

Degrees of inspiration

DANCE THEATRE

Lucy Guerin Inc.

Dancers Are Space Eaters Festival
At PICA

Review: Naomi Millett

GIVEN Perth's recent heatwave, multi-award winning Victorian choreographer Lucy Guerin's *Melt* probably had extra relevance to the hot and sweaty capacity audience at this final festival event.

Based on the idea of using movement to represent different temperatures, the 20-minute opener in this double bill begins with a welcome "cool" interlude.

Bathed in bright light, dancers Kirstie McCracken and Stephanie Lake, in white singlets and skirts, stand close together, as immobile (at first) as a couple of fish fingers at the back of the freezer.

Franc Tetaz's subdued electronica and sounds of dripping water and creaking ice reinforce the chilled feeling, and even the dancers' expressions are frozen into blankness.

Soon the pair begin to thaw, wiggling their icicle-like, splayed fingers, flexing stiff limbs and shuddering like creatures resurfacing after hibernation. Hardly moving their feet, the pair synchronise arm and torso movements (reminiscent of Indian dance) as if of one mind, their crisply defined silhouettes adding further visual complexity.

On screen behind them, subtle motion graphic designs play, with jagged lines suggesting cracks in ice or a vista of icebergs. Upping the intensity by degrees, the well-matched dancers then separate, one (in blue light) representing "cold", the other (overlaid with a pink glow) "hot".

Among many stirring images is the moment the warmer dancer gently embraces her shivering companion in a snowstorm, and a sudden magical shower of spring flowers heralds a change in the weather.

In Guerin's world, nothing stays stable for long and seconds later the climate soars. Both now immersed in projected leaping flames



Ros Warby and Stephanie Lake in *Melt*.

and, accompanied by a score on fast forward, the pair explore the physical and emotional aspects of heat, conveying exhaustion, anger and passion, before a sizzling finale in which each literally goes up in smoke.

Equally riveting, though thematically darker and more narrative based, is Guerin's 45-minute *The Ends of Things*.

This features a repressed, compulsive man (Trevor Patrick) existing in a restricted, often nightmarish world. His 3D "house" is centre stage and in the first minutes he mimes domestic actions — dressing in daggy clothes, making a cup of tea, "combing over" his sparse hair, listening to the radio and even

going to the toilet. On a backdrop, slides of a drab kitchen and bathroom reinforce the concept, as do Tetaz's perfectly timed sound effects.

But the character's life is changing, perhaps even ending, and the mood is ominous. "Outside" the house, three other grey-clad dancers (McCracken, Lake and Byron Perry) lurk in the shadows.

Who they are is never made clear, though their influence on the man is profound. Easily disturbed, without purpose and isolated, he fails to make contact with another soul. Grappling with the telephone, for example, he is put "on hold", offered a string of nonsensical options and eventually cut off.

It is one of several blackly humorous metaphors that drew nervous laughter from the crowd. If John Fowles' novel *The Collector* was distilled into dance, the middle section of this piece may have been the result. The man's single interest is butterfly collecting and he pores over his specimens as if gaining pleasure from having trapped, killed and ultimately possessed the beautiful creatures.

Outside, to low key techno and heartbeat rhythms, the trio transform into insects and butterflies that flutter, dart, flail and twist. You can sense them moving in and they do, to torment and manipulate the man in his sleep. Are they aspects of his conscience? Or rebellious parts of his personality that he fights to subdue?

Like much new dance, Guerin's works are deliberately ambiguous. Such is her vision, and the team's skill, however, that one's attention is completely held; the sophisticated movement is so well integrated with the ambient sound and lighting that the viewer becomes compelled to interpret what is happening.

It took PICA director Sarah Miller five years of planning to get Guerin and her team to Perth and from the standing ovations on opening night it seems the effort has paid off.

The opportunity to see works of Guerin's extraordinary calibre are what festivals like *Dancers Are Space Eaters* are all about.