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Adventuresome Aussie dance company Lucy Guerin Inc. explores info overload.

BY **LISSA BRENNAN**



Information overload: Kyle Kremerskothen (low) and Kirstie McCracken in Aether. Photo courtesy of Rachelle Roberts.

When we say that something has "gone into the ether," we mean that it has vanished. It's not exactly gone -- it hasn't disappeared from the world entirely -- but for us it might as well have. Talk of the "ethereal" references that which we find elusive, something otherworldly and possibly insubstantial.

Aether is Lucy Guerin's title for the full-length dance work her eponymous company will present, courtesy of the Pittsburgh Dance Council, as part of the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust's Australia Festival. The piece examines the assault of information we undergo daily through interactions other than face-to-face conversation: telephone, fax, e-mail, Internet, text messages, television, print, billboards. This surplus of attempted communication often breeds malfunction: When we're barraged with data we end up overwhelmed, and the impossibility of ferreting out what we actually need or want to know can lead to surrender. We'll probably never get it, so we don't even try.

To investigate the struggle to dissect and analyze this onslaught of words and image, choreographer Guerin offers a whole composed of two divergent halves. With motion-graphic designer Michaela French, Guerin begins by reconstructing the bombardment. There are projections of spooling digits and evolving formulas, and twitchy and seemingly uncontrolled movement; the sound, by Gerald Mair, evokes a maelstrom of beeping and whirring, with fuzzy, static-corrupted announcements exploding into chaos, too many things happening for any one to emerge with clarity.

In the *Aether's* latter segment, communications technology is stripped away and we're left with the human. While the opening salvo demands flawless practical skill of the dancers -- who must become almost robotic as their bodies jolt from motion to motion but their eyes rarely meet -- the closing segment requires that they show up as individuals. Here, Guerin veers from the technical precision of dance and moves into theater, requiring connection that goes deeper than the body.

While the confederacy of these dissimilar segments might seem surprising in a single evening's presentation, it's a little less of a shock for those familiar with Guerin's body of work. Though her company is relatively young (the ensemble was formed in 2002), it's already developed a solid reputation. Guerin had previously earned a name as an independent choreographer and dancer, first based in New York City and later returning to Melbourne, Australia. (She's an Adelaide native.) She established a company of her own so that she could devote her time to generating new works to tour. At that, Guerin has been extremely successful: In the five years since the company's birth, she has taken pieces throughout the U.S. and Europe, as well as Australia.

The company's stock-in-trade is trafficking in the unpredictable, exploring every avenue. Projections have been used; sets have been elaborate; ultra-orchestrated scores and fantastical costuming have accompanied frenetic, micro-managed choreography in which the creator controls every motion down to the dancers' breath and the cast of their eyes. In other works, all of this is dropped in favor of simplicity, and burrowing into the depths of what it means to be human. Subject matter swerves from the intimately personal to the hugely historical. But rarely have all of these vast and varied continents been landed upon in one piece. With *Aether*, Guerin has managed to encapsulate the myriad of styles she's been known to conquer into a single evening of performance.

Lucy Guerin Inc. performs Aether 8 p.m. Sat., Nov. 3. Byham Theater, 101 Sixth St., Downtown. \$19-40. 412-456-6666 or www.AustraliaFestival.org

THE AUSTRALIAN – Monday March 14 2005

Dancing through chaos

Lucy Guerin's latest work explores identity lost in a sea of messages, reports **Vicki Fairfax**

IT may have been her Adelaide upbringing or the rigours of childhood ballet lessons, but there is something curiously genteel and accommodating about dancer-choreographer Lucy Guerin. Underneath, though, is a shrewd intellect and an urge to snub convention. These qualities have contributed to a growing international reputation in the field of contemporary dance.

Guerin, who lives and works in Melbourne, has not so much flouted dance-world traditions as quietly ignored them. Her inspiration frequently comes from philosophical musings — whimsical reflections on sleep patterns, heat or even waitresses. She is fascinated by constructed environments, and the way in which we conduct the public and private events of our lives.

Tracing her inspiration to New York artists such as Sara Rudner, Guerin sets out to not merely explore philosophical questions but to render them tangible in rhythm and texture.

"It's always easy when you start out — everything's new," says Guerin, who founded her own dance company, Lucy Guerin Inc, in 2001. "But then you can keep repeating yourself — you start working between parameters. It is a point for me not to repeat."

She revels in paradox and situations that have no easy resolution. Her choreography focuses on the small gesture: she can create a whole dance, for example, out of the juxtaposition of elbows and fluttering fingers.

These idiosyncratic movements are frequently combined in performance with layered, electronic scores, animation, graphics and sophisticated lighting effects — all the technological wizardry available to the modern artist. Yet there is nothing ostentatious or self-consciously clever about the finished work.

Her latest piece, *Aether*, is the result of a conversation that took place "over several months" between Guerin and her long-time collaborator, award-winning motion graphic designer Michaela French. From Guerin's dance studio above a Melbourne car park, the pair would look at the cityscape and muse about all the different forms of communication that were at that moment passing between people and buildings.

They wondered what would happen if it were all to coalesce into a great, dark, textured mass of signals: text messages, billboards, emails, faxes and phone calls. How do we find ways to express our ideas and feelings and co-ordinate our desires amid this chaos, they asked themselves. All this is now the substance of *Aether*.

Now Guerin is rehearsing the final sequence of the work at the North Melbourne Town Hall. The dancers are performing in shafts of white light, against a black background. They dance mostly in pairs, reaching out with fingers, elbows and ankles as each tries to make contact in some way with another. Guerin watches them intently. She is not a demonstrative person, but there is an expression of quiet satisfaction on her face.

She didn't choose an easy road to a choreographic career. Guerin graduated from Adelaide's Centre for Performing Arts in 1982 and then joined two of the country's most challenging contemporary dance teachers and choreographers: Russell Dumas at Sydney's Dance Exchange and Nanette Hassall at Danceworks in Melbourne. In 1989 she left for New York and worked with Bebe Miller and the inimitable Rudner, among others. In the years since



Thinking on her feet: Lucy Guerin comes to grips with contemporary urban life in *Aether*

Picture: Brett Hartwig

she has garnered a swag of awards and glowing reviews, and her name is known to dance cognoscenti in the US, Britain and Europe.

Guerin's company is closely aligned with another Melbourne outfit, Chunky Move — her long-term partner is that company's artistic director, Gideon Obarzanek. Apart from personal and business connections, there's a distinctive dance idiom between the companies, too. *The Australian's* Melbourne dance critic, Lee Christofis, calls it the "Melbourne aesthetic": strong, fearless movement and a certain quirky isolation and articulation of the joints.

Collaboration is not new for Guerin: with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in 2003 she created a solo dance version of Stravinsky's *Firebird*; with Opera Australia in 2004 she devised dances for *Dido and Aeneas* and *Il*

Combattimento; with Patricia Piccinini she worked on an installation called *Plasticine Park* at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image. Two of her works, *Two Lies* and *Soft Centre*, have been performed by Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Project.

Her most successful and robust collaborations, however, have been with her dancers, who are some of the best in the country. Ros Warby and Stephanie Lake were mesmerising together in *Melt*, and Trevor Patrick was haunting in *The Ends of Things*. She danced with her good friend Rebecca Hilton — a powerfully dramatic stage presence — in *Incarnadine*.

Of Guerin's own performances, New York critic Deborah Jowitt has described her as "small, lean and strong [with] a tartness to her dancing". Christofis likes the "particularity" of

Guerin's dance and choreography. But not all of her work has met with unalloyed approval. Christofis says it can sometimes appear "too dry, too cerebral".

Sit in any studio with a group of young dancers and students these days, especially in Melbourne, and almost all of them will acknowledge Guerin as a big influence. They are drawn to the complexity of her work, its highly conceptual nature.

Indeed, Guerin does not feel a need to address expectations or shy away from oddity — willing, instead, to leave the spectator to savour the images and to garner their own meanings. "It's a task that's not so easy in dance," she says.

Aether opens at North Melbