'In my work I aim to create an enclosed abstracted world; a theatre where human drama is formally presented to the audience. I hope that through being drawn into the theatrical space and experiencing the nonverbal communications of dance, the audience will reinterpret their own lives in more revealing aspects. The dance material is derived from intricate phrase-making, set within the larger framework of choreographic structure. It makes use of classical lines to present iconic shapes and then subverts them. My movement vocabulary is often geared towards breaking down these classic forms or exaggerating them past recognition. The themes throughout my dances deal with dual nature and divergence. They explore questions of conflicting choices both emotionally and aesthetically, often pursuing differing paths to an extreme. A dialogue is created that challenges the audience to find a way to accept the presence of disparity in the world and the tension that is thereby created.'

— Lucy Guerin
Lucy Guerin was born in Australia and graduated from the Centre for Performing Arts, Adelaide in 1982. She danced in the company of Russell Dumas ('Dance Exchange', Sydney) and with 'Dance Works', Melbourne, and received several travel/study scholarships before moving to New York in 1989. She has been a member of Tere O'Conor Dance, the Bebe Miller Company, and has also worked with Sara Rudner.

Lucy Guerin's dances have been produced in New York at Dance Theater Workshop (DTW), PS 122, the Kitchen, and through Movement Research at the Judson Church and Pace Downtown Theater. Lucy has also shown work in Stockholm, Melbourne and Sydney. In 1994 and 1996 she was selected to attend the Rencontres Choreographiques Internationales de Bagnolet in France, and was awarded funds to create and produce future works.

In 1991–92 she was an artist in residence at Movement Research, and in 1994 was a recipient of a New York Foundation for the Arts choreographic fellowship. She has also received support from the Australia Council, the New South Wales Performing Arts Board, the Jerome Foundation, and the Harkness Foundation.

In September 1996 Lucy presented Incarnadine and the premiere of Courtable, 1966 in Melbourne, with dancers Nicole Bishop, Rebecca Hilton, Ros Warby and Jennifer Weaver. Writings on Dance spoke to her after this season about the changing environment and contexts that have informed, defined parameters for, and helped produce the development of her artistic vision.

**Lucy Guerin** It is pretty straightforward why I went to New York in the first place. I'd been there several times to study – and was getting increasingly frustrated with my dancing options in Australia. I went there pretty much to work with other choreographers. And that changed over a few years. I think I then started to get frustrated with working with choreographers, so started making my own work. And much to my surprise I found that New York was a very supportive environment to do that in. Initially I thought it would be very threatening because it is so competitive and there's so much going on there, but in a way it gives you a kind of anonymity to test out your initial fumblings with choreography. The thing that I think kept me there for so long was that the community there was very strong, it was very supportive. I think part of the reason for that is that there is just so little money there, and so little support for people that it has a kind of integrity. It allows you a kind of freedom. There's no pressure, really, because there's not really any financial support. There are opportunities to be presented by theatres, but there's not a lot of financial gain to be had by anyone, so I think in a way I found that really freeing. Rather than having to respond to market pressures or fashion or whatever the local flavour of the month was, I could pretty much explore what it was I was interested in. But, ultimately, that lack of funding was just the thing that I think got to be too hard – it's too hard a life when you are 35 years old and you are still having to wait tables four nights a week and then get up and rehearse in the mornings and go home and have a nap. Yes, I think that's pretty much what made me decide to come back. But also I felt like I don't really need the kind of stimulation that there is in New York any more. It is very full-on, and it is inspirational. But then after a while I didn't need so much external input, I don't think. I felt like I could generate that myself a little better.
When I first got to New York I danced with a choreographer called Tere O’Connor. His work was almost the opposite to work that I had done here, say with Russell (Dumas), which was very much about movement and vocabulary and dancing – very much about dancing. And Tere’s work came from I think a much more ‘ideas’ related place. He has an incredible imaginative reign. That was really strong for me when I first got there – just to experience what seemed like the other side of making work. And also he encouraged me, and when I did start to choreograph we would talk a lot about choreography and what it was. We also came up against the same frustrations with it, I think. You know, because as much as I love dance, I have always had big questions about it. I don’t respect it, I don’t think, as much as I should some times. Tere was someone who felt the same irreverence in a way. A lot of people in dance take it very seriously I think. Which is good, but I just have never been able to. So I’ve always felt a little bit like a charlatan, you know, like I didn’t have the dedication or whatever it was. But at the same time I feel like it is a really good vehicle for me, for the way that I think, and a good balancer. And to include both those elements – the more physical, dancerly aspect of it, but also a broader, more abstract approach to creating something – that rounded out the picture a bit for me when I went to New York.

