Built to Break: Lucy Guerin at Dance Theatre Workshop

By: Cory Nakasue

As an art form, contemporary dance is often thought of as “the low man on the totem pole,” a “soft” art form, or “the red-headed stepchild of the art world.” One could argue that this is due to its ephemeral, physical nature or a lack of codification — a certain ambiguity with regard to classification. One could argue that it is the use of choreography over the years as a “supporting” or decorative art form. Australian choreographer Lucy Guerin’s new work, Structure and Sadness, illustrates this use of choreography while attempting to combat it.

Dance Theater Workshop, in partnership with Baryshnikov Arts Center, presented this work along with another piece shown two weeks prior at Baryshnikov Arts Center. Structure and Sadness uses the fatal collapse of the West Gate Bridge in Melbourne, Australia in 1970 as a template for exploring the principles of construction in the material and emotional realms, and the inevitable collapse of all that is built.

Guerin approaches this work in layers — beautifully constructed layers of set and light design (Ben Cobham and Andrew Livingston), motion graphics (Michaela French), and the performance of six highly capable dancers. The first half of the hour-long piece is rife with building. Like watching an army of ants busily digging, moving and transporting, the cast of six take turns literally building a house of cards on stage, with boards that range from the size of playing cards to pieces of cardboard that seem to be six feet by six feet wide. To add to this dystopian, insect-like work atmosphere, the cast is clothed in varying shades of gray, with no regard for gender, and they work under stark lighting, expressionless and task-dedicated.

While some of the cast is assembling this precarious housing that eventually takes over the stage, other dancers — sometimes in duets, other times solos — stop building to dance. They skillfully arabesque,
pirouette, go through their forms and partner with very little dynamic in movement, and again, no expression. Are they taking a dance break from building? The dance movement is not woven into the fabric of the world she has created. There are a couple of duets during these contemporary dance asides that involve wooden sticks and bungee cords. In her attempt to illustrate the principals of engineering through choreography, she merely explores the properties of the props. Clever, yes, but a decorative aside, nonetheless.

The piece gets more inventive with its use of construction materials as the evening progresses, but in the form of tableaux and the more pedestrian movement. For example, the dubious nature of structures is displayed by having dancers stand on the smallest cardboard pieces set up as tiny houses, and later on a long metal beam with a fulcrum underneath it so it becomes a seesaw. The six dancers line up on this seesaw and take turns playing with balance and weight, unity and division, which begged the question, "how far can something bend before it breaks?"

The more humanistic second half of the piece was broached by the off-balancing thud of the seesaw that cued the entire “house of cards” to collapse with a domino effect — arguably the most stunning part of the evening, as it charged the energy in the room and transformed the stage into something post-apocalyptic. In the midst of the wreckage, the humanity in this piece was born. The vulnerability in people, structures and relationships was brought to the fore with sensitivity and reverence. The coolness and predictability of the building routine and abstract dance was replaced with warmth, softness and surprise. In a section performed to the song “Crimson and Clover” by Tommy James and the Shondells, the piece finally blossoms as sound, set, performance and choreography unite in an orgy of sighs, diffused light, and lush movement. For the first time in this piece, the movement itself was used to forward the content and vision without relying on the mise en scène.

Jolted out of this reverie, the song is replaced by a news announcement about the collapse of the actual bridge in Australia. At once banal and catastrophic, this section of the piece, which was introduced by a woman cleaning house while singing along with the song on the radio, effectively lulls us into the comfort of our blissful ignorance and the trust we place in structures, even as they crumble around us.
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