

Moments electrified amid the dazzle

HELD Australian Dance Theatre
Drama Theatre, Sydney
Opera House, August 11

Jill Sykes

The New York-based photographer Lois Greenfield is famous for her photographs of dancers hovering in the air. Garry Stewart's choreography for Adelaide's Australian Dance Theatre is strong on aerial dancing that suits her style - jump high on a roll, twist, turn, kick sharply and plunge to the floor. Together they make an explosive piece of dance in Held.

Greenfield, a tiny figure in plain black pants and top, works on stage with the dancers. Her camera is wired up to capture and project, almost simultaneously, the moving figures whose image is "held" on two giant screens. That is, until the next one comes along to replace it. And the next and the next.

The result is a dazzling display, first by the dancers in real life, then on screen where you can relish the astonishing athleticism of their actions in a way that the naked eye would never allow. Greenfield is shooting at 1/2000 of a second. At first, the delay between the danced moment and the screened photograph can be distracting, but you soon get used to it.

Held is like fireworks: first the ooh and aah of excitement and disbelief, then gradually the impossible seems ordinary. How quickly we become accustomed to extremes. Wisely, in terms of audience appreciation and the continuing health of the incredibly dynamic dancers, Held lasts for just an hour. For fireworks of any kind, that is about right.

Greenfield is not out there with her camera for every minute

of the piece. While the photographic sections are the highlights of adrenaline rush, Stewart has developed contrastingly quiet choreography and a form of presentation that extends the photographic theme. This, and some intervening prerecorded photographic sequences, combine in a more cohesive and interesting way than in Held's debut performance at this year's Adelaide Festival.

In non-photography sections, lighting designer Geoff Cobham has drenched the stage in the solid, eerie light of a darkroom for film development. (Do they still exist in this digital age? Never mind, you know what he is getting at.) He has also scattered the floor with rectangular lighting spots, like a spray of photographs on which the dancers move in the powerful illumination from above.

Those dancers are amazing. Their solo and ensemble work is equally impressive, their energy and daring seem unstoppable. What they put their bodies through is no less than scary for the non-athletic viewer. Yet in all this exploding, headstrong activity their split-second precision reveals the care that has gone into preparation and presentation.

Composer Darrin Verhagen has given them a muscular springboard of a soundscape to dance to. Costume designers David Bonney and Michelle Robinson have dressed them in minimal gothic gear, with a range of tops, bottoms, and my favourite, the hooded but sleeveless jacket. Long hair and loose fabric fly with the leaping performers to star in the photographs, accentuating both the speed of movement and the stillness of the freeze.

A multiple winner at the Helpmann Awards on Monday, Held is one of those shows you really have to see to understand how boldly and seductively it fuses two art forms at the extremes of action. It also provides a satisfying symmetry to the contribution that Greenfield has made to dance through her photographs, bringing her back to the well from which her inspiration springs.

Until August 22

Under picture:

Explosive energy ... the unstoppable and daring dancers of Held. *Photo. Bryan Chariton*