SG/ED I am struck by your comment about that sense of irreverence about dancing – that you can’t always take it seriously. I’m interested to know how that plays out in your choreographic process. I’m presuming it is more present there than in the dancing you might have done in other people’s work. When you said ‘irreverence’ I remembered noticing that quality in the two works we have just seen here in Melbourne.

Yes. There is a little bit of commentary going on, and I do feel like that. And I’m not sure if that’s a kind of immaturity or not, or whether it is or not probably doesn’t really matter, it might change later. But, yes, our whole approach to rehearsal is, especially Becky (Hilton) and I – we’ve worked together for quite a long time, and she’s the one person who has been in all my work – is like this: not too much of a warm up, and she smokes lots of cigarettes, we drink coffee and talk about what happened yesterday or whatever. And I do think that’s part of it. I think the whole approach to the body, that reverence for the body is something that I can’t enter into really. I feel like my mind and my body are pretty sort of connected in a way. So that to come in and take my body through a whole series of things that I’m not really very interested in... Some days I am, you know. And I am interested in moving and dancing – I like dancing, I’ve decided after many, many years. I do like it. I don’t have a ‘joie de danse’ kind of approach to it, I don’t feel like it’s my life. Although I do feel like its my life (laugh). But I think the process and the part that I really enjoy is – and this is the same for everybody, I’m sure – getting to movement sensations or mental movement areas that are outside of my experience – when it comes to actually developing vocabulary. Because structurally and presentationally I’m pretty formal in my choreography. I also get inspiration from Pop and fashion and things like that, because that also helps I think, helps me to cut through that kind of reverent or elitist approach.

So you engage in the business of making a dance because it takes you to things that you haven’t experienced before; it’s a way of getting to somewhere that you don’t know about. It would seem that your interest is not so much in the recreation, reworking or reconfiguring of materials and concepts that are already part of a dance repertoire or tradition. Maybe that’s why that whole warming up business is unhelpful, because that process tends to keep recreating a particular, familiar body.

Yes. That’s really true. And it is a bit of a problem because a lot of times I want the dancing to be fairly physical and fairly extreme. But if you go in and do a warm up where – you know, you do a barre and then you jump around or whatever – then it does set it up for just those things to come out. I think my mind leads me a little bit in this – in making vocabulary. I almost feel like I have to get into a kind of trance-like state. Sometimes I’ll think the thing first – the mood – or the style of the movement that I want to make – I’ll think about it – you know, you have a little flash of what it could be, or a possibility – and its interesting because... it should take you further, but then you go into the studio and try and do it, and it is amazing how the increments are really small. You get a little bit further, but it is not that different to what you’ve done before. Every time I make material I do get a little bit further I think, but it is not like the radical leaps that I’d like to make.
In 'Incarnadine' you and Rebecca Hilton stay on those targets that are on the floor, and because of the targets I was reminded of Trisha Brown's piece, 'Glacial Decay'. That dance is very much about not being able to catch the dancers in the dance because they keep going off – they keep skipping off, slipping off the side. Sometimes they bump into each other. It happens very much as though the frame isn't in the middle. It is one of Brown's first pieces where the movement is very layered and multi-directional through the body. In 'Glacial Decay' the decoys are very much what you can't catch, what you couldn't possibly keep in sight long enough to shoot down. On one level it is the opposite of your just staying on those targets in 'Incarnadine'. I was wondering whether that need or tendency now to stay put and be very frontal and make a very strong statement in a more readily readable way is an historical shift. At the time of 'Glacial Decay' there was perhaps much more interest in dancing that you couldn’t 'read'.

