Bridge of tears

Bridges collapse more often than people might expect, causing grief, chaos and incredible force, according to choreographer Lucy Guerin.

After researching these events around the world, her interest was captured by the 1970 collapse of the West Gate Bridge which caused 35 deaths in her adopted hometown of Melbourne.

"I have memories of hearing about the collapse as a child in Adelaide, but now I have seen the bridge, its silent feeling of tragedy and heard people murmuring still about the 'terrible tragedy' there," she said.

"It is not an obvious choice for a dance, but I seek out ideas that don't easily translate into dance, as it pushes me to search for new solutions and the connections dance performance has to the more concrete world."

Guerin saw parallels to human movement and emotion in the engineering principles of compression, suspension, tension and torsion.

She transformed that "germ of an idea" into the striking new work Structure and Sadness, exploring the forces behind the bridge's disintegration as well as stories of survival and the subsequent Royal Commission.

Choreographing any new work is a challenge, but Guerin found this 14-week development period was even more demanding and intense than usual.

She forced herself to go out and meet with friends "as I can't live in a cocoon", despite being unwilling to take her focus off the work.

But these breaks helped narrow the piece down to two aspects: first, the factual physical and structural events, the forces acting on the bridge building materials and how these are reflected in the human body.

The second came "from a more human side", looking at the emotion surrounding the collapse, including the loss and grief felt by the families left behind and the wider community.

"I look for things that are more abstract, but this is a very complex, tragic story so I had to find a way of drawing a dance work out while making something respectful to those who lost their lives," she said.

Structure and Sadness will be performed on February 9-12 at the Playhouse Theatre as part of the Perth International Arts Festival.

For more information, call the festival office on 6488 5555.

Louise Bettison