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Mette Edvardsen & Matteo Fargion in *Penelope Sleeps*. Photo: Werner Strouven

## A dance of words

by Andrew Fuhrmann | March 18, 2020 | [0 comment](#)

### 'A glimpse of something hidden and unknown': Andrew Fuhrmann on Mette Edvardsen and Matteo Fargion's *Penelope Sleeps* at Dancehouse

"I can't believe how many people are here," says Norwegian artist Mette Edvardsen, lying supine on the stage floor, her head pointed toward the audience. "I almost didn't come."

And, yes, it is amazing that so many people – about 20 – have gathered in the Sylvia Stachli Theatre. It's Saturday night, March 14 2020, and public events across the city of Melbourne have been cancelled in response to the spread of the new coronavirus. The streets are eerily quiet and empty. From Sunday night all

But Edvardsen is not talking about self-isolation or social distancing. She is not, in fact, addressing us at all. After a pause she continues. “I almost didn’t come. Because of the rain.”

It’s just part of the script. The same line was used when *Penelope Sleeps* premiered at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels in May of last year. We take a moment to register the coincidence, how events have orchestrated themselves to give this opening a peculiar dissonant quality. She says rain when she should say virus. It sounds rough, like a wrong note.

And yet how aptly this brief moment sets the tone for this quiet work about sleeping and waking, working and dreaming, fragmentation and meditation.

The three performers are lying on their backs on the empty stage with eyes closed. Edvardsen, who wrote the text, starts to tell a story about spending night at her father’s house and finding a spider on the wall. It’s a long story. And it is, in a sense, trivial; but the effort of memorising it, the great pains taken to con it, give the words a special gravity. It recalls *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* (2010), a performance by piece Edvardsen in which performers memorise a book and repeat chunks of it for individual audience members in one-on-one performances.

Edvardsen is credited as writer but she is also a choreographer. She has been invited to Melbourne as a member of the Keir Choreographic Award jury. She trained as a dancer, performing with Les ballets C de la B for many years; and yet her work over the last decade hasn’t focused on moving bodies. Instead, she has pursued an interest in the relationship between bodies and texts. She’s interested in the idea of text itself – or writing – as choreography. In an essay collected in the anthology *Post-Dance* (2017), which she also co-edited, she wrote:

*My pieces are not very visual. Theoretically I could use one and the same image for almost all my pieces, a*

The idea, apparently, is to do as little on stage as possible, to perform what Andre Lepecki might call an act of stillness. If there is movement, then it is through a different kind of space.

Her first text – which is more like a jumble of spider factoids and recollections than a narrative – is a skimming but lucid reflection on little truths and little lies and the way we make our lives by playing one role after another. Like Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, spiders are weavers. And so, says the poet Wallace Stevens, glorifying the imagination, are we all:

*A fictive covering*

*Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.*

This story leads into the first song. The other two bodies on the floor begin to stir. Composer Matteo Forgion sits up and plays a small hand-pumped Indian harmonium. London-based soprano and early music specialist Angela Hicks remains lying on her back. Her pure, clean tone floats above the wheezy drone of the harmonium. The simple, repetitive melodic lines and the chantic vocals have the flavour of a Plainsong Psalter. Or is it a vesper hymn? *Lights on late at night, lights still on in the morning. Legs tucked in. Did we finally sleep.* The dreamy lyrics and trance-like accompaniment suggest rituals of evening lucubration. And, of course, Penelope is said to have spent her evenings working, or un-working. In Emily Wilson’s translation of *The Odyssey* it is said that:

*... every day she wove the mighty cloth,  
and then at night by torchlight, she unwove it.*

When does Penelope sleep? This is the indeterminate point around which this opera circles. *Wide-awake in sleep.* sings Hicks. *plunae into obscuritu. fall awau. take it awau.*

her disguised husband? Does she merely pretend not to recognise him? These questions have generated extensive debate among scholars.

Here, however, the ambiguity lies in the grey, half-lit confusion between waking and sleeping. When does Penelope sleep? If it is true, as Anne Carson argues, that Penelope is a *master of sleep*, then perhaps it's because she can sleep and work simultaneously.

The opera alternates between spoken word and song. The other instrument on stage, next to the harmonium, is a small boxy synthesiser. In "Find the Beginning", Fargion taps out a steady, meandering tune with a wobbly, plinking bell-like tone; Hicks sings of labouring at some never ending writing task through the night. *Make tea to avoid completion. Start a new page. Try to sleep. Hold off an end point.*

Of course, not finishing the funeral shroud for Laertes was Penelope's great masterpiece. Her life's work and god-given talent was for the fragmentary and unfinished. Her art was an aesthetic experiment. She worked against her own talent. She made her loom – or, if you like, her page – a field of uncertainty. It's not for nothing that *Penelope Sleeps* is described by Edvardsen as an Opera Essay. It's shape recalls Adorno's description of the essay as a fragmentary, random and associative form that is always struggling against itself.

Meanwhile, back in the Sylvia Staehli Theatre, the three bodies lie comfortably, languorously, as they perform. As if the work – *the opera* – were happening somewhere above them, hovering in the empty space, the way dreams are represented in cartoons.

The texts continue. There's an incantatory prose poem that recall the experimental use of language in Edvardsen's dance trilogy *Black* (2011), *No Title* (2014) and *We to be* (2015). There's a story about an international flight where the narrator discourses with a nine-year-old boy. There's a letter recounting a dream about Antarctica. And there's a story about a road accident. They all have a fragmentary quality but the links to *The Odyssey* are mostly submerged.

The libretto, however, is more explicit with references to Homeric phrasal repetitions and to the work of Norwegian textile artist Hannah Ryggen. But what to make of the song where the only words are *I'm not sorry no no no*, repeated over and over?

Perhaps we can dream a reference here to Penelope and her serving maids, the maids hanged by Odysseus and Telemachus? Penelope, after all, was complicit in their murder. How does she sleep at night? This is the theme Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*. Atwood imagines the twelve dead girls in Hades, haunting their former mistress:

*we are the maids  
the ones you killed  
the ones you failed*

And what does Penelope, in Atwood's story, reply? What is her defence?

*I was asleep, Your Honour. I was often asleep.  
I can only tell you what they said afterwards.*

As the song comes to an end a drone – a flying drone this time, not a musical drone – takes off from the sound desk and flies over to Mette Edvardsen, who is now sitting up. It lands on her outstretched hand. Is this one of the Angry Ones, the Furies, the Erinyes? Sent from Hades to torment Penelope, so that she may never again have the excuse that she was sleeping? Or is it something else, another night-time distraction, like a mosquito or lost blowfly buzzing around a lamp?

*Penelope Sleeps* brings to a close the Kier Choreographic Awards 2020 Public Program. The overall winner of the \$50 000 competition – Angela Goh – was announced on Sunday night. *Penelope Sleeps* is also the final performance presented by Dancehouse with [Angela Goh](#) as artistic director. An scheduled work by

Although Conquet – particularly through initiatives like the Housemate program, KCA and Dance Massive – has provided valuable support for local artists, I think the lasting positive impact of her eight-year tenure at Dancehouse will be the focus on international works such as *Penelope Sleeps*. She has developed strong creative relationships with a number of international artists and invited them to return again and again, exposing Melbourne to shifting aesthetic trends and global conversations about dance and politics.

Conquet has worked to create an active context for international visitors such as Xavier le Roy, Myriam Gourfink, Nacera Belaza, Takao Kawaguchi, Compagnie Mossoux-Bonte, Jennifer Lacey and Donna Uchizono, to name just a few. There was always a panel discussion or workshop or double-bill with local artists to complement the performance. Matteo Fargion, for example, who has visited Melbourne several times with his regular collaborator Jonathon Burrows, ran a two-day composition workshop at Dancehouse.

But, finally, returning to *Penelope Sleeps* and that strangely dissonant opening line. “I can’t believe how many people are here.”

In her essay in praise of sleep, collected in *Decreations*, Anne Carson argues that sleep allows something uncanny to enter into the world. We bring something back from the other side, the sleep side, even if it is just a new way of seeing. This, Carson suggests, is the secret of Penelope’s fascination. And *Penelope Sleeps* has that same fascination because it gives us a glimpse of something hidden and unknown, of the place where the text is and where the song comes from, of a different kind of space on the other side.

***Penelope Sleeps*, text by Mette Edvardsen, music by Matteo Fargion, performed by Mette Edvardsen, Matteo Fargion and Angela Hicks. Light and technical support by Bruno Pocheron, costumes by Anne-Catherine Kunz. Subtitling and production support by Cillian O’Neill. Presented by Dancehouse as part of the Keir Choregraphic Award Public Program. Produced by Kaaithheater & Kunstenfestivaldesarts (Brussels), BUDA (Kortrijk), Black Box teater (Oslo), Teaterhuset Avant Garden (Trondheim), BIT Teatergarasjen (Bergen), centre chorégraphique national de Caen in Normandie (France), apap-Performing Europe 2020. Performed 14-15 March at Dancehouse.**

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