For me, I'm very self-centredly wrapped up in expressing something about myself. And that thing about going further and looking for the parameters of my movement vocabulary is about that. And I suppose that is always what the creative process is about. Although, say in a situation like what you were talking about with 'Glacial Decay' it sounds more like it's a system that is set up and then fleshed out, but it probably comes from the other end as well: I imagine it would have involved a certain stylistic exploration – in developing the vocabulary. And they are the two things that I am very strongly interested in – the structural aspect and then the stylistic – the tone, the mood (I've never quite found a way of saying it) which to me comes through in the vocabulary. The meaning expresses itself through the structure, and the emotion or the tone expresses itself through the vocabulary. So in 'Incarnadine' in its very structure its got Becky and I not being able to get off these targets. Our approach is very rigid and pretty relentless. It just goes on and on in unison. We don't divert from each other, and we're very independent. But the whole idea of the piece is dependent on that trio. They're more expressive, they have readable gestures, and they are leaning on each other and wandering all over the space and its – its about those two approaches – to dance, but also just to living. You know, its two different approaches to movement, dynamic, but also just to thinking. On the one hand hammering something, and really trying to get at it directly. Whereas the trio is more submissive, more letting things come in sideways. From the time when 'Glacial Decay' was made I think there is a tendency – I mean I'm sure everyone's noticed – to want to make personal stylistic statements. Now. I mean in New York I think there is. And I think that is different to how it was then. I feel like I want my work to work on all these different levels. I want it to be accessible, but I want it to have layers of meaning. I want it to be readable but really unique. So, I think in 'Incarnadine' that's a way to getting two different approaches into the same thing and creating the meaning through that dialogue between the two of them.

You mentioned something about the thinking you do before rehearsal actually starts – the intellectual preparations and the imagining of the work. The dances do have that quality in performance; there's a mind at work there. I don't know how better to describe it. There is a very lucid intellectual construct at play in the dances, but it doesn't dominate the really thorough exploration of physicality. It doesn't overpower that at all. But it is clear that the choreographic process you are engaged in is not based upon some sort of simple body-based exploration which is then organised and structured later. You don't sense that in watching the work; that is not its logic, shall we say.

I am also thinking of 'Venus Bay' which you showed in New York. After I'd seen that I thought, I wonder how she is getting that strong sense of a piece with some sort of meaning without having that at all on another level.

I am glad that that comes through (laugh). I mean it is something that I do think about a lot. It is a big preoccupation, and when I first started making work I think the mental structure was a bit heavy handed, and was, well, just too obvious to people. Not even that it was obvious, it just lacked warmth or something. But it is interesting that you say the meaning without actually doing that because I do feel like there's almost a narrative going on but it is not in terms of events – it is more in terms of emotional narrative perhaps. I'm not really sure. It is very hard to talk about these things. And in 'Venus Bay', the one that you saw in
New York, I think I was playing a little bit more with letting go of having a really overriding structure. I think in those two that I did at the Gasworks their structure was their meaning really. You know, in ‘Incarnadine’ the dialogue between the two groups being in the same space, and in the second piece (‘Courtabie 1966’)- doing the piece twice – it was very simple. I feel very comfortable with having that kind of form to work within. And in ‘Venus Bay’ I was trying to let go of that a little bit. But it felt awful, and by the end I had to quickly organise it for myself, because I just felt like I was rambling on. But I did it: I tried to go from the non-literal down to the literal through the piece, so that it started off fairly abstract and then got anchored more in very readable things, gestures and the sound score. It is very hard for me to proceed with any kind of movement until I have a some kind of mental picture I suppose. If I go into a studio and just start dancing around and making movement, I start getting very depressed and thinking ‘Why am I here? ’ ‘What’s the meaning of life?’ and I end up lying on the floor sobbing. I just get an awful feeling of meaninglessness. I don’t quite know what that means. So I think to allow myself to make movement it has to be going somewhere. I guess I’m a bit goal orientated or something.

That also makes sense of what you were saying before about not doing a warm up and so on. You are not buying into that still pervasive notion of dancing as an inherently natural, organic process. That doesn’t seem to be a productive notion for you. For others it might be.

You were talking about the dialogue between the two parts of ‘Incarnadine’, talking in somewhat formal terms about that, but it certainly wasn’t a completely formalist work for me. There are moments in the duet which just kind of cut across that. You have talked about that relentless quality, how it just goes on and on and on – but when you fall so that you’re legs are spread open – they’re devastating moments, and they’re marvellous and shocking – and not shocking at the same time. They’re very complex – not images – they’re complex moments or complex events. And they just demolish the formality.

