

# Critical Correspondence

a project of movement research/publishing

Lucy Guerin

in conversation with Luciana Achugar

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photo: Jeff Busby

**Luciana Achugar:** You're showing two pieces: *Corridor* at Baryshnikov Arts Center, which is from last year, and *Structure and Sadness*, from 2006, which you're showing at Dance Theater Workshop. Do you want to start speaking a little bit about *Corridor*?

**Lucy Guerin:** The spatial set up for *Corridor* is two single rows of audience, which form the set for the piece. The two rows, generally between 20 and 25 meters long, face each other at a distance of about four meters. It's quite a long, narrow space—hence “corridor”—and just a single row of audience on each side. I like working with this spatial relationships because you get a very intimate, up-close contact with the dancers, and from either end, you get a real perspective as well.

*Corridor* has been a bit of a new process for me because often in the past I've worked with choreographed material: I'm creating movement and setting it for the dancers. In this process we worked a lot with giving verbal instructions or written instructions, and generating the movement from that. [These were] generally very fast lists of instructions, which they had to respond to quite spontaneously so that the movement doesn't have such a predetermined quality. It gives a very different attention to the movement or focus of the dancers.

**Luciana:** I saw a clip online and I wasn't clear if this happened during the process only or if you are giving directions to them while they're on stage? I saw they had cell phones and iPods.

**Lucy:** Both, really. We generated hundreds of instructions during the rehearsal process, and we use them in different ways. Sometimes they were used to generate a set phrase, but most often they receive these instructions during the show from the mobile phones or iPods, or there's written instructions, or they are heard over the speakers. They receive them in different formats and respond to them in that moment. There is a little

bit of set material. I guess I think of choreography in a way as a type of instruction as well, but much more refined and designed.

**Luciana:** It seems like the choice of putting the audience on a single row and across from each other in this corridor is giving them more of a sense that they are inside of it rather than watching it from a distance.

**Lucy:** A lot of the idea for *Corridor* is about how we exist in the public arena and in those transit or waiting spaces. The idea of the corridor is of an institutional space [where] you're often seated in that waiting space in close proximity with other people. Initially I wasn't thinking that way. I went with the corridor because I love that element of closeness and distance that you get. It has a very intriguing confined feeling. I thought of putting it on a proscenium because obviously that's going to be the easiest when you are thinking of touring or anything like that, but I couldn't find a way to give the audience that experience.

**Luciana:** Yes, when you're walking along a structure like that, there's a kind of drama to that experience or a theatrical element.

**Lucy:** Very much. They are very dramatic spaces—evocative and oppressive, yet poetic.

**Luciana:** Also, there's the idea of perspective you mentioned. Either you're seeing something very close or, if it's happening at the other end, everyone sees it in a different way.

**Lucy:** That's right. Each audience member has a different experience of space. Even in terms of the sound, there are small speakers under the chairs and different sounds coming out of different speakers. Haco, the composer, came to Melbourne and went around a lot of public spaces recording all different sounds, and made a very ambient soundscape with people's private conversations in it. From that point of view as well, each person has a kind of unique experience of the performance. Sometimes things are a little hidden by audience. You can see mostly, but there'll be the occasional instance when you miss something. You have to make a choice about what you look at; you have to do that anyway in a performance. And you have to do that in life.

I think often when you're creating work and you're teaching or devising new movement, the time when the dancers are first processing that movement, for me always looks the most interesting because they have this particular kind of engagement with what they're doing, and it hasn't become that polished, sort of presented, performed material. And there's no way of holding on to that really, and you don't want to—you want it to go passed that—but I think in this piece there is some connection still to that. The focus of the dancers, especially if they're receiving instructions through the iPod that we're not hearing, is a very different focus. It's an internal focus and a focus of processing. Also, because the instructions are quite fast, it's not about making aesthetic decisions or decisions about style. I have very much done that in the past, being very particular about what movement I'm going to choose and which movements I'm going to reject. And here there is sort of equality of movements. Rather than it being about what they choose, it's really about the whole process.



photo: Jeff Busby

**Luciana:** So you're not as much the designer in this piece as you have been in the past.

**Lucy:** No. I've choreographed very little in this piece, in that traditional sort of refined way. There are some short sections.

**Luciana:** Is that decision particular to what you're dealing with in this piece or is it something that you've arrived at because of the history of what you've done, where you're no longer so interested in designing.

**Lucy:** I think they affect each other. I was thinking about that on my way here, about whether that decision to remove myself from the physicality of the piece is partly arrived at through many years of one way of choreographing, and wanting to experiment with something else, and also partly because I don't dance as much. But, the subject matter or content of the work is to do with overload and receiving and transmitting information, so to work in that way fits. How is it? Function fits the content?

