

'Unpredictable, funny, unusual': Lucy Guerin's Untrained

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This week we interviewed **Lucy Guerin**, the mastermind behind the dance performance **Untrained**, which has been described as 'A fascinating combination of dance, theatre, improvisation and multimedia, all presented with just the right amount of quirk and irreverence.'-*Australian Stage*.

Untrained is a quirky and irreverent theatrical exploration that takes both performers and audience into a whole new undefined experience. Setting **two highly skilled dancers against two men with absolutely no movement training at all** - the four men are given identical instructions: to execute the same series of movements.

We asked Lucy about this captivating, insightful and sometimes amusing dance performance. This is what she had to say about auditions, improvisations and laughter.

How did *Untrained* come about?

Untrained came about from a one week creative development opportunity that I was given at Arts House in Melbourne. I was interested at that time in making movement by giving instructions to the dancers and having them respond spontaneously, rather than preconceived choreographed movements.

I had been thinking about working with untrained people for many years. I had an idea to work with firemen at one stage. Many experiences fed into this idea. When I lived in New York I used to take ballet classes on a regular basis. There was an older woman in the class who could do all the steps and learn the sequences but she didn't do them like a trained dancer. She didn't point her feet or stretch her legs and I loved watching her dancing. She didn't have the same locked in physical pathways that the other dancers had. I think my interest in this work is not that the men can't dance, but watching untrained bodies attempt the physical pathways that are so entrenched for skilled dancers. The lack of predictability is really interesting and surprising.

What were your influences and thoughts behind it?

As a choreographer, I have always had an interest in 'original movement' that is, movement that has not been codified as part of a style or technique. In many dance styles the same movements appear again and again, in different sequences and done with different expressive qualities. Although I also use these movements as part of my dance vocabulary, I also try to find movement pathways and dynamics that are not so familiar and this often involves breaking down the habitual training of myself and the dancers in order to find something that doesn't stem from our training. The dancers that I work with are highly skilled, not only technically but in their ability to respond to this type of task. But their training also means that they can never move like a non dancer (which of course is a good thing) even when they walk on stage and stand, you can clearly see the difference between a dancer and a non dancer. I began to be interested in the unrefined, unformed movements of ordinary people as they do not have an awareness of their bodies in the same way that dancers do. When you ask them to do a dance movement they don't know if their leg is bent or straight or where their arm is in relation to their body. This gives the movement an immediacy and unconscious quality which I find fascinating, especially when contrasted with the dancers' awareness which can never really be dropped. With dancers there is the layer of training always present. With non-dancers their movement training is their daily lives and their inherited physicality. So they are more able in a way, to create movement that is 'new' or undefined from a dance perspective and that movement is very difficult to reproduce, even for a dancer, as people will see when they come to the show.

What is your ultimate goal, aim and/or message with *Untrained*?

As is quite common in my works I am posing questions. I am asking the audience 'what is interesting for you to watch in a performance and why?' Is it the fact that something has been put on stage and in the context of a performance? Is it the personal charisma of a particular man? Is it the level of skill with which they execute the instructions? Is it the concentration and effort required to do them? I have set out to communicate with the audience, a range of ways to look at moving and performing. And perhaps through that to look at the potential of the wider world and themselves

Is laughter something you always anticipated to be present when performing it?

No. Initially *Untrained* was more like an experiment in how trained and untrained men responded to the same instructions. The structure for the work is very simple and repetitive and I was expecting it to be quite demanding for audiences. I was not at all prepared for the hilarity that erupted on opening night. People were almost hysterical at times. I think part of the laughter comes from their trepidation when they put themselves in the place of the untrained men, performing on stage with no experience or skills.

I was a bit taken aback by this response to *Untrained*. I suppose there is a slapstick component to *Untrained*

that audiences find very amusing. I find the unconventional moves of the untrained intriguing and fascinating rather than funny. I didn't respond in the same way that audiences did although I must say we had a lot of fun when creating this work. After many years of working with trained dancers (which of course I love) there was a different potential for choreography with people with no training. But after my initial concern about audiences laughing at the untrained men I realised over a few performances that they were ultimately the stars of the show. Audiences wanted them to succeed and admired their courageous attempts at some of the impossible tasks that were set for them. Audiences imagine themselves in the same position and ask themselves, 'What would I do?' So there is a lot of empathy towards the untrained men. But when I take on new untrained for the piece I always explain to them that audiences are sometimes highly amused and that they need to have a sense of humour about what they are doing and understand the premise of the work.

Each time it is performed it has a different cast. How do you select the participants?

The first cast of *Untrained* was my brother-in-law and his friend. I asked them to do a week long workshop to play with a few ideas never dreaming that the work would end up touring internationally. But after performing the work in several seasons they began to lose their untrained edge, the show became very familiar to them and it was clear that the cast needed to change periodically.

I selected the two untrained performers for this cast from an audition that was a great experience in itself. We had 90 applications and we selected 40 to audition. It was so wonderful to have this room full of men who were really challenged by moving their bodies and responding to the instructions we gave them. But they were also really focused and found it a great experience to do something with other men that was not connected with sport, drinking, cars etc. I guess that says something about Australian culture, but attempting something outside of their normal activities was really inspiring to them. The untrained men are paid as professionals for rehearsals and performances.

Anyway, Jake Shakleton and Michael Dunbar were the successful applicants. I chose them because I felt they could show viewers something about themselves without affectation or reserve which is quite rare and one of the qualities I also look for in the dancers I work with. They are both interesting, though not necessarily co-ordinated movers and are thoughtful people. Jake is an environmental engineer and Michael is an interactive designer (I didn't know what this was, it's someone who designs apps, games, websites etc) Jake is delightfully chatty and a great socialiser; Michael is very sincere and quite insightful about dance which he has had little experience of.

The two [professional] dancers that I am working with are Alisdair Macindoe and Ross McCormack. They are both outstanding dancers and engaging, unusual people. I have worked with Alisdair for many years but this show is the first time I have worked with Ross.

Watch interviews with some of Lucy's dancers here:

What is it like working on the same piece with such a variety of dancers?

The way a person moves and the attitude they have to their physical body is a large component of their personality. Everything that has happened to you, physically and emotionally, leaves an imprint on your body and how you choose to comport it, consciously and unconsciously. We have done the show with many different types of men: footballers, teachers, visual artists, meat workers, laborers, carpenters, PhD students and of course always with dancers.

The rehearsals begin for me with an initial impression of these people, but as they progress so many complexities emerge. The meat worker had a love of musical theatre, the visual artist loved fly fishing, the teacher had experienced a nervous breakdown. It is amazing how well you get to know people, their lives and their ways of dealing with its challenges, from an exploration of movement. And in only one week which is all the time we take to rehearse the show. I haven't studied any of this in depth but there is something about moving, particularly dancing that releases these experiences. What the untrained men are asked to do is really difficult and unknown, they bring their whole physical experience to the task and draw on everything they know.

One part of the show that I really love is when they are first asked to improvise. They have no experience to guide them and it is quite confronting for them, but from somewhere, they start to dance, and this dance is always very interesting. And even though they only rehearse together for a week before presenting the show, there is a strong camaraderie that develops between the cast.

If you could sum up Untrained in three words, what would they be?

Unpredictable, funny, unusual.

Catch *Untrained* and *Lucy's exclusive workshop* (hurry – limited availability!) at Southbank Centre on the 5th and 6th June.

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