

Take it to the bridge

October 8, 2006

Choreographer Lucy Guerin has tackled the story of the West Gate Bridge collapse as a tribute to rebuilt lives, writes John Bailey.

It looms large on the Melbourne skyline, bearing an emotional register of equal dimension: for many, the West Gate Bridge will always be a reminder of the morning in October 1970 when the collapse of 2000 tonnes of concrete and steel claimed the lives of 35 construction workers.

But, this year, the city's worst industrial disaster has inspired a modern dance work, *Structure and Sadness*, which will have its world debut at the Melbourne International Arts Festival in 10 days' time, days after the 26th anniversary of the collapse. How can you dance a disaster?

It's a difficult question, admits Lucy Guerin. The petite 45-year-old has spent several months trying to find a way to choreograph catastrophe. The answer, she believes, is not to be literal. Searching for a hook, she kept returning to the stories of collapsing bridges.

"When I first came to Melbourne, I remember seeing the West Gate and knowing that it had this kind of tragic taint," she says. "And it's been interesting because everyone you talk to has a story about the bridge."

It must have been frightening to tackle such a powerful subject with no personal experiences of the incident. Was this a concern for her?

"Not so much in the beginning, but the more that I researched the story, the more I asked whether it was for me to make a piece about this event. And I guess that's what it became, it really did become an outsider's perception of what happened. I deliberately kept it that way." Guerin does acknowledge, however, that many of those most directly affected by the West Gate collapse might not be so familiar with the realm of contemporary dance. Danny Gardiner is a chairman of the West Gate Bridge Memorial Committee, and admits that a dance piece responding to the collapse would hardly be his area of expertise.

"Mate, I'm no art aficionado. I've got to say, it sounded a bit odd, but isn't that what art is?" he says.

But he describes the way that many Melburnians would see the bridge, perhaps drive over it every day,



Lucy Guerin in her studio.

Photo: *Supplied*

without realising its significance to construction workers and the city's inhabitants more generally. For Gardiner, who worked on the bridge's reconstruction from the rubble, the nature of an artwork such as *Structure and Sadness* is secondary to its usefulness in keeping people mindful of the event.

"Anything that keeps putting that up - about these men who lost their lives just doing their work, going to earn a quid, doing their normal duties. And then 35 of them get killed in one industrial accident. It just shows you, you've got to be vigilant. You've got to work safely and go home in one piece."

This isn't the first time the West Gate collapse has been given artistic treatment. Earlier this year, the Melbourne Workers Theatre production *We Built This City* was performed at Scienceworks in Spotswood, the bridge visible on the horizon, and featured unionists speaking of the disaster as part of the show's tribute to Melbourne's construction and building workers. Director Donna Jackson had also previously staged Vicki Reynolds' play, *The Bridge*, which explored the collapse and its aftermath.

Visit the West Gate Memorial Park today and you'll find a series of 35 sculpted pillars, a memorial to each of the workers who lost their lives there.

But how can something of this magnitude be expressed through dance?

On a frosty afternoon last June, as 80,000 workers marched to protest against the new IR laws, a group of dancers tried to work out a solution deep within Carlton's Trades Hall, that bastion of union activity.

Beginning with an empty stage, the dancers created a towering construction of dazzling complexity, a house of cards built from hundreds of squares of wood. From one tiny corner, it arched to a five-metre crest, filling the space with a sense of both presence and precariousness. It was not a literal rendition of the West Gate; it was not intended to be.

"We wanted it to be living," Guerin says of the show's ambitious set, "an integral part of the piece, not just the backdrop."

Fast-forward to early October, with the show's opening approaching fast. Guerin has just returned from a working trip to Japan, and is about to return to rehearsals for *Structure and Sadness*. The choreographer, who isn't originally from Melbourne, came to understand the bridge's significance only after arriving here.

Initially, she set about gathering the personal experiences of those affected by the tragedy, but decided that dance did not seem the right medium to tell those stories. For this reason, her research shifted to information accessible to anyone, from the Public Records Office, descriptions from books and the internet, and the official report of the Royal Commission into the bridge's (euphemistically labelled) "failure".

The resulting work doesn't try to explain the collapse of the bridge. Instead, it is a kind of dialogue between two ideas, the "structure" and "sadness" of the work's title.

In the first half, the performers use their bodies to demonstrate the kinds of physical forces that play a part in the engineering of great structures such as the West Gate Bridge. Limbs become tensile cables; bodies are compressed, precariously balanced, slotted together or wrenched apart. Guerin soon realised that the language of engineering has strong emotional parallels: "When you're using support

and the withdrawal of support, or pressure that buckles, it has a sense of vulnerability, or of letting down other people. So that translated for me into the more emotional side of the story."

Guerin grew up in Adelaide, entering the world of dance via her local ballet school before studying at Adelaide's Centre for Performing Arts. After graduating, she made her way to Sydney. In 1989, she headed for New York, a move that was to prove decisive. For seven years, she danced with choreographers such as Terry O'Conner, Bebe Miller and Sara Rudner, and eventually found the confidence to begin creating her own work.

"The companies that I worked with (in New York) only worked certain months of the year. The rest of the time, the other dancers would all go on unemployment, but, because I was Australian, I couldn't get that. I rented this little rehearsal studio for five dollars an hour, and decided I was going to make a solo."

The problem with going solo, however, is that you can't sponsor your own visa, and the US green card system is notoriously difficult to negotiate.

"I was well into my 30s," says Guerin, "and still waiting tables. I couldn't really get better jobs than that since I didn't have that green card."

She returned to Australia, to Melbourne, in 1996. Her early works here, such as *Two Lies* and *Robbery Waitress on Bail*, got good reviews, while more daring later work (such as the dense and complex *Aether* and last year's *Love Me*) cemented her standing as one of the city's most prominent choreographers.

Researching the West Gate disaster for *Structure and Sadness*, Guerin's sympathies were piqued not just by those who died, but by those left behind.

"The more I looked into the story, the more I couldn't imagine what it must have been like for the families, and the wives whose husbands went off to work, and then they never saw them again."

Ultimately, she says, *Structure and Sadness* isn't about death. It's about grief. To suffer, at least, is to be alive, and perhaps this is where the show becomes something other than a mausoleum piece. It's a tribute to life, to the lives that were crushed by the disaster, but were slowly rebuilt.

"In some ways, the dead were dead, and there's not really a lot I can say about that," says Guerin. "It's really about the people who remain, and how they have to go on with, and deal with, the rest of their lives."

Structure and Sadness will be performed at the CUB Malthouse from October 18-21. Ticketmaster 1300 136 166.

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