The Joy in 'Sadness'
Lucy Guerin returns to New York with tales from Australia
By Susan Reiter

Lucy Guerin spent much of the 1990s performing and choreographing in New York, before returning to her native Australia. Now we only get to see her work sporadically, and it has been six years she her company last appeared here. The impression left by that 2003 program, at Dance Theater Workshop, was of a choreographer in rigorous control of her material, creating beautifully focused, powerfully evocative works.

Now Guerin is back in New York, and thanks to a friendly partnership between Baryshnikov Arts Center and Dance Theater Workshop, audiences here have been able to catch up on her two most recent works. Last week at BAC, her six exemplary dancers performed Corridor, an hour filled with devastating surprises, that evoked erratic, disturbed behavior brought on by being constantly connected and wired-up via technology.

This coming week, at DTW, they will perform her 2006 work Structure and Sadness. It takes its inspiration from an event that became a national tragedy in Australia: the 1970 collapse of the West Gate Bridge in Melbourne, then under construction. "Initially, I was looking at the general idea of collapse and disintegration. I researched quite a lot of bridge collapses; It was going to be a more general abstract work," Guerin recalls, speaking from her New York hotel shortly after her arrival. "Then, as I did more research, I thought it would be a challenge for me to base it on one particular incident.

"That's something quite different for me. Generally, my work doesn't connect to a real event, or any narrative storyline. So that was something I wanted to try and to see if I could [do] because it's quite a difficult thing to represent in dance. I like to choose subjects which don't render themselves easily in dance, because I think it pushes me in new directions."

She based the movement vocabulary for Structure and Sadness on engineering principles of compression, suspension, torsion and failure. She recalled the experience of "working with these physical principles, but when you apply them to the human body, or two human bodies together, this emotional language comes up that parallels the experiences that were a result of that collapse. It's quite a universal thing, that trust that we have in our built environment, and what happens when that fails—the effects on a human body and emotional impact. It became quite interesting to balance that functionality with the more internal, emotional aspects of the work."

The work is a richly layered collaboration, with significant contributions from the set and lighting designers Ben Cobham and Andrew Livingston, and the motion graphics designed by Michaela French. The dancers build and construct as part of the choreography, creating an intricate structure at each performance.
“The dancers spent an intense amount of time working out how to build this structure. I was really impressed by their focus and concentration,” Guerin said. “That was really an essential part of making the work. I wouldn’t have been able to do it without those particular dancers.” In terms of performance, she notes that Structure and Sadness is “hugely demanding for them. They’ve got this incredible focus and concentration on the building and then they have to drop that, switch completely when they’re dancing.”

Guerin worked in close collaboration with composer Gerald Mair, whose score incorporates real-life sounds—including some recorded underneath the existing West Gate Bridge. Midway through, the pop song “Crimson and Clover” puts in an appearance. That came from Guerin’s having researched Australia’s top 20 songs in 1970. Ironically, number one was “Bridge Over Troubled Water.” “Of course I couldn’t use that; that was way too much. Actually it was great to use ‘Crimson and Clover’ because it has this really happy, sweet, joyful sense to it. That’s one moment in the piece where you get let off from the tension.”

Taking an analytical and imaginative approach to a real-life, devastating event, Guerin has created a quietly devastating and potent work. New York’s loss has been Melbourne’s gain, but fortunately local dance audiences are again able to experience this singular artists’ work.

Structure and Sadness
Oct. 1-3, Dance Theater Workshop, 219 W. 19 St. (betw. 7th & 8th Aves.), 212-924-0077; 7:30, $15.
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