four corners of the room. When the dancers appear, they are draped in neutral, skin-tone costumes, making them appear naked and raw in their bare environment.

Immediately, you get a feel for what Adelaide-born director and concept designer **Daniel Jaber** was trying to create. **Nought**, a production by **The Australian Dance Theatre**, is a journey of discovering dance at its core. The work has periods of silence, mixed with music and spoken words to emphasise the dancers' vulnerabilities. **Catherine Ziersch's** costuming, **Lucie Balsamo's** production design and **Jaber's** incredible choreography all assist to draw attention away from the traditional 'dancer focused' style of dance and instead focuses on the space and the movement which occurs in that space.

The choreography eliminates the notion of the dancer as an individual, yet at the same time questions the notion of a collective. Lighting either floods the stage with light or cast everything into shadow highlighting the flawless and fearless nature of the movement. The choreography itself is a combination of dramatic and sudden bursts of energy and symmetrical duets, and stark, contrasting stillness. The seven incredibly talented dancers move independent of each other as well as in synchronicity, and the audience may either choose to follow the pathway of the individuals or watch the performers *en-masse*.

The dancers perform whilst sporadically counting from one to eight, reminding the audience that this modern and conceptual piece is still tied to the traditional rhythmic tempo of dance. This counting and movement creates the 'logical' connection between the performance and numerical, structured movements. In the final moments of the performance, dancer Samantha Hines, stands separate from the ensemble and recites a monologue which is akin to spoken word poetry. "Can a human body be like a number?" she asks, articulating the overriding question which drove Jaber to create this investigative piece. Hines reiterates the nakedness and raw elements of this performance when she says that the dancer is like an "*unknown quantity*", and "*able to take on all forms*". By returning the dancer to "*zero*", Hines claims "*the more I dance, the more I am what I dance. [...] Blank. Naked. Non-existent*".

Nought takes the audience through a process of discovery, ending with a poignant insight into the choreographer's ability to tell a story through their structured movements, and the "*naked canvas*" that is the dancers body. A cross between a math class, a poetry reading, Swan Lake and a gym session, **Nought** does not disappoint, nor does it fail to make you question all that you thought you knew about conceptual, modern dance.

Congratulations to Natalie Allen, Zoe Dunwoodie, Scott Ewen, Samantha Hines, Jessica Hesketh, Matte Roffe, Kimball Wong and Daniel Jaber on a fantastic run.

Reviewed by Jenna Woods