

Dancing through chaos

Lucy Guerin's latest work explores identity lost in a sea of messages, reports **Vicki Fairfax**

IT may have been her Adelaide upbringing or the rigours of childhood ballet lessons, but there is something curiously genteel and accommodating about dancer-choreographer Lucy Guerin. Underneath, though, is a shrewd intellect and an urge to snub convention. These qualities have contributed to a growing international reputation in the field of contemporary dance.

Guerin, who lives and works in Melbourne, has not so much flouted dance-world traditions as quietly ignored them. Her inspiration frequently comes from philosophical musings — whimsical reflections on sleep patterns, heat or even waitresses. She is fascinated by constructed environments, and the way in which we conduct the public and private events of our lives.

Tracing her inspiration to New York artists such as Sara Rudner, Guerin sets out to not merely explore philosophical questions but to render them tangible in rhythm and texture.

"It's always easy when you start out — everything's new," says Guerin, who founded her own dance company, Lucy Guerin Inc, in 2001. "But then you can keep repeating yourself — you start working between parameters. It is a point for me not to repeat."

She revels in paradox and situations that have no easy resolution. Her choreography focuses on the small gesture: she can create a whole dance, for example, out of the juxtaposition of elbows and fluttering fingers.

These idiosyncratic movements are frequently combined in performance with layered, electronic scores, animation, graphics and sophisticated lighting effects — all the technological wizardry available to the modern artist. Yet there is nothing ostentatious or self-consciously clever about the finished work.



collaborator, award-winning motion graphic designer Michaela French. From Guerin's dance studio above a Melbourne car park, the pair would look at the cityscape and muse about all the different forms of communication that were at that moment passing between people and buildings.

They wondered what would happen if it were all to coalesce into a great, dark, textured mass of signals: text messages, billboards, emails, faxes and phone calls. How do we find ways to express our ideas and feelings and co-ordinate our desires amid this chaos, they asked themselves. All this is now the substance of *Aether*.

Now Guerin is rehearsing the final sequence of the work at the North Melbourne Town Hall. The dancers are performing in shafts of white light, against a black background. They dance mostly in pairs, reaching out with fingers, elbows and ankles as each tries to make contact in some way with another. Guerin watches them intently. She is not a demonstrative person, but there is an expression of quiet satisfaction on her face.

She didn't choose an easy road to a choreographic career. Guerin graduated from Adelaide's Centre for Performing Arts in 1982 and then joined two of the country's most challenging contemporary dance teachers and choreographers: Russell Dumas at Sydney's Dance Exchange and Nanette Hassall at Danceworks in Melbourne. In 1989 she left for New York and worked with Bebe Miller and the inimitable Rudner, among others. In the years since

Thinking on her feet: Lucy Guerin comes to grips with contemporary urban life in *Aether*

she has garnered a swag of awards and glowing reviews, and her name is known to dance cognoscenti in the US, Britain and Europe.

Guerin's company is closely aligned with another Melbourne outfit, Chunky Move — her long-term partner is that company's artistic director, Gideon Obarzanek. Apart from personal and business connections, there's a distinctive dance idiom between the companies, too. *The Australian's* Melbourne dance critic, Lee Christofis, calls it the "Melbourne aesthetic": strong, fearless movement and a certain quirky isolation and articulation of the joints.

Collaboration is not new for Guerin: with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in 2003 she created a solo dance version of Stravinsky's *Firebird*; with Opera Australia in 2004 she devised dances for *Dido and Aeneas* and *II*

Combattimento; with Patricia Piccinini she worked on an installation called *Plasticine Park* at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image. Two of her works, *Two Lies* and *Soft Centre*, have been performed by Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Project.

Her most successful and robust collaborations, however, have been with her dancers, who are some of the best in the country. Ros Warby and Stephanie Lake were mesmerising together in *Melt*, and Trevor Patrick was haunting in *The Ends of Things*. She danced with her good friend Rebecca Hilton — a powerfully dramatic stage presence — in *Incarvadine*.

Of Guerin's own performances, New York critic Deborah Jowitz has described her as "small, lean and strong [with] a tartness to her dancing". Christofis likes the "particularity" of

Guerin's dance and choreography. But not all of her work has met with unalloyed approval. Christofis says it can sometimes appear "too dry, too cerebral".

Sit in any studio with a group of young dancers and students these days, especially in Melbourne, and almost all of them will acknowledge Guerin as a big influence. They are drawn to the complexity of her work, its high conceptual nature.

Indeed, Guerin does not feel a need to address expectations or shy away from oddities — willing, instead, to leave the spectator to savour the images and to garner their own meanings. "It's a task that's not so easy in dance," she says.

Aether opens at North Melbourne Town Hall tonight.