It is sometimes surprising how comfortable choreographers appear to be in interviews. Actors tend to put up a front of wit or uneasy seriousness; writers and directors often seem to be interrogating their own thought processes as they speak; musicians would rather just be jamming. But choreographers, whose work is generally devoted to the non-verbal, give the impression of being effortlessly easy in conversation. Melbourne’s Lucy Guerin is a prime example.

Guerin’s schedule alone indicates her position as one of the country’s most in-demand choreographers: this year she’s toured different works to New York, London, Dublin and Frankfurt; she’s currently remounting a 10-year-old work with Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts students in Perth; and she’s about to bring back her multi-award-winning epic Structure and Sadness to Melbourne’s Malthouse Theatre.

Structure and Sadness premiered in 2006. It’s an affecting and unexpected work inspired by the 1970 collapse of the Westgate Bridge; a quietly meditative work that gains its power not from shock or spectacle but a slowly growing sense of catastrophe.

Guerin’s approach to Structure and Sadness reflects the restless nature of her career: “My relationship to it really changes depending on what I’m thinking about. There are times when I’m not happy with it and there are other times I find it very moving. Other times I think it’s too theatrical. It just really depends on my frame of mind and the types of things I’m interested in at that moment.”

Rather than reinventing the show for each of its incarnations, there’s a certain point at which she’ll no longer tamper with a piece. “It sort of represents you and the dancers and that group of people at a particular time in their development. So once a work starts to get old, like about three years, you kind of have to let it just be what it is, rather than trying to constantly update it in terms of your own personal development as an artist.”

Guerin was born and raised in Adelaide, where she studied dance at the Centre for Performing Arts. Her first year out of college took her to Russell Dumas’ company Dance Exchange in Sydney; a few years later she moved to Melbourne and worked with Dance Works under Nanette Hassall. She was in demand. And then she moved to New York. In her seven years there, she worked with various companies — Tere O’Connor Dance, Sara Rudner, and the Bebe Miller Company — as well as developing her own practice as a choreographer. In 1996 she scored a prestigious Bessie award for her work, as well as an award that allowed her to tour Europe over the next two years, after which she returned to Melbourne.

Soon after arriving back here she created Lucy Guerin Inc. “It was very minimal in the beginning. I just became an incorporated association and had a producer who worked one day a week. Year by year it’s grown, so now we’re on triennial funding, we have our own studio space, two people full-time in the office. It’s still quite a small organisation but that’s important, too, for our company to be flexible and responsive to the projects that I’m wanting to do.”

Guerin has moved frequently in her career, but forming her company was a commitment that felt necessary. “I really got to the point where I wanted to be doing my work more consistently. I needed a support structure. I was finding it quite stressful, and I was getting more work and more touring and finding it very hard to manage on my own and create the work as well.”

Guerin’s choreography has displayed the same alternation between reinvention and commitment: she has recurring interests (the effect of modern life and technology on the individual body, for instance) and a particular style based around fine detail and the possibilities offered by each dancer’s physicality. But her work never becomes predictable — her last two offerings, Corridor and Untrained, saw her moving in a new direction in which chance and accident played more of a part than any specific directions from the choreographer herself. “It’s a way of breaking my aesthetic. I think I’m looking for something beyond what I’ve been working with for the last 10 years or so.”

Guerin’s willingness to talk about dance extends beyond her own practice — her company is increasingly moving towards research and workshops. One enterprise is First Run, a program that showcases the first drafts of works from independent artists. Another is the annual Pieces for Small Spaces, a showing of new pieces from emerging choreographers. In “giving people a chance to show work and get feedback,” she says “it’s also an effort to create more of a dialogue and find more ways of talking about dance. It’s a notoriously difficult medium to put into words and I think people are quite afraid of that, especially here in Australia.”

It’s not just those in the inside who benefit from the discussion, either. “It’s sort of a way of getting audiences to ask questions, too. Often they feel that they don’t understand dance and they feel alienated or distanced or stupid or whatever, so it’s a way of allowing them to have valid questions.”

Structure and Sadness plays Nov 25-29 at the Malthouse Theatre.
Author/s: 
Bailey, John

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Steps in Time.

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