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## Melbourne International Arts Festival: Inside out/outside in

Sophie Travers talks to Lucy Guerin about 2 new festival works



Lucy Guerin  
photo: Tom Burless

Lucy Guerin is showing 2 new works in the 2006 Melbourne International Arts Festival. A major new production, *Structure and Sadness*, about the collapse of Melbourne's Westgate Bridge in 1970, receives its world premiere October 19. Setting is a duet made in Japan premiering in Australia on October 25 as a double bill with Japanese choreographer, Kota Yamazaki's *Chamisa 4degreesC* (see p6). The double bill was instigated by the Australia Japan Dance Exchange (AJDX) and comprises 10 events in both countries in 2006. AJDX is co-ordinated by Hirano Productions in Melbourne and Japan Contemporary Dance Network in Kyoto. With 2 important contributions to the festival, Guerin's status as one of Australia's most important contemporary

choreographers is confirmed. I spoke to her about the projects and the prospects for Lucy Guerin Inc.

**You're just back from Japan. How was that?**

I was away for 6 weeks and it was a really enjoyable experience. I was in Kyoto and Yamaguchi, presenting the work in both places. In Yamaguchi we were in a brand new arts centre which was fantastic.

**How did the premiere go?**

Well, I think. The pieces are very different, and yet there are some similarities, so it worked as a double bill. Both choreographers ended up working with the experience of being in a foreign place.

**Had you met the other choreographer, Kota Yamazaki, before?**

I met him for a drink when he was over for the last Melbourne Festival. But he's not that confident with his English, so we didn't talk much. And this time we only chatted a little too.

**So the double bill is not collaboration?**

Not at all, the productions are very separate. He made his here and I made mine in Japan. We auditioned our dancers separately. I'm working with a Japanese composer, Haco, but that has nothing to do with Yamazaki.

**So the similarities come by chance?**

Yes, I think we both found our experience of each other's country very foreign.

**Was this your first visit?**

Actually I had been there with Russell Dumas and Becky Hilton when I was 22, on our way back from touring somewhere. But we weren't performing, just looking at Kyoto and Tokyo, as part of our 'education' with Russell.

**Did you have a chance to take in much this time?**

Not really. The 6 weeks were pretty intensive. We were in the studio for 4, producing for one and performing for another. I did have a bicycle though and loved riding around.

**So the work is not about Kyoto or Yamaguchi?**

No, the piece was inspired by the dancers. I interviewed them on my first visit and

Haco recorded the interviews to make a soundtrack, which then inspired the choreography and the props. The piece is made entirely from these external sources, which is new for me. Normally I make my work from an internal concern.

**Why embark upon a new process for a commission? That's risky, isn't it?**

Yes, very risky. But I've done a few commissions and find that the context in which I end up working is often very different from what I was expecting. So if you arrive with too many plans and preconceptions, it can be hard to achieve what you had in mind. This time I decided to just head over there and respond to the situation and let the piece grow out of my experience rather than impose any pre-thought-out ideas. It was a lot more enjoyable. And terrifying too! This could really not have worked out.

When you're making a commission you certainly feel responsible to the people who put the money and support behind it. There's an extra pressure. But my last experience of a commission, in Rotterdam, was not so good and I didn't want to repeat it. Why do these if they're not worthwhile? I needed to question my whole way of approaching commissions.

**And you have another piece in the festival to act as some sort of insurance.**

Yes! The 2 pieces are a good balance. The Japanese piece is gentle, light-hearted. I was able to express a happier tone, because the Westgate piece is about a traumatic, disastrous event.

**That piece also feels like a departure.**

In some ways, yes. The main difference is that it grew out of research into an actual event, located in a specific place and time. How that has translated into dance is quite abstract however. I was interested in the way that large physical subject disintegrated. I read about the engineering forces that led to the collapse—compression support, tensile support, buckling and sheering—and applied these to the human body. I looked at how gravity affected the dancers' movement. Whilst I didn't do much research into the human stories, aside from the accounts of victims and witnesses, which are in the public domain, the emotional repercussions did naturally emerge. It also started out very specific but has become more universal and could be about any disaster now.

You have a set in this piece. Is that also new for you?

It's new to have a set and digital projections together. I am working with Michaela French again on motion graphics and Bluebottle (Ben Cobham, Andrew Livingston) have constructed a beautiful set. I really wanted the presence of the bridge.



Byron Perry, Structure and Sadness

photo: Jeff Busby

**What else is happening with the company?**

We are looking for new office and studio space, as the VCA high school is taking over our current home. We are hoping to continue our Pieces for Small Spaces program (RT70, p38), despite our lack of venue. In that project I invite people I work with in and outside the company to create work for studio presentation. I think it's important to be inclusive and create opportunities for the younger people coming up. We do a lot of secondments for dancers from the colleges and, when we have a project on, we always hold open class. It's important to maintain links to the local scene, so we're hoping to do some workshops at The Meat Market as well as the Mobile States presentations of Love Me there.

**And internationally you are building relationships too?**

We have some great touring opportunities coming up. We're taking an excerpt of Aether to CINARS (the international performing arts market in Montreal) at the end of the year. We're also working with a US agent [Harold Norris of H-Art Management] on a tour of Aether in the States in 2007.

**And you were in the UK recently?**

Yes, in Belfast and Manchester as part of The Australia Council's Undergrowth program.

**Structurally is the company in good shape?**

Yes, we received triennial funding from the Australia Council for the first time this year and are looking for more security in our funding relationship with Arts Victoria [currently the company receives project funding only]. We have a business plan, which seeks more funds, but we don't want to grow our infrastructure too much. We're still a small company and keen to maintain the balance of our activities. We try to keep our infrastructure in proportion to the work I want to make. Some projects are larger, but I can still go off and make a small piece if that is what the idea demands.

**So you have reasons to be cheerful?**

I tend to be optimistic about this side of things. Like most artists, I have doubts about my work, but I am really happy with the opportunities the company has at the moment.

Lucy Guerin, Structure and Sadness, Merlyn Theatre, Malthouse, Oct 19-21; Setting, Malthouse, Melbourne, Oct 25-28

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