Yes. That’s been interesting for me, because I didn’t consciously ‘make’ those moments. We’re in the short white dresses and we sit up and we have our legs open. I’m a little bit stupid in those ways – because I didn’t even realise the implications of that, I don’t think. In rehearsal we were just wearing sweat pants and stuff. But once I started performing it – we do it very detached and very removed – so it is almost doll-like or controlled – and very contrived and together, a lot of people commenting thought it was some kind of feminist piece – or at least about women and their sex. So that you’ve got those two sides, one being more subjugated and controlled, and then there’s the women in red who are the more passionate. But it makes sense to me if people had a lot of different interpretations. One person said to me they thought it was about different ways of handling emotion. And the fact is that it is all women too. I feel a little bit confused about that. Because I do work with all women people often read it as that being part of the meaning, but it is not actually for me. Like it is not really a choice, you know.

It was very interesting for me in watching that, because it wasn’t as if those moments were marked out. You just continued on and it had a marvellous ambiguity really. I suppose too it is not to take for granted a
certain – I don’t know whether it is inscription in dancing – but it is in the way one might perform those things. There’s something about that injunction not to mean anything. Again at a certain point historically it was very important not to be performing a meaning on stage – that you had to leave it open, hovering. But that isn’t actually easily come by. There’s something in being able to perform in that way or to have that relationship to what you’re doing that is not an easy thing – or not to be taken for granted I guess. On the one hand it wasn’t that that duet could have meant anything at all. For me as a viewer it was definitely going into a particular area, but what I was also savouring was that that sense could continue to come as a surprise, that one would never become facile or predictable with those meanings or suggestions. For the performers to be able to do that or have that relationship to what they’re doing – I don’t know that you can pull these things apart – is not to be taken for granted. It seems like a very deep commitment.

Yes. I mean its interesting, because after people started having different interpretations about that duet, I think it has probably changed the way we do it a little bit. I mean I think we’re now aware – but the thing about it is that it is an amazingly difficult duet to do. Becky will tell you, and she complained to me constantly, it is hard to remember because there’s nothing that leads on to anything really organically. It is extremely inorganic. So it is really like remembering however many little moves. It is very hard to get a physical memory of it. And you constantly find yourself going off – because things repeat but they’re slightly different – so you constantly go off into the wrong one or you don’t stop when you’re supposed to. And that is very obvious. (laugh) It is all in unison, obviously. So similarly it is very hard to get into a performance mode of it too. It is quite difficult to take it anywhere presentationally, which I think is actually good. It holds it in place, almost like the targets – it holds it in this fairly – like you say, not unreadable but ambiguous place. You know, it could have become more about being a woman or something like that. But since people have read it that way and I’ve thought about it that way, I’ve thought there’s some very obvious things there that I have missed, even though I’m the choreographer, but it hasn’t really changed that much. It is an interesting question that whole thing about performing something, but allowing it to be – I don’t mean to say ambiguous – allowing it to be open to interpretation but at the same time still making a statement.

I was part of a group of dancers who all started to do their own work. I think I was first but (laugh) all the people that I got to dance in my work – various ones of them have since made their own work, and I’ve been in their work. Becky has made work and Mia, another dancer, has made work. So there’s that opportunity to do that. It was so helpful to me as a starting choreographer to have these people who I’ve had a very similar history with, but who also know me and are my friends. Because you know how it is very confronting going into a room when you haven’t done it before and having six people standing there waiting for you to make genius movement (laugh). And also because I think it is part of the irreverent thing that I was talking about before. I mean, they know me, and if I do something really silly they knew where I was coming from so I didn’t feel as self-conscious. I mean I did feel self-conscious, but you know, I think that because they knew me as a person they trusted that I wasn’t just doing something that was completely stupid – although not all the time.
I want to be in other people's work actually – a little bit, not too much though. But at the same time it is really difficult being in your own work. And I'm starting to feel a real need to be out of it, and I don't know what that will do. I haven't ever made a piece that I wasn't in. I need to be in it from the movement vocabulary point of view I think at the moment, because I'm still really interested in that and going further with defining that. These whole questions of meaning are something that I'm really interested in trying to get more of a grip on. I think there is a kind of meaning that is developing in what I do – an approach to meaning, but I still haven't grasped quite what it is. And I think you know I'd like to, but maybe when you do that it is over (laugh).

Now that you are back in Australia would you keep working with friends? How would that work?

