ACROSS THE DIVIDE

VALERIE LAWSON

As image or metaphor, the bridge is everywhere in art. From Monet’s waterlilies, to David Lean’s Bridge on the River Kwai, to Simon and Garfunkel’s Bridge Over Troubled Water, to Wordsworth’s Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, the bridge stands as a practical yet beautiful image, representing support or trouble ahead, escape or entrapment, strength or fragility. But dance and bridges? An unlikely combination until choreographer Lucy Guerin searched for a theme on which to hang her ideas about weight and gravity, toughness and weakness.

Looking for “the idea of collapse and fragmentation as a theme”, Guerin stumbled onto websites listing bridge disasters. She found many — “too many, I was quite shocked” — among them the collapse of the Tay Rail Bridge, Scotland, (in 1879), the bridge at Granville (1977), the Maccabiah Bridge, Israel (1997) and one that took place in Yarmouth, England, in 1845 when a suspension bridge collapsed under the strain of hundreds gathered to watch an absurd prank by a clown. (He planned to float down the Bure River in a tub drawn by geese.)

But Guerin, who lives in Melbourne, was looking for something closer to home. She chose the West Gate Bridge, where 35 men were killed during construction in 1970. In terms of loss of life, it remains Australia’s worst industrial accident.

At the time Guerin was a nine-year-old schoolgirl in Adelaide. She remembers nothing of the tragedy but, decades later, it became the spine for her 60-minute dance piece, Structure and Sadness, which will have its Sydney premiere tonight.

“I’ve always been very attracted to bridges, even that thing of putting a plank across a creek when you’re a kid,” she says.

Structure and Sadness began as a peg for Guerin’s choreographic ideas but developed into a more emotional tale. “We worked with ideas of tension, compression, buckling and torsion, all sorts of forces that act on the bridge. But the more I worked on it, the more I became very conscious of the human and emotional scenes in work. That took me over.

“It’s still a very raw subject in Melbourne. A lot of people are very angry that it happened at all, that so many men lost their lives. The second half of the work reflects that emotional response.

“I think the idea of precariousness and the fragility of our endeavours is very much there in the work.”

Unlike the playwright David Hare, who collaborated with survivors of a railway accident for his play The Permanent Way, Guerin did not work with survivors or victims’ families. “That was a big decision in the beginning for me,” she says. “I read a lot of accounts of the victims. I didn’t feel it was necessary to interview them. If you’re going to intrude on people’s lives you have to have a specific reason. It is an abstract rendering of that event, it wasn’t a documentary-style piece.”

Guerin worked closely, though, with her dancers who helped create the intricate structure within the set. Numerous pieces of board, from tiny to chunky, represent the building of the West Gate. At one point they all come tumbling down in a domino effect, in a perfectly managed piece of stagecraft.

Structure and Sadness premiered at the Melbourne International Arts Festival last October and is part of the Sydney Festival’s About an Hour program. Guerin’s company spends much of its time on the festival circuit, here and overseas. This year it will tour her Love Me in Australia and, at the end of the year, her work Aether, in the United States.

Guerin recruits dancers such as Byron Perry on a freelance basis for specific projects, as triennial funding from the Australia Council is sufficient to support only Guerin and her producer, Michaela Coventry. In 2005, Guerin was one of 15 artists and companies to receive $60,000 from the Australia Council’s one-off New Australian Stories program. The result was Structure and Sadness, created with graphic designer Michaela French and composer Gerald Mair.

Guerin has been mentioned as a possible successor to Graeme Murphy, outgoing artistic director of the Sydney Dance Company. But she says she is not interested in the job.

“I wish I was but I would just feel a lot of pressure to make very successful works. I like to be able to work in different scales.”

Structure and Sadness, Drama Theatre, Sydney Opera House, tonight until Friday.
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