**Luciana:** You're dealing with language and body—that relationship. Like you said, you're fascinated with that moment when the dancers are processing. I guess when you teach choreography you don't only do it with language; you're doing with your body too. But the more you take yourself away from dance as a mover yourself, then you change your relationship as a maker. When did you stop being in your work? Or, did you completely?

**Lucy:** Yes, definitely. I think the last piece I made that I was in was a piece called *Robbery Waitress on Bail*. I really wanted to be outside to watch it and, you know, I think that changes the work. I think it became more complex after that, which some people would say is good and some people would say is bad. I still dance and I still make material and do class. I try to maintain a way of integrating drama and movement, or psychology and movement, so that I can pass that experience on to the dancers because I can't do what they can do. They are younger and more virtuosic than I am, but I guess it's important for me as a mover to maintain this connection to that dramatic intent, to what's motivating the movement.

**Luciana:** Do you have a practice with your body? Or do you mean that you go in the studio and you improvise and dance.

**Lucy:** Not so much in *Corridor*, but with other works that I made, I've often gone to the studio and tried to find this sort of tone of the movement. I don't try and find the steps or the structure or anything, but before I work with the dancers, I like to know what the tone or quality is to convey to them, and that is somehow connected conceptually to the idea of whatever it is I'm bringing in to work with.

**Luciana:** And you mentioned some sort of psychology or emotional level too. It seems to me that in your work, not to over simplify, but there is always a strong formality in terms of the movement material, not only structurally. But there's also always, I don't know what to call it, emotional content or a tone or feeling connected to it.

**Lucy:** Yes. I suppose that's one of the reasons that I'm so fascinated by this disconnection or connection between how we speak about dance and what it is. It's because it's very hard to translate that, which is why we do dance. Although my background has been in what you could call pure movement or dance for its own sake, I feel that as part of movement there can be, not so much a person expressing emotions or characters, but part of



choreography can also be words or emotions or psychological states—they are all just elements that can be choreographed along with movement.

**Luciana:** Along those lines, I wanted to ask you about the other piece that you're doing here—*Structure and Sadness*—because its title is so loaded already.

photo: Jeff Busby

**Lucy:** It's almost like a split of function and emotion. I've sort of separated them and made this kind of duality between them. The first part of that work is very functional and really about the human body, material, building and working. There's a real functional aspect to the work that we do as dancers. We're dealing with weight and gravity around bodies as form, and what they can do. Because the piece is based on an event where a bridge collapsed and killed 35 men, the second part of the work goes into this more evocative, emotional territory to do with the outcome of that simple act of gravity. There's something very impersonal about the object world. If something is not held properly, it's going to fall down. But for us, that's colossal and tragic, and has these massive repercussions. The second part is these three women in black who represent the widows of the men who lost their lives. And it's a more traditional relationship to dance than I would normally work with. It's a bit different because I don't often work in such a sort emotive way.

**Luciana:** And that happened by circumstance, or...

**Lucy:** When I started working on this event, I was more interested in the structural aspects of it, the idea of disintegration and collapse. But as I worked more and more on that, I realized I had real responsibilities to deal

with other aspects of the event, especially if I was going to say it is about the collapse of the West Gate Bridge (in 1970). It was a strange experience. I started to feel like I needed to represent the loss and the grief and the suffering. I had never worked with something like that before, a historical event or an event of any kind, with anything that previously existed. This was a different way of making work, which was really difficult. I found it very difficult to partly represent something in dance without it being too much of a story-ballet. It was a real challenge and actually very rewarding.

**Luciana:** How do you feel in retrospect now?

**Lucy:** I know that it affects people, which is something that I look for as a choreographer. I like it and I'm very connected to it, but also it's not something that I particularly want to go forward with. There are other aspects of choreography and movement that interest me more, or I find more challenging or complex. This piece has this very simple expressive movement in it that is about sorrow and grief. It was really beautiful and fun to do it in a way because I gave myself permission to try to express emotion through movement. I don't know why I don't let myself do that or I don't want to do that. I suppose is from watching a lot of contemporary ballet that has that sort of yearning, which I've always found not very affecting emotionally. I find that pouring of emotions through dance quite distancing, and that's just personally for me. And getting at it through other ways has given me more access to my own emotions. I suppose that's what I tried to do.

**Luciana:** When you talked about going to the studio alone to find the "tone" of a new work, it made me think of moving and getting at some texture or tone that is evocative of some feeling in the way that music or visual art can be. Not necessarily telling you 'I'm feeling this', but that through experiencing it, as a mover and then as a viewer, it evokes something in you.

**Lucy:** Yeah, it could be sort of a rhythm. It's one element among the different elements that one brings to work. I try to find something that I don't recognize also when I do that. So I'm sort of looking for, not just 'oh, I'm going to do something heavy there, or I'm going to do something light'. I'm looking for a more complex connection to do with emotion, but also, psychology or philosophy, almost. That plus the visual or the symbolism, all of those things come together, but to be able to hang on to that basic physical connection. Once I've set that note, I can keep referring to and that somehow that's helpful in maintaining a connection to the physicality and the body.

