

## **Dance to the Death with Death, and Beyond**

### **Terra Incognita by Douglas Wright**

Bernadette Rae – The New Zealand Herald

Douglas Wright's *Terra Incognita* is not for the faint-hearted. It opens with the description of the internationally acclaimed choreographer's emergence from a three-day coma after his serious attempt at suicide, in February 2005. A long, mostly bleak journey follows before the final chapter revisits that desperate act, how he did it and how he felt.

Then there is a quiet, almost understated statement of peace and hope and sensation of being reborn.

Sensitive readers will need to hang on to that "happy ending" as they make the journey through Wright's dalliance with depression, will need to remember that a new dance work, *Black Milk*, has been delivered after a difficult gestation, that its existence endorses the triumph of continuing creativity emerging from Wright's dance to the death with death.

For there are skulls and crossbones embroidered on every page.

Wright explains his depression as the result of the loss of three of the most important people in his life: his great love Malcolm Ross, mentor and soul mate Janet Frame, and old friend Tobias Schneebaum.

Wright, in 2003, had survived 13 years infected with the Aids virus, but now began to sink under the weight of each new death.

"That cat sat on me until it died. And so on," he writes.  
"Grief stole a colour from my voice."  
"I felt like a frayed shoelace, hanging on by a thread."

He describes an episode outside a supermarket's automatic doors where "an old grey woman, bent like a question mark" was waiting. Wright "walked back and forth once to try and trigger them before a more corporeal person walked up and the doors opened wide."

"They made a sighing sound as if they were tired and I understood at once that the doors could tell the difference between a shadow and a body, between a ghost and a living breathing person, and that I was now too insubstantial to qualify as someone for whom automatic doors opened like mouths and must stick close to real people and sneak in behind them, like a thief".

A new therapist, Johnella Bird, arranges for Wright to go to Hallburn House, then a respite facility for HIV-positive people, recuperating from a spell in hospital and who needed 'time out'.

For four months Wright does find haven at Hallburn House, spending long hours on a side veranda or under the feijoa tree, making some new friends and losing some, all acutely observed and portrayed by Wright and all, like Wright, young men living with the spectre of death on their shoulders. It is both a harrowing and victorious tale.

Around this time Wright was awarded Creative New Zealand's Senior Choreographic Fellowship, worth \$65,000.00, and was juggling images for a new work, to be built on four pieces of music by Transylvanian composer Gyorgy Ligeti.

"I don't choose music, music chooses me."

His description of how he creates a work is a substantial and fascinating strand weaving through the more personal observations of life in – and out of – Hallburn House.

"Some images have the power to haunt," he writes. "I don't know where they come from. It's like having a thorn in our brain and the only way to remove it is to give the image life; to somehow give birth to it. This bringing-to-life is often fraught with difficulty and is best avoided in uncertain times.

"To dream about them though can be like feeding your brain a delicious forbidden meal. In Hallburn House an image kept haunting me; it wanted to live and I was its host. What it means has little or no interest for me; if you can keep the tidal waves of meaning from swamping you, sometimes images can reveal things you didn't know – like a riddle."

Then there is the chapter he titles "The Nerve Bible", on Danial Paul Schreber, the German judge who succumbed to a nervous illness and was institutionalised but who detailed his psychotic experiences and theories in great detail in writing, and with whom Wright became fascinated, at this time, even recognising some of Schreber's behaviour and sensations.

He concludes that "he lived what we dare not even think about, the shadow-side of enlightenment, and suckled from the udders of darkness. He needed his father to love him".

Wright has always been the master of the weird, the bizarre, what he describes as the "unheimlich", literally "not home like" or strange. A self-labelled Tantric, he has certainly dwelt in the graveyard, drunk from a skull cup – and attained some liberation from the experience.

In his first stunning autobiography, *Ghost Dance*, Wright covered a swathe of experience, covered a variety of cultural landscapes.

*Terra Incognita* is far more closely focused, primarily on a period of a year or two, with only minor excursion to the past. It makes for an intense encounter, of small and domestic and distinctly intimate events that could have become

self-indulgent were it not for Wright's scoring intelligence, skill in painting word pictures and portraits and searing creative vision.