Mikhail comes on Heavy

By ALISON BARCLAY

Putty in the Australian girl’s hands, that’s what he’ll be.
But that’s what Mikhail Baryshnikov wants.

For a while he stalked Lucy Guerin, his shaggy form slinking into her shows in an off-Broadway bolthole known as The Kitchen.

Then he called her. An invitation to create steps for him, the most awe-inspiring man in tights since Rudolf Nureyev, came forth.

And Guerin was afraid.

“I was totally daunted by the idea of him,” says the Melbourne-based choreographer, who nevertheless managed to gulp down her terror and graciously accept.

“Having to speak to him for the first time wasn’t very comfortable, but he was so easy to talk to — he made me call him Misha — and after five minutes I forgot to be nervous.”

The work Misha particularly likes is Two Lies, which in fact had its premiere in Melbourne under the title Courtship 1986 before springboarding into New York.

In April, Guerin heads back to Manhattan to teach Two Lies to Misha’s company, the White Oaks Dance Project. Then she will choreograph a duet on the runaway Russian himself.

“I think, though, that he is really interested in encouraging lesser-known choreographers as a way of challenging himself, because he’s still really into dancing,” she says.

“That’s his primary interest. If he was just interested in making his company a success, he’d get the big names in.”

As this implies, Guerin does not consider herself a big name. But she is certainly becoming known, with Two Lies winning one of New York’s enviable Besame awards and touring Europe last year.

Floored by Baryshnikov: Lucy Guerin’s new work Heavy has lifted her profile. Picture: MANUELA CIFRA

This year she went to the Copenhagen International Festival, where she performed Robbery Waitress On Bail — inspired by a report in the Herald Sun.

Too much excitement? Yet Guerin knows how to put her dancers to sleep. Embarking on her new work Heavy, which opens on Saturday, Guerin invited the quartet to the most soporific rehearsal in history.

“Tired all to lie down and go to sleep,” she says.

“It wasn’t too hard, because some had jet lag.”

That sluggish quality drags itself into Heavy, which tracks the brain as it subsides into slumber and is pestered by dreams.

As Rebecca Hilton, Ros Warby, Trevor Patrick and David Tyndall evoke in dance the five stages of sleep, a dot matrix printer on the ceiling oozes a polygraph chart of brain activity (or lack thereof).

“I studied science at school but it definitely wasn’t my forte,” Guerin grins. “I’m just fascinated by that clinical approach to exploring something because it’s different from what I do in work as a choreographer.

“I do explore that in Heavy, the brain waves, eye movements and sleep disorders. But the focus of the work is the unreadable dream world. No one understands why we dream.”

Heavy is at the Athenaeum 2, Collins City, from Saturday to November. Bookings: 9650 1500.