

Meremere

By Rodney Bell

Directed by Malia Johnston

Produced by Movement of the Human

Starring Rodney Bell



Circa One

22 - 30 June - 10 shows only!

Tues - Thurs 6.30pm,

Fri - Sat 8pm, Sun 4pm

\$25 - \$46

NZSL interpreted performance on Saturday 23 June.

Contact access@circa.co.nz for more information

Challenging disability and homelessness through dance

Wellington audiences are in for a real treat this month with the arrival of internationally renowned performance artist, Rodney Bell, and the work *Meremere*.

Meremere is a powerful and moving performance in which Bell brings to life his incredible journey; ranging from the highs of an international performance career to the lows of homelessness in America to redemption in the form of a return to Aotearoa and reconnection with his Māori and artistic heritage.

Bell's journey is unique and compelling. Brought up in Te Kuiti, Bell spent many of his early years immersed in culture and sports. At the age of 19 he acquired a disability. A motorbike accident left him paralysed from the chest down. A year spent in the Auckland Spinal Rehabilitation Unit brought things into focus. "As I recovered, I had to adapt to a new way of being, wrapping my head around this new vessel that was my body. It took time."

Exploring new ways to be physical led to a placement with the New Zealand wheelchair basketball team. "This helped me rebuild my strength, and gave me a taste of international travel". And then, he says, "Dance came into my life."

Bell was inspired to dance by Catherine Chappell. He became a founding member of Chappell's then new company Touch Compass Dance Trust in 1997, and went on to perform with them nationally.

Eventually, Bell attracted international attention which led to an invitation from Oakland-based AXIS Dance Company. In 2007, he relocated to the US and embarked on a successful international dance career that would see him win numerous awards, including a coveted Isadora Duncan Dance Award in 2009.

Bell says, "The years I spent with AXIS were a very rewarding time for me as an artist. I got to perform and tour the US, as well as perform and teach with Sins Invalid, a performance project that addressed social issues around beauty and invisibility, and perceptions of impairment and disability."

In 2012, Bell's life started to unravel; he found himself in a perfect storm - jobless and struggling to survive on the streets of San Francisco. The catalyst was a fire that burnt down the apartment block in which he was living. Bell lost everything and found it difficult to find a new home. Then his work with AXIS ended, and lacking the means to come home, he fell into homelessness.



Bell spent the next three years navigating the streets of San Francisco, sleeping on park benches and in homeless shelters, before – with the assistance of San Francisco based charity HandsUp – he was finally able to return to New Zealand.

"It was a time of learning to endure" Bell says. "You draw on superhuman powers when you're in survival mode. On the coldest nights I'd wrap clothes around my head. I'd be able to sleep through a lot of it because I was super tired. Negotiating the streets is a marathon. You're always moving, trying to find essentials like running water."

Creation and performance of *Meremere*

On his return to New Zealand in 2015, Bell reconnected with his wider performing arts whanau. "It was good to get home" he explains, "I was able to bring back my experiences and pass them on through performance, teaching and support for disability support organisations."

In 2016, Bell drew on his life experiences to create *Meremere* in collaboration with choreographer Malia Johnston and the creative team of Movement Of The Human. Explaining the process, Bell says, "When I got home to Te Kuiti, I began carving a meremere from a piece of black maire, one of the world's hardest woods. During that process, memories would storm through my head. It was very meditative. Malia and her team helped bring some of my stories to life through performance."

Meremere premiered at the Tempo Dance Festival 2016 in Auckland to critical acclaim, with one reviewer describing it as "the ultimate combination of theatre, dance, music, film; of storytelling and image evoking; of power and play." The Wellington performances this month are the culmination of a month-long tour that has included performances in Auckland, Kerikeri, Hawkes Bay and Waiouru.

