

So, they think they can dance

Two ordinary blokes attempt to mimic the moves of the pros with hilarious results.

FESTIVAL

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TWO professional dancers walk onto a stage and, with effortless grace, perform a series of steps. Beside them, two people with no more dance experience than a late-night boogie at a wedding party are then required to attempt the same moves.

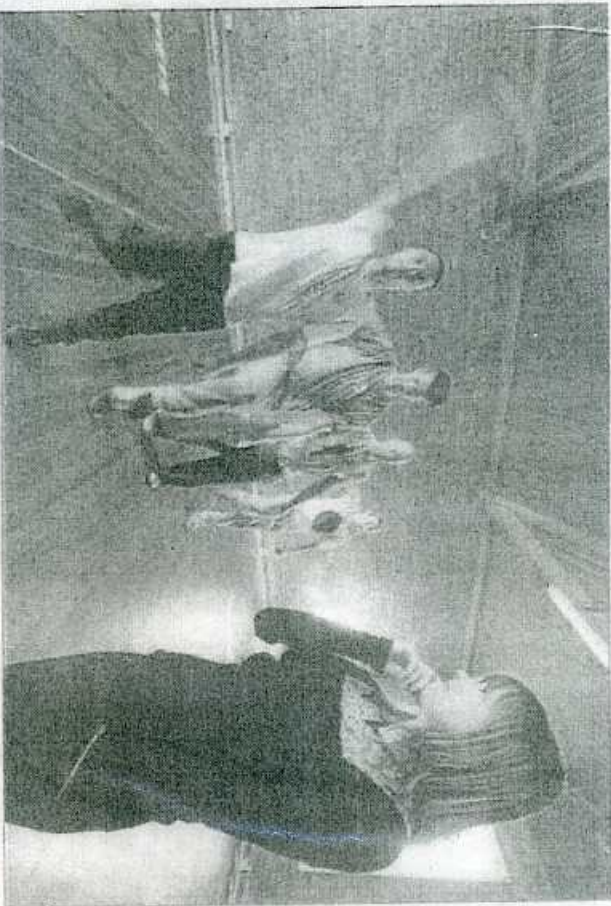
The mimicry by the amateur dancers is also applied to other creative acts — acting a film scene or writing a song — and to more prosaic activities, such as eating a biscuit or taking off a shirt.

For anyone with two left feet, Lucy Guerin's latest work seems the stuff of nightmares but the dancer-turned-choreographer says humiliation was never her intention. Rather Guerin wanted to explore how training shapes dancers' behaviour, both on and off the stage.

"Working with untrained dancers has been happening for a long time," says Guerin, who spent more than 15 years dancing professionally around the world.

"But I was looking at how dance experience shapes people physically and mentally. One of the things it demonstrates is how intrinsic dance becomes. At a forum after one of the shows, one of the dancers said he approaches each of his tasks through the medium of dance. He thinks physically, through his body."

The project began as a one-week "experiment" in July 2007 but Guerin saw the potential to turn it into a performance, *Lucy Guerin: Untrained*. After premiering at Dance Massive in Melbourne, *Untrained* comes to Sydney in September as part of Spring Dance at the Sydney Opera House.



Follow the leader ... Lucy Guerin and the dancers from *Untrained*.

Photo: Gary Medlicott

Her work is on the program alongside that of superstar flamenco dancer Eva Yerbabuena, Japanese street dance artist Hiroaki Umeda, a new work from choreographer Meryl Tankard performed by Paul White and works from emerging choreographers from the Sydney Dance Company and Australian Dance Theatre.

Spurred by the revival of dance as an art form through reality television, the house's head of theatre and dance, Wendy Martin, has included *MyMutation*, an online dance competition open to the public culminating in *MyMutation Live*, a "club night" held in the Opera House studio.

If successful, Martin hopes to make Spring Dance an annual event. The idea was inspired by the re-emergence of dance in popular culture and the success of the Sydney Festival's *About an Hour* program.

"I wanted to build on this huge passion that people seem to be developing for dance ... by including accessible events. One hour is not a big commitment," Martin says. "But I also wanted an event that walked the line between a popular festival and one that is taken seriously by the dance community."

Guerin says the audience often laughs in sympathy with the ungainly actions of the

untrained dancers. "I think non-dancers can't help but put themselves in the place of one of the untrained dancers," Guerin says. "By the end they are pretty much seen as heroes."

While the experienced dancers betray their training, the untrained dancers also display their own physical history.

"It is really difficult to imagine what it would be like to have not had dance training when you have been doing it for 10 years," she says. "But the way people move shows other things. What sports they have played or if they slump in their chair."

Casting the trained dancers, Luke Smiles and Byron Perry, was relatively simple. In casting the untrained dancers, visual artists Ross Coulter and Simon Obarzanek, Guerin says she was looking for people willing to "understand that they would feel ungainly and uncoordinated."

She was keen to use male dancers, because "they tend to be a bit more self-conscious about how they move". Creating the work was a very different experience for Guerin.

"Normally I would choreograph everything in great detail and then spend time refining it," she says. "With this I haven't made any of these movements myself and it is not a work with a subject or a theme." Guerin is aware her untrained dancers will eventually meet their use-by date.

"There was one task to fall over in slow motion — the first time they did it was brilliant, they were so ungainly," she says. "It is quite surprising how much they have already improved. If that went on it would undermine the piece."

Spring Dance runs from Thursday to the end of September at the Sydney Opera House. *Lucy Guerin: Untrained* is on from September 2 to 5. Tickets \$25.

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