SYDNEY FESTIVAL :: Structure & Sadness

By Antonette Collins
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Strength, support, flexibility, resistance, balance and suspension. At first, constructing a bridge and constructing a dance piece seem somewhat removed. But both share the same core physical principles which are a part of their fascination as well as their danger.

In its Sydney premiere, Lucy Guerin's work Structure and Sadness reflects on the West Gate Bridge collapse which happened in Melbourne in 1970. 35 men were killed and many others injured in the accident which remains one of Australia's biggest disasters.

Guerin's piece sets out to explore interpretations of the physical collapse as well the emotional collapse of those who lost loved ones in the tragedy.

Choreographing a 'movement vocabulary' to capture this duality, Guerin gets her dancers to work with wood, elastic, metal planks, boards as well as their bodies to emulate all the stages of bridge building. Prying, weaving and rebaring off each other, the performers and their objects slowly make their way towards the inevitable. An entire city of cards has been slowly forming and an intricate and clever piece of stagecraft sends it scuttling down like dominoes, a grim symbol of the 2000 tonnes of twisted metal that collapsed on that October day.

What follows is a heart-wrenching but beautiful scene of a woman doing the dishes and hearing news of the collapse on the radio. The guttural cries and moans echo from the disaster site as the devastation and mourning sets in. The overwhelming scene of loss is quickly followed by anger and questions as to how the collapse happened.

But as has happened throughout history, life and humanity continues and the bridge is rebuilt serving both as a gateway to the city as well as a monument to those who died.

A seemingly difficult task to express an event with so many complex emotions through contemporary dance has been achieved and constructed with grace and simplicity, Lucy Guerin's choreography elegantly captures the themes surrounding the work with beautiful lines of movement, clearly articulated through the compelling performances of the dancers. Sophisticated lighting and a pulsating score full of electro-engineering sounds also give added weight to the piece.

So many metaphors can be gained from such a piece as Structure and Sadness. At times, one wonders if the cracking metal and twisting bolts also reflects the life of a dancer - constantly aching joints, bones and muscles placed under enormous pressure. And of course, if one move is incorrectly executed, it can lead to collapse. But the bridge is the primary symbol. It brings people together and crosses divides, both physically or in the circumstances of the West Gate Bridge, emotionally.

:: Lucy Guerin's Structure and Sadness is playing at the 2007 Sydney Festival from 9-12 January, at the Sydney Opera House. See www.sydneyfestival.org.au for all the details.
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