

Lyndal Jones

Beyond Boundaries

Lyndal Jones graduated from Monash University in 1971. After a time in London, she returned to Australia to teach movement, writing and directing at various colleges, mostly the School of Drama, Victorian College Of The Arts. But also, Lyndal Jones embarked on a series of sophisticated performance works, the latest being the Prediction Pieces.

Lyndal Jones was one of Nine Contemporary Australian Artists invited to present work at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles Olympics Arts Festival, 1984. She has presented work in numerous other performance and art venues in Australia and abroad.

Jones is among the few genuinely groundbreaking performers Australia has produced. Adrian Martin pays tribute to the significance of Jones' work; and Suzanne Davies talks to Jones about the Prediction Piece series.

Room To Move

Post-modernism is a strange and somewhat terrorist cultural movement. It is very keen to 'back date' itself as a style or sensibility — retroactively swallowing up beat poetry, New

Wave music, and *nouvelle vague* cinema into one monstrous historic monolith — in order to sneakily cover the fact that, as an item on the agenda for discussion, it has hardly been around five years.

Indeed, in 1982, when I was first bowled over by the performance work of Lyndal Jones

and tried writing about it in *Art & Text*, I was still happily and innocently trying to figure out what *modernism* was. Modernist art was still — even in those days hardly very far away from us — art which could be new, different, complex... and *critical*.

I guess if post-modernism (circa 1983) marks anything, it is the recent loss of faith in a critical dimension in art, and indeed a critical function for criticism itself. The language of modernism — rupture, intervention, montage, participation, transgression — was superseded virtually overnight by an idiom, the keynotes of which are, on the one hand, world-weary indifference (the seductive 'who-cares-and-what-does-it-matter-anyway?' stance of Jean Baudrillard) and on the other, misty-eyed 'poetic' lyricism with a head in the clouds and no feet on the ground (the sad 'religious revival' in art, for instance).

Criticism — the art of incisive analysis which aims (however fractionally) in the direction of change — was suddenly so, so *passé*; and everybody started talking about 'style', all the while clambering up-market to become professional entrepreneurs of cultural fashion.

The Last of the Great Modernists are two women who still persist, with fierce intelligence and quiet passion, in producing, slowly and carefully, critical art: the American filmmaker Yvonne Rainer and our own Lyndal Jones. They share common origins — the performance styles that grew from the minimal dance experiments of the 1960s and 1970s — and both the concerns and the forms of their work overlap in many intriguing ways. More and more drawn to 'multi-media' experiments (is multi-media the ultimate *passé*-word of 1970s modernism?), both multiply the

by Adrian Martin



Lyndal Jones, *Prediction Piece 7*

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elements at play in order to interrogate, ever more elaborately, all foundations of fictional 'truth' or certainty.

In both their cases, a line can be drawn from the tiny performance gestures which, through their repetition, once aimed to empty out traditional connotations of theatrical 'expressivity', to the more difficult confrontation with that most 'illusionistic' of media, film. (Jones has not, to my knowledge, directed a self-contained film, but has incorporated cinema in important ways into her work both as material and reference.)

In Rainer's films (*Story About a Woman Who...*, *Lives of Performers*, *Journeys From Berlin*, *The Man Who Envied Women*), there is always a strong element of 'materiality' — as much the grain of the film stock as, performance-wise, the weight of an actor's body, the strangeness of their movements, the grain of the voice. From this point upwards, however, nothing is so certain. Wild stories start to spin out from what appeared simple, casual facts; the multiple narrating voices seem perpetually out-of-synch with what we see or assume we are seeing. When Rainer splits the actor from their role (more often a 'type' than a psychological character), this is not a banal Brechtian reflex, but the weaving of a veritable labyrinth of cues, clues, inferences, complications, contradictions. We can never find our way back through this labyrinth to anything like a stable unity of actor/character, or even body/mind (Rainer has a droll way with intellectual neuroses which leaves Woody Allen well and truly for dead).

In Lyndal Jones' series of magnificent *Prediction Pieces*, something very similar happens

through her own utterly unique manner of formal elaboration. As in Rainer, the question for the spectator goes past 'who are these people?' to even 'what has happened here?'. Lyndal Jones often presents a 'scene', or perhaps more simply a space, which from the word go seems full of traces of past incidents and interrelations. A series of possible scenes, variations, are played out in this strange and mysterious space. Yet the more they are played out, the further away we get from solving the puzzle of the 'origin' of these events.

This perhaps makes Jones' work sound like those teasing games with detective fiction played by the French New Novelists like Alain Robbe-Grillet in the 1950s, carried through to film by Alain Resnais (*Last Year At Marienbad*) or to stage by Marguerite Duras (*L'Amante Anglaise*) in the 1960s. The echo is there, and Jones' work is certainly playful. However, as in all truly critical modernist art, something is at stake.

In Lyndal Jones' work, this level of textual mystery carries no particular existential or romantic tinge (as it does, say, in Resnais' films). The weaving of the labyrinth between and around bodies, fictions and media is its own material event for the spectator. Jones lures us gently away from the assumption that the 'depth' of the work is elsewhere, beneath or beyond it (as in that classic arty formulation 'deep and meaningful').

All the connections to be made — and Jones by no means prescribes all of these — have to be made across the unfolding surface of the work, in the present tense of the performance. Her work stresses narrative as an open-ended process or event, forever setting up elements

of chance or introducing new scenic configurations which surprise us and suddenly stretch the lineaments of the 'narrative space'.

Lyndal Jones asks her performers to work with elements of type — gender, class, manner, race — but in a way that never invites the satirical reflex of kitsch or parody. There is something generous about the spaces that play between performer and role and spectator — something almost inviting. Although Jones has a sharp fix on the determinations of ideology, she is willing to let social roles drift a little ... and watch them perhaps transform themselves.

Lyndal Jones' pieces are not overt allegories of social or personal change — nothing would be more vulgar to a sophisticated modernist. But in dramatising how, in performance, we all take up positions in space — spectators as well as actors — they suggest how we can also multiply and complicate those positions, making them fluid and open to new investments, new passions, new strategies.

A question often asked of Jones' work is: why 'prediction' pieces? What has prediction got to do with any of it? Prediction figures in many ways in her work, but insofar as it involves an attempt to guess or figure out what happens *next*, it is intimately concerned with the prospect of the *future*. Not determined futures — determined variously by ideology or mystical prediction — but possible futures, spaces where the given just might turn out differently, for once.

All things considered, I would rather have this sort of tough but hopeful critical art than the circular, tired pessimism of post-modernism. For modernism at least offers us some room to move. ■



Angela Seward, Evdokia Katahanas and, Kylie Belling, *Prediction Piece 8 Winter/Passion*
NEW THEATRE: Australia