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Build. Collapse. Rebuild. – SpeakEasy for Structure and Sadness

by **Jessica Fiala** at 2:08 pm 2011-10-09

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Following the Saturday evening performance of Lucy Guerin's *Structure and Sadness*, a group of audience members convened in the McGuire theatre's balcony bar for a SpeakEasy, an informal discussion designed to offer an opportunity to share ideas, interpretations, and questions. This weekend's conversation was facilitated by choreographer and Walker tour guide Ray Terrill and Otto Ramstad of the Body Cartography Project. This blog is drawn from participants' comments and offers an online forum for continued discussion.

Structure and Sadness begins with a non-emotional exploration of the limits of materials. A solo dancer opens the evening manipulating a flat rectangle, establishing its boundaries and testing its ability to fold, bear weight, and fall. The company expands this introductory theme, methodically constructing an architectural form that angles to an apex and fills the stage. Individuals break off in ones and twos to conduct precise choreographic investigations of engineering apparatuses and to foreshadow the disaster to come, blurring balances, suspensions, and falls.

Taking, as Otto suggested, a formalist approach to catastrophe, Guerin's piece emphasizes the exactitude of sciences connected to built environments. In an efficient, pedestrian manner dancers perform the work of construction while vignettes suggest a larger underlying order and logic. Precise movements turn angular bodies into interacting tools and imply the systematized disciplines of engineering or architecture, herein displaying the mathematics of structures and construction through the physics of bodies. The grandness of architecture is reduced to a human scale as dancers coolly engage with their materials, assuming a stability that is never ensured.

As the program notes indicate, this attentive work is already doomed. The dancers are retelling the story of a tragic 1970 Melbourne bridge collapse. Onstage the structure tumbles, a pop song is interrupted, and as a chorus moans, one dancer reels from the sudden emotional impact, staggering helplessly across the now open space. Coping with the shock, performers pick up the pieces, regaining composure and responding with the familiar formulas introduced earlier in the performance.

We build, our efforts crumble before our eyes, and we rebuild. Is this new attempt conducted with a greater awareness, a deepened connection between bodies, and a transformed sense of our own fragility? Do we approach the rebuilding disillusioned, anticipating a future disaster and fearing the unknown flaws built into our new structure? Do we memorialize and then forget, reverting to life as it was?

Structure and Sadness is an evening divided into meticulous construction and the ensuing aftermath when this order falls apart. The specific Australian history depicted in is echoed across time and space in our recent 35W bridge collapse and the tragedy of

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9-11. The trust and innocence of a time before catastrophe is seen in a new light from the other side of such events. Impacted in diverse ways, individuals collect to mourn, memorialize, and begin constructing anew. Through work, tragedy, and protest, bodies congregate. This gathering offers both the promise of what we might accomplish as well as a reminder of our frailty. Guerin's soloists invite audience members to consider the larger system informing any singular project, to see our varied efforts in context, and to hopefully find a means to both remember and continue on.

Read blogs about *Structure and Sadness* by [Penelope Freeh](#) and [Emily Taylor](#).

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