I am continuing to work with Becky. But the other friends are in America. So I can't do that. But I did reach a point I think with the friends where they were experiencing similar frustrations to me and wanting to go off and do their next thing after having been dancing in companies for 8 or 10 years themselves. And also – it is an interesting question – but in some ways you can't – although they can interpret me incredibly well and easily, at the same time I don't feel like I can push them in the same way because they are my friends and my colleagues – and I have a lot of respect for them – not that I wouldn't for say younger dancers that I didn't know. When you're a choreographer I think you need to be able to push people through things. And I actually don't really need to as much with them, so I guess it's a bit of a pay off. There's something appealing to me about working with new people who I am not as connected to I think.

It seems to me what becomes entailed here is this whole question of induction and training or the depth of experience that people have.

I think that any time you are working with younger dancers anywhere – I mean in America or here – you always have to train them as a choreographer and you have to – I mean they have to absorb your movement quality and your approach to it and all that, and then the next person that they go and work with maybe it is a little easier or ...it depends. I mean if they work with you for 10 years then I think it can then be quite hard to then go on and do a totally different style. And I suppose that's what was good about New York, that there were several other people, not working in the same style as me but working in a place where the dancers could cross over. I think just physically. You know, like using some ballet form and some release technique – I guess that's what you call it – you know, a lot of sequential joint movement. So they had the skills. Whereas, here, I think there's not so much of a mix of the two things that I've noticed. You know, I haven't really seen a lot, but I think it seems to be that people tend to work either in this kind of presentational balletic modern dance style or they're quite formalist. So it's hard to find people that have the two things, which is what I realised – you know, I do rely on people having both those skills. So that's difficult, but its something I think that if they have one, you know you just have to work with them on the other. And there are a lot of dancers here. It is not even just dancers. It took me a really long time in New York to find a composer I wanted to work with, and a lighting designer, and it is just going to take that time again. The historical thing is difficult because, although all the elements are here, all the elements of the history of the kind of work that I'm doing, it doesn't seem like they've been brought together really, which you know they have I think in New York. And so people can read it. But I was worried when I came back here and performed how people would see it and whether they would notice any difference, you know. Well, I think the response has been really good and very perceptive. Its just the same question of how readable is dance and how much can you make your meaning clear especially without that context that I've been working in. I was a little bit worried. Its mainly people in the dance community that I've talked to but I've felt that people do understand it and do see where its coming from. So that's a big relief actually.

You talked about the very tight financial situation in New York before. But you have received several grants and awards, haven't you?
Yes, I’ve had little bits of money. I got a New York Foundations for the Arts Choreographic Fellowship, which was a nice $7,000. That was the most that I got. The Movement Research grant translates into rehearsal space, and a little bit of money for production, but never enough to pay anyone really. And when I perform at DTW I do get a commission, which is a small amount – but its never anywhere near enough. So basically you have to go into debt, which is what I did – borrowed money from my parents – thank you Mum and Dad. But being presented in New York is really good, you know, you go into a theatre and they do a lot of your publicity and they provide you with a lighting designer and they clean the theatre and all that kind of stuff, and you have a psych – a clean psych (laugh). But you know there’s the other side of the coin that you never can pay your dancers, and that’s very hard. So you’re constantly in a state of feeling like everyone is doing you a favour. All the time. That’s hard. It is a bad feeling to always feel indebted and feel that people are having to make these huge sacrifices and that’s another reason why you feel like you can’t make demands on them too, I think. Because they’re all these incredibly accomplished, amazing dancers. Really, you know, fantastic. And they’re coming along and they’re doing all these other horrible jobs so that they can come in and work for you for nothing basically. I mean they’re happy to do that, but its hard to be in that position. I mean it has got to a point just in the last few years where the funding situation is just appalling – its really bad. And a lot of companies have just closed down. And everyone is in a state of almost despair, you know. That’s all anyone ever talks about. It gets to a point where you can’t support each other really any more. And remember that I was saying that it is such a supportive environment – it just gets to the point where you’re stretched to your limit, and to do that extra little favour for, you know, your fellow choreographer – and people still do – but its really hard. I don’t mean to make it sound like a sob story, but it has changed since I first went there. It has got, I think, more desperate, and you know I think it is serious actually – it is quite serious. It was kind of shocking to me I suppose when I went to New York and there were these choreographers that I knew about and had heard of that then I would run in to working in restaurants, and I’d think, these amazingly accomplished people that just can’t make it work! So I’m starting to think that, there, anyway – and I know it is getting worse here too – its just not about supporting yourself, really, any more. It is not going to support you. Which is very hard to accept – I still don’t quite want to accept it, I want there to be a way that it can, but – we’ll see.