

Warm characters in dance of cool abstraction



Guerin dance company performs tonight at the NAC.

Australian learned craft in America

BY JENNY JACKSON

Australian choreographer Lucy Guerin will bring her dance of cool abstraction and warm characters to the National Arts Centre tonight in her Canadian premiere.

This is the only Canadian stop on her North American tour.

Ottawa audiences will see two pieces, *The End of Things*, about the disintegration of a man's sanity, and *Melt*, which looks at the continuum between freezing and boiling points.

In *The End of Things*, the more narrative of the two, a scrawny, disconsolate man starts morning rituals in a confined little house, while outside, three enigmatic characters dance around. As the piece progresses, they penetrate his barriers until he loses all reason or sense of structure.

Some reviews have called it the end of his life, others the end of his personality. One reviewer thought he'd gone on to a freer existence.

"It's ambiguous whether it's the end of his life," Guerin said in an interview from Houston where the four-member company appeared recently. "I tend to think of it as the end of his reason or grip on reality."

"It's been really fascinating. People in Portland saw his escape as a freeing, positive thing. For me, I thought it was a fairly frightening experience for him. He's trying to relate to these characters that aren't really aware of him or not responsive to him. I welcome all those interpretations."

Melt begins in virtual stillness, two dancers bathed in blue light, their faces blank. Funny, though — judging by the promotional videotapes, they don't look more than usually icy for modern dancers. They only lack the ubiquitous black. And what would we call such dancers? Cool, of course. The piece progresses through warm cosiness to explosive heat.

Guerin has a natural inclination for the abstract if only

because it leaves more room for interpretation. But she has to remind herself that the audience won't necessarily share her enthusiasm.

"An audience really only looks at (a work) once. I've been looking at it every day for months. You can't expect people to get all those layers and levels. You have to allow more access to the work," Guerin said.

She acknowledges that modern dance can be quite alienating, especially to people who are used to relying on language rather than visual or emotional signals to communicate meaning.

"My mother has that problem," she laughed. Sometimes her daughter's work leaves her baffled.

But it was Guerin's mother who got her started on dancing.

"I've got this sneaking suspicion that my mother would have liked to be a dancer. I remember her pointe shoes in our dress-up box, being very fascinated by them and standing up in them."

She took dance classes, but as a teen, dropped out for awhile. It wasn't until adult-

hood that she returned to it.

She lived in New York for seven years, waiting tables while she struggled to shape her career. As tough as it was, it paid off. She won a prestigious Bessie award and a commission from the White Oak Dance Project starring ballet star Mikhail Baryshnikov.

She loved it there but finally had to leave.

"I couldn't see anyone going anywhere as a role model and it's so hard for choreographers and dancers financially," she told a reporter shortly after returning to her Melbourne home. "I could stay there for another 10 years and still wait tables."

In Australia, she has been able to establish a dance company and stay afloat while building an international reputation. But then artistic success is like that, especially in cities like New York — to get far, you have to go far, sometimes all the way home.

Lucy Guerin performs tonight at the NAC at 8:30 p.m. Tickets are \$27-\$37, available in person at the NAC or with surcharges through Ticketmaster (755-1111).