**Luciana:** I wanted to touch before we end on the fact that you were here in New York for seven years, was it? And you moved back to Australia. Why did you go back, and how has that changed your work?

**Lucy:** The why is partly about my employment opportunities have always been limited here because I never had a greencard. Also, I am from Australia, and when I moved here initially I wasn't planning on staying seven years. I think I left when I was 36 and I couldn't keep waiting tables four nights a week.

**Luciana:** You had already done several full-evening works then.

Lucy: Yes, and some other choreographers were getting some more supportive work in universities, but I was never able to do that. I knew that if I moved back to Australia, I could get financial support for what I was doing. Part of me too wanted to invest in the dance scene in Australia and contribute to that. It was very hard because I really had a close community of friends and artists here. And I really missed that and I still miss it. I love being back here and reconnecting with those people who I feel like I can talk about dance in a particular way that I don't always have access too, though Becky Hilton also came back and also Phillip Adams spent time here and has come back.

I suppose there is a sense of struggle here, and everywhere in the world if you're in contemporary dance, but there is a real sense of community because of the numbers of people, I think. The really important thing for me when I moved here was there were so many choices, I really felt like I could find a group of people and a type of work that I was really interested in. That was very formative for me to be able to feel that I could fully invest in what I was doing.

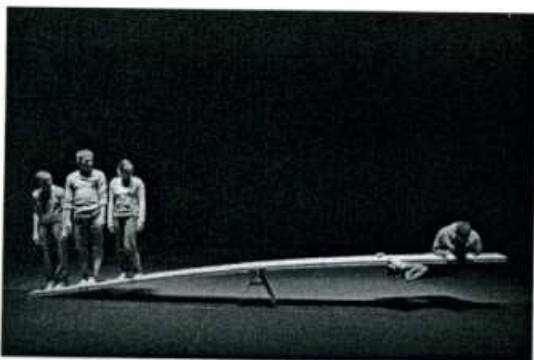


photo: Jeff Busby

Luciana: Gia Kourlas in her article in the New York Times mentioned that even though you have been making work in Australia and it's been a while since you left (1996), one can see that moment in New York when you came into being as a choreographer, that there is some connections with other choreographers.

Lucy: Absolutely.

Luciana: You have that rigor of exploration of movement, what you were talking about, this formal element, this getting the tone and these other layers of meaning or experience that the audience gets from the work that comes from the form and the structure.

Lucy: Yes, very much. When you make work in New York, you don't have much else really, you've got the space and you've got the body. And I think vocabulary and defining vocabulary at the time when I was in New York was very important, to articulate your vocabulary.

Luciana: I came to New York at that time and now looking back, it seems like that is a very defined thing about New York choreographers and it's often used in comparison to European choreographers.

Lucy: It's interesting because although that's still there, in a work like *Corridor* or in other works that I've seen in New York, there's now also a sense of wanting to let that go, or a reaction to that. For me and for younger choreographers too I think. But because it's a reaction, it wouldn't be there without having going through that. So it's different, say, from what is happening in Europe. It's a conscious letting go of, it's not that it's tight, but it is very rigorous and there's a lot of attention to detail and articulation through every joint. All about initiation

and articulation is what that generation really worked with—what moves first and what follows through. And that defined the way people moved and the way people thought about dancing.

To let that go or to move to something else feels almost radical, which it's not. But it feels very different and unique not to work that way. But that's how things change and evolve. I used to spend ages working out new coordinations, everybody did, and interesting relationships for the body. And there are all these techniques for doing that that people developed, you know, doing things backwards, drawing, reading the room, there's millions of them, but just to do a solo that doesn't consider the originality of the body feels almost shocking to me, but also really exciting. And it's not that the movement is different or special really, it's just really the process of engaging with the movement that has shifted.

**Luciana:** As a dancer I was working at that time with Jeremy Nelson and Wil Swanson. I think when I started making work I had a reaction to that, where I wasn't so interested in developing material. It started to feel like 'but why?'

**Lucy:** Yeah. It needs a connection to something else. I guess it became not enough to just do it for its own sake. I think that a lot of people found that they wanted the reasons for making these decisions—the shoulder connected to the finger tip or whatever—connected to a bigger idea.

**Luciana:** It's also about that mind-body thing like you were saying—you were very interested in when the dancers are learning the movement. Maybe the interest is not so much on the design, on what the elbow and the hand do, but how do we relate ourselves to that.

**Lucy:** Yeah. How do we process that? And seeing someone working with their body is very different than seeing someone show you a whole set of coordinations that they've perfected. And both are interesting, but they say different things.