

The Morning After – Thursday 29 November
Review with images

THE MORNING AFTER: PERFORMING ARTS IN AUSTRALIA

DRAMA, DANCE, OPERA AND MUSIC REVIEWS FROM AROUND THE
COUNTRY

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2007

Lucy Guerin: *Aether*

Dance Australia's annual critics' survey has been mopping up my spare hours over the last few days. I don't write for the magazine, but I am always happy to contribute to this poll of dance writers and critics around the country.

This year, there's a new "gripes" category in which we're all invited to vent! One of mine - and a fairly minor one at that -- is that Melbourne's big name choreographers haven't given us new work in 2007. (Relax, Phil, we know you've got one about to happen!)

Chunky Move has recycled *Tense Dave* and *Glow*, and Lucy Guerin has repackaged/restaged *Love Me* and now *Aether*.



A past production of *Aether* (photo: Rachele Roberts)

As I say, it's only a minor gripe as all of these works deserve to be seen and seen again. It makes sense, too, to show off works that are touring nationally or internationally. The Chunky Move shows have toured extensively since they were last seen in Melbourne.

I didn't get a chance to see *Glow* this year, alas. (Twice is not nearly enough!) I just couldn't fit it in. So, with that caveat, I've got to say that Lucy Guerin's *Aether* rates as my Revival of the Year -- shame there's no such category! -- and it has some stiff competition from Reg Lipson's *A Large Attendance in the Antechamber* (see here and here) which is, of course, not dance!

My review of *Aether* is after the jump.

***Aether*. Choreographed by Lucy Guerin. Motion graphics by Michaela French. Composer: Gerald Mair. Costume design by Paula Levis. Lighting design by Keith Tucker.**

Presented by Lucy Guerin Inc in association with Malthouse Theatre. Merlyn Theatre, CUB Malthouse, Wednesday November 28, 2007. Season ends Saturday.

At the risk of sounding like Neil Jillett, there really are some kinds of dance that are best watched with your eyes closed. Obviously I don't mean that literally -- as I think Mr Jillett once did -- but in the way that practiced dance audiences learn.

Not to focus too closely on detail. Not to see in a penetrative sense.

We need to turn off the visual cortex. We need to see with the body. To try to apprehend rather than comprehend.

In all but the plainest, unadorned, solo work, one has to make choices about what to watch. (My preferred approach is to see a work from middle distance, preferably slightly elevated and near the centre so I can see line and formation, then to return and watch the thing from up close... once I know where to look.)

In *Aether*, choreographer Lucy Guerin plays with this most basic decision making process. Apart from having to choose between the five dancers which start the work, we must also decide how much attention we give the mass of visual information filling the huge screen above and behind the dancers.

If you're up close, this is a no-brainer. No-one in their right mind would swing their gaze away from Stephanie Lake, Antony Hamilton et al.



The extraordinary Antony Hamilton (Rachelle Roberts)

Perhaps if you found yourself at the back of the theatre, the choice wouldn't be quite so clear cut. Even for a logocentric like myself, the words scrolling up the screen (like the coding of a web page, or rehearsal notes, or amateur choreology) were easily ignored. Perhaps too easily ignored.

Guerin's stated aim is to examine how we filter the information that we're constantly bombarded with. (Having gone into exile in the bush for 18 months in the late 20th

century -- I was a country kilometre from my letter box -- I know how we lower our visual and aural defences when we can... I literally learned to see in my thirties.)

But, intriguingly, Guerin clinches her point obliquely. The motif through both sections of the work is wagging fingers. First, they're a bit like Tom Cruise doing his flippy fingered thing with the holographic display in *Minority Report*. Crazy typing, if you like. At the end it's reduced to a single digit, one of Antony Hamilton's, wiggling like a tiny sine-wave.

Like I say, I'm the logocentric. Words, words, words. Watching *Aether*, I felt I knew what it was like -- I *felt* what it was like -- to be one of these dancers... consigned to communicate through a medium that reduces the truth of the body to a tiny movement of a metacarpal. Into a keystroke.

Abstracted and abstracted and abstracted again.

Physical ideas transformed into thoughts, then into language... Not even into *spoken* language which at least has -- within it -- some revealed physical truth; even over the phone you can hear a lie. Not even *written* language. No marks on pages made with hand-held implements. No marks on a page made with a mechanical instrument... a typewriter or laser printer.

But turned into key strokes. And those key strokes are transformed into what you're looking at now. Low-persistence phosphors on a screen. Two-dimensional. Completely ephemeral. And yet... not. And yet... infinitely archivable. Reproducible. Transmittable.

But what do we lose? What is stripped from the physical feeling in this transformation? How can we communicate, each of us in our solitary confinement? Each of us confirming our prison.

Guerin, I hasten to add, is not another in the long line of theatre artists who have abandoned all hope. Who have despaired of the capacity of one person communicating to another. Of one group of people communicating to another group of people. (Dood Paard

anybody?) (Inviting *other* people to despair too!)

As a diarist, I know that the most fundamental challenge of writing is not to communicate with another person, it is to record something in a way that will communicate *to me* at another time in my life. To make it real. To encode the thing in such a way, with such portable and intrinsic richness, that the retrovirus of emotion and truth will survive the process. The mediation. The vicissitudes of distance and time.

Guerin plays with dimensions. She reduces 3D bodies to 2D with some digital lighting. We feel -- we know -- that if these dancers were to turn side on, they would disappear.

But, man, her dancers are so evocative, so corporeal, so damn fine... expressive and talented and well-drilled... how can we possibly despair? How can we do anything but delight?

Labels: BalletLab, Chunky Move, Gideon Obarzanek, Lucy Guerin, Phillip Adams