To sleep perchance to dance

SUZANNE BROWN

It is difficult to keep your sights firmly on your goals of cracking the New York dance scene when you are working a nine-hour shift as a waitress. Especially when your customers are pretentious Wall Street types with reed-thin girlfriends who only drink mineral water. What kind of tip are you going to get from a bottle of mineral water?

Australian choreographer Lucy Guerin will tell you that it's not much. She carried plates for months at the Big Apple, waking the next day with sore feet and an aching body before heading to a studio and working on solo dance creations.

Eventually, she received financial assistance through an artistic residency at Movement Research, an organisation that holds classes and supports the work of new choreographers, and received a New York foundation for the Arts Choreographic Fellowship.

But perhaps the best measure of access is her latest commission, an offer to create a work for one of the world's greatest dancers, Mikhail Baryshnikov.

Guerin will teach her Bessie award winning piece, Two Lies, to his dance troupe, the White Oak Dance Project, and create a 15-minute duet for Baryshnikov and one of his female dancers.

Guerin feigns panic when discussing her contact with "Mish", as he is known in the dance community. She recalls spying him in the audience of a Two Lies production and says he alleviated many of her fears when he was so charming and "normal" on the phone.

"It will be interesting for me, because I don't think I've ever worked with dancers I am completely unfamiliar with. Of course, I've seen Baryshnikov on TV, but he is an older dancer, too; I know he can still do anything, he is an incredible dancer. Just working with someone who has that kind of facility and that kind of experience — it will challenge me to come up with something to match his expertise."

Guerin says her six years in New York (she has been based in Melbourne for the past two years) has helped build her dance vocabulary and develop a distinct style. The lack of financial support for dance in New York means the focus is on what choreographers can do with a human body in a studio, as opposed to working with design or narrative elements. There is also a strong critical dialogue between choreographers that is not part of the Australian culture.

But the lack of money also means choreographers and dancers are often working in unrelated jobs, so rehearsal periods are short.

"To me, to try to make it follow a storyline with these completely abstracted movements just gets really ridiculous. It doesn't work; it's not the right tool to tell a story. It is not a language you can change into words and audiences just need to let it affect them as a whole."

Heavy, her latest work, draws on the stages of sleep. It was conceived when Guerin, exhausted after an arduous European tour where she was manager, choreographer and a dancer, was recuperating in Madrid by embracing the Spanish custom of an afternoon siesta.

Once home, her research into sleep patterns led her to Footscray's Western Hospital, where she observed sleep disorder patients. Guerin contrasts the scientific research of sleep with the intangible dream states, both of which lend themselves to movement.

"On the one hand, sleep is a completely inert and immobile state, but once you begin to read about what goes on in the brain, and also physically in the body, there are quite a lot of changes taking place."

The coming year is shaping up to be the busiest in her 10-year career with two commissions, including her first with Chunky Move, and an overseas tour of Heavy. Guerin would also like to experiment in collaborating with directors of other mediums, such as theatre and film.

"Just getting myself out of dance a little bit is the main thing. Dance is a really specific world and I really love it. But I think you can become quite narrow if you don't try and reach out and make contact in other areas. I think it's quite dangerous to just let your life become only dance, year in and year out. It's like a relationship you don't have anything to bring to it."

Heavy is at the Athenaeum 2 from tomorrow until 15 November. To book, tel: 96350 1500.