

Dance back on its feet

For the first time in 20 years, Perth will have a contemporary company

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Nine dancers cross the rehearsal room in a tight ensemble, drop to their knees, flip upright, swerve sideways like a surging wave. The sweat is dripping from their brows, when the fluid dance sequence comes to its relentless end, one dancer drops to the floor and one spreads herself on the cool surface to catch her breath.

Choreographer Raewyn Hill has pushed them to the limit, not out of cruelty but because these dancers have a point to prove. In a new chapter for contemporary dance in Australia, they are about to challenge the dominance of Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide in the art form with the first series of Co3 Contemporary Dance Company in Perth.

"Creating a new dance company for the 21st century is very, very rare," Hill says in a rehearsal break. "We have to be courageous, and we have to push where it's difficult to push because we're creating something new. We're making history."

For more than two decades, Perth has lacked a contemporary dance company, a gap was left when Christie Parrott Dance Company, a prolific and inventive local ensemble, ran out of steam and folded in 1996.

It's why there is a heightened level of expectation with this week's first performances by Co3, titled *re: Loaded 2015*. Hill's commission, *Carnivale*, will be one of three technically demanding pieces that form the evening's fare. The other works are a reprise of Larissa McGowan's work *Transducer*, and Gavin Webber's choreography in *What's Left?*

"The artistic philosophy of this company is to curate, commission, create," Hill says. "So for me it was important to acknowledge those three parts of the company and present work under each of those philosophies."

The three works will be preceded by the dancers of Co: Youth performing a version of Hill's 2012 work *Fugue*. This inclusion will be a symbolic meeting of youth and adult dance because, as the company's name implies, Co3 is a trio of dance entities that have come together to spearhead this new era in Perth-based dance.

Eighteen months ago two existing youth companies, Buzz Dance Theatre and STEPS Youth Dance Company, agreed to merge with the new proposed adult ensemble. In September last year, Helpmann Award-winning Hill was appointed as artistic director and moved to Perth after five years as artistic director of Dancemorph in Queensland.

A selected group of dancers began an intensive regime of dance psychology, CrossFit and yoga sessions, as well as daily ballet and dance lessons. In parallel, the fused company has continued to run open classes in ballet and contemporary dance for young dancers aged eight to 16; its educational arm goes out to assist teachers and primary and secondary school students in workshops based on the national dance curriculum.

The three-pronged company seems to have managed a perfect merger that endows Co3 with a stream of new talent and a training program. Hill and her artistic advisory board chairwoman Margaret Helgeby say they also hope to forge close links with the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, which produces up to 30 dance graduates a year and has its own Link graduate dance program.

Helgeby is the embodiment of the link between Perth's past and present dance worlds. A former West Australian Ballet dancer, she was a lead soloist with Christie Parrott Dance Company before heading overseas to perform with



ASHLEY DE PRAZER, MATTHEW POON

Co3's Zachary Lopez, left, and Andrew Searle; above right, dancer Russell Thorpe and artistic director Raewyn Hill

Ballet Rambert in London. Now returned to Perth and married to Michael Chaney, ex-Westfarmers chief executive and a keen arts philanthropist, Helgeby has been a significant force in shaping Perth's modern dance scene and Co3's painstaking birth. She describes "a 21st-century company born of really vigorous

conversations, not just plunked down with no reckoning about what our audiences, youth and community are asking for". Several years of careful planning to reposition the art form in Western Australia have led to this week's inaugural season. "In 2007, the contemporary dance sector here was really struggling, not viable at all," Helgeby says. "We commissioned a report and, in consultation with the state government, a Future Moves initiative was funded so we could have conversations — some really hard, impassioned ones — about how we make our sector viable and create an adult company for adult audiences."

They went back to government with a blueprint that included a promotional marketing strategy for contemporary dance, continued support for choreographic development and the merger of the youth dance activities into the adult company. Co3's appearance has been welcomed nationally by artists and

choreographers alike. Rafael Bonachela, artistic director at Sydney Dance Company, says the new West Australian company was launching itself with the perfect director at the helm, "and we look forward to building a strong relationship across the Nullarbor with them".

Choreographer McGowan says the new company broadens opportunities for work to be staged in Australia.

"I would be struggling to make ends meet if I couldn't work with a group like this. And it's giving a broader audience the right to have their own opinions about contemporary dance, which encompasses every style."

The long-term ambition of Co3 Dance Company is to join the elite ranks

Co3 also has been embraced by Perth's strong independent dance community and STRUT Dance, the national centre for choreographic development in Perth. Defying Perth's tyranny of dis-tance, STRUT attracts more than one-third of its masterclass attendees from outside Western Australia; director Paul Selwyn Norton says dancers fly in for expert classes in William Forsythe dance style, or the movement language Gaga developed by Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin.

"We see STRUT as a beautiful complement for us," says Helgeby. "We will have artists who want to develop work on a bigger scale with STRUT. If we work intelligently together, we can present ourselves as a cohesive sector to funders."

Even the West Australian Ballet has made supportive overtures towards Co3; its ballet master oversaw a gruelling ballet audition for 20 or so finalists — from an original pool of more than 70 applicants — to help select the company's final nine dancers.

"We're lucky to have the WA Ballet and a strong independent dance sector because it makes for a more sophisticated conversation about dance," Helgeby says. "Why wouldn't we work to complement and support each other? It may even be that certain seasons lend themselves to Co3 dancers going to the WA Ballet and vice versa."

Clearly determined to make an early public impact, the company has commissioned giant billboards and bus-back advertisements across Perth. Against a dramatic portrait of a muscle-bound male dancer, the simple message reads: "These are your dancers. This is your company."

The campaign hints that financial backing from a few generous sponsors is already forthcoming. "We've got people ready to support us at various levels," Helgeby says, "but the biggest issue for us now is that our deductible gift recipient status has been held up in the change of government."

The other issue is the hiatus in processing their application for federal funding, caused by former arts minister George Brandis's creation of a second funding arm. "That's the moment when I feel a little sad. If we could just be given the stability of funding that will allow us to get on with our job, we can bring benefits on so many levels."

The long-term ambition of Co3 is to join the elite ranks of a few other professional dance ensembles, such as Australian Dance Theatre in Adelaide, that offer dancers a full-time contract, meanwhile, says Helgeby, "We offer them all kinds of support in other ways to keep them engaged and employed."

"Perth audiences are now ready for a different sort of discourse, she adds, "and all of a sudden they may find they have had a conversation with contemporary dance."

Co3 Contemporary Dance Company presents *re: Loaded 2015* at the Heath Ledger Theatre, State Theatre Centre, Perth, from Wednesday to Sunday.

