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Melbourne's gift: the space to create

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Choreographer Lucy Guerin appreciates an air of freedom, writes Robin Usher.

LUCY Guerin is used to living out of a suitcase but despite all the travelling her dance company is thriving with Melbourne as its base.

Choreographer Guerin has just returned from another overseas tour and is preparing for a new season of her show, *Aether*, in her company's studio home in West Melbourne.

The tour included South Korea, Singapore, Shanghai and Pittsburgh. The travel will resume in January when she will take *Aether* to the Sydney Festival before going to the Perth Festival with the other piece on the tour, *Structure and Sadness*.

This premiered at the 2006 Melbourne Festival and went on to win this year's Helpmann Award for best dance work. The works have few similarities and both are different to anything Guerin has created in the past.

Structure and Sadness is based on the 1970 collapse of the West Gate Bridge. "I've never done anything like that before and it was difficult to find how the event could intersect with a dance vocabulary."

While Guerin is pleased with its success, she returned to her 2005 piece, *Aether*, because of its contrasting style. It marks a new direction in her choreographic output because it is the first time she has allowed rehearsals to have such a strong influence on the work's outcome.

"I usually create on my own body and teach the movements to the dancers," she says. "There is always back and forth as a work evolves, but with this the process went over the top and became hysterical. I was worried it was out of control."

The work was inspired as a comment on the flood of communications that overwhelm people in contemporary society.

She asked the dancers in rehearsal to make facial and vocal expressions to show the impact of this overload. "Because the result was so interesting, it became part of the process that we worked on and it had an impact on the outcome," she says. "These excursions into nonsensical raving also contained the essence of the piece, as they were creating a wordless language specific to the relationships between them."

She warns the first half is intricate and dense and people in the audience have to find their own way through it. "They have to view it selectively because it's impossible to take it all in, just as it's impossible to absorb the constant barrage of daily communications."



The work is divided in two parts, and the second is very different, dealing with the difficulties people have in relating to one another. Guerin says it is more stripped back than the first half.

"I don't seek to draw any conclusion but present a dialogue on how we find our way through the contemporary world."

Guerin is one of Australia's most acclaimed contemporary choreographers. Her commissions include a piece for Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project. Among her awards is the French Prix d'auteur and a 1994 choreographic fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts.

Originally from Adelaide, Guerin moved to New York in 1989 for seven years before returning to Australia to make her base in Melbourne.

In 2005, *The New Yorker* magazine's dance writer, Joan Acocella, wrote that she wished Guerin would move back to New York. But Guerin says conditions made it too hard for her to work there. She was unable to get funding to pay her dancers properly, which meant that rehearsal time was limited.

She says New York suited her when she was young when there was a lot she wanted to express. "Now I need more time to explore new directions. Funding is better in Australia, although it doesn't compare with Europe."

She says contemporary dance is thriving in Australia and she is happy that the Melbourne Festival director, Kristy Edmunds, is committed to the art form. She says support for the arts in Victoria is much stronger than in Sydney. "People see the arts as part of the community's identity, which is why dance is so strong in Melbourne."

Guerin is looking to take time off next year and travel around Europe to catch up on new developments in dance. But then she wants to come back and work on two new pieces.

These include a work that would reunite her with the *Tense Dave* team from 2003 — theatre director Michael Kantor and her partner and Chunky Move director, Gideon Obarzanek.

But there is another ambition. "I'm keen to see a purpose-built theatre for dance developed in Melbourne," she says.

Aether opens at the Malthouse Theatre at 7.30pm tomorrow until Saturday. Book on 9685 5111.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2007/11/27/1196036884784.html>