

Ghost Dance by Douglas Wright

David Eggleton – New Zealand Listener – 27 March 2004

The self-confident innovator, the prime mover with an incredible athletic ability, Douglas Wright, in the late 1980s and early 90s established himself as possibly the best – the most profound – choreographer New Zealand has ever produced. Certainly, he is the most visceral, the most gutsy, creating dance works that combined a kind of unstoppable callisthenic zest with philosophical ideas done out as images: dance as an articulation of the human condition. Dancers, however, don't last long at peak physical condition; like athletes, they wear out. And Wright had another consideration: in 1989 he was diagnosed HIV positive. He began to be laid low with a series of debilitating illnesses.

Ghost Dance allows Wright to summon up his past and turn it into a series of tableaux through which he wanders, alternately bemused, amused, elated, anguished: the ghost dancer revisiting myriad roles – the phantasmal centre of his own story. He started writing this memoir after he gave up dancing in 1999. Ghost Dance is a book redolent of death and mortality, of eulogies and valedictions. Yet, as much as it's a lyrical elegy for vanished friends and vanished performances, it's also a sharply told black comedy, recording an unusual New Zealander's struggle against adversity and low expectations.

"In Tuakau, South Auckland, in the early 1960s a dancing boy was frowned on ..." His tremulous childhood out in the sticks began to turn him a bit feral, even as he was making his Pukekohe Library card work overtime fetching out books. "In the school playground, at playtime and lunchtime, I improvised wild expressive dances." He was quickly shepherded into gymnastics. Then a double life began at 12 years of age when he stopped attending mass and started advanced gymnastics lessons at the Leys Institute in Ponsonby.

Put on the bus to Auckland by his mother, he got off at the downtown terminal and found himself loitering, a part-time juvenile delinquent, in the twilight world of the men's toilets. At the same time he was proving a champ in the gymnasium, bringing home gold medals and trophies galore to the delight of his bluff, gruff dad. All this is described with a certain gay abandon and without any overtones of regret, yet Wright's behaviour rapidly became self-destructive.

Leaving school as soon as he could, he partook fully of the drug-laced sensibility of 1970s counter-culture consciousness. (The book contains a roll-call of some of Auckland's most infamous drag queens.) Wright records musician, antiques collector and socialite Billie Farnell hauling him up out of the gutter, but his life didn't turn around until he met the Dadaist artist Malcolm Ross, who helped him "escape from an underworld of drugs and petty crime".

Ross was the prettiest boy on the block, and one of the most precocious: an art world wunderkind and a former drinking buddy of Colin McCahon. The two young men became an item. Yet it emerges that, damaged by his upbringing

– his parents were teachers but also stern disciplinarians – the fey Ross was a wounded bird, a sensitive misfit. (Ross died suddenly last year, and Ghost Dancer also serves as an art gallery for photographs of Ross projects.)

Wright's bored, aimless, hedonistic existence ends when he belatedly discovers modern dance and begins a regime of punishing ballet, with Ross providing logistical support. Mentors Kilda Northcott and Mary-Jane O'Reilly eventually induct Wright into the modern dance group Limbs, where he rapidly proves himself no ordinary dancer. After two years Wright leaves Limbs in 1983 to try his luck in the glittering city of New York, where his kinaesthetic brilliance and boldness bring him to the attention of maestro Paul Taylor whose leading dance company Wright joins.

With his game-for-anything sensibility, Wright is also drawn into the promiscuous permissiveness of New York's gay baths circuit where, curiously, "dancing was the only thing banned". AIDS soon strikes and all the baths are dramatically barred and padlocked, but Wright is already moving on, eventually back to Auckland to rejoin Limbs and create his masterworks with their poetry of excess and abandon, their Dionysian ecstasies, their shrewd deconstruction of gesture.

A rebellious product of the militant puritanism that shaped so many in the 1950s and early 60s, Wright has in Ghost Dance written a sensual text dealing in riddles and paradoxes centred on the human body and its endless symbolic potential. He even gives the environment characteristics of the body, from slimy rooms to the erotic "folds and crevices" of the landscape. Flesh creeps and sweats; the skin of the dancing child condemned as a "sissy skiting" prickles "as if covered in a hot, itchy and spreading rash"; an audience at a dance performance makes "a sucking sound" to express approval. Emotional hurt and estrangement is likened to flesh being torn apart; emotional rescue and intervention is a torn body stitched back up.

Wright sketches his battles with booze as well as his denial and eventual acceptance of his HIV status. His recovery programme goes on to embrace detox, rehab and Buddhist meditation retreats. Making kinetic sculpture out of the body, Wright acknowledges an inspirational pantheon: Nijinsky, Blake, Emily Dickinson, Patti Smith and Janet Frame – outsiders all. Like them he has a singular vision.

Take, for example, all those brief but attentive noticings of movement: disgruntled Auckland motorists giving a gentle shake of the head to express disapproval of other motorists' antics; the uniformed attendant in the café at the albatross colony on Otago Peninsula suddenly yelling "Albatross!" to the startled customers, whose heads all swivel in unison; Janet Frame breaking into a quick tap-dance in her secluded house in Levin as she and Wright discuss their respective illnesses over afternoon tea. If you blinked, you'd miss them; Ghost Dance choreographs and holds the moment.