Can’t Hardly Weight

Ever since modernist choreographers abandoned the well-known narratives of traditional ballet, the abstraction of modern choreography has faced a fundamental problem: how does one create dance which is both abstract but clear; accessible but rich in meaning? It is a question choreographer Lucy Guerin has faced repeatedly. Guerin's latest piece Heavy uses the open metaphor of sleep as a familiar structure on which to base her movement language.

“I don’t want to be this really enigmatic, mysterious abstract person in my work,” Guerin says. Nevertheless, Guerin does not wish to jettison her vision of dance as a rich and complex language which speaks indirectly to the human psyche, without a specifically rational rhyme or reason. “It’s just finding a way to contextualise movement in the here and now, but still maintaining my interests in it and my engagement with it.”

In response to what Guerin describes as “audiences’ voracious appetite for narrative”, the choreographer commenced her latest piece, Robbery Waitress On Bail, by projecting slides of newsprint which laconically related the tale of a waitress who posed as a hostage when her fiancé robbed an all-night cafe. “I presented them with the story then and there,” she says, “and thought: ‘Now they’ve got their story, they’ll be satisfied. Maybe they can watch the dance and see other readings in the dance rather than just looking for who’s the waitress and where’s the knife’. “ Having talked to some spectators however, Guerin was forced to concede that this was not altogether successful.

“It did work for some people, but there’s a number of people who said, ‘I didn’t see the moment when the waitress died this.’”

In Heavy, Guerin will be trialing a different solution. Scientific research of the last few decades has traced the patterns of sleep in the brainwaves and unconscious movement, revealing a distinct process that the mind goes through during what is an otherwise inert state. “I liked the subject because it felt like it gave me a really clear structure,” Guerin explains. Nevertheless, as there is “so much mystery surrounding dreams - and still surrounding the sleep process itself - I could work on those two levels: the very clear, scientific level, but also on a more instinctive, psychological level as well.” Sleep is a state known to all but which possesses a hidden complexity which Guerin will explore through movement.

Guerin readily admits that the precise pattern of the sleeping mind will not be communicated to the audience: “I’m not trying to convey a scientific expose of the sleep process - it would be ridiculous for a dance piece to try and do that.” The overall structure of sleep should however be readily accessible. “The first half is a gradual descent into a stillness from which the dream-state emerges.” Despite the sometimes dense nature of modern dance, Guerin continues to try to provide familiar elements which allow those from outside of dance to approach her work. This is partly facilitated through the music, composed and mixed live for the show by DJ Jad McAdam (who also composed the sound-track for Robbery Waitress). The music consists of layered beats, patterns and sounds, supported by drum-machine loops and similar devices, as in some of the work by artists such as Tricky. Nor is Guerin adverse to incorporating the odd direct reference to popular culture in her performances. In one part of the dream sequence the choreography involves three of the dancers making zombie-claw movements like in the Thriller video at the fourth performer. She is trapped in a disturbing nightmare inhabited by dead-pan demons of her mind and memory.

Although sequences like those of the night-terror's section have a greater comic potential than much of Guerin’s previous work, her choreography generally represents an indirect relation to emotions. The dancers are not in character and their faces do not give much away. Consequently the emotional content of the movement is not on stage as such, but exists elsewhere, in the audience’s response. “My work affects people differently,” Guerin says. “Some people find it highly emotional, others find it alienating and distancing. It depends on what your relationship to your own emotional process is, because there is a sense of slight removal from that actory, overt expression of emotion. But that in itself produces an emptiness that can be really affecting. It can leave a lot of space for the viewer.” The emotional content of the dance is therefore largely conveyed through spatial relations between the dancers, through the bodies themselves, deployed as neutral elements in an overall pattern. Guerin states that she finds it very natural to express emotion in this way, “rather than having to say to the dancers: ‘Now this is the really passionate part, I want you to feel that passion and present it to the audience.’ I’d rather have them bring it out through the dynamic of the movement.”

- By Jonathan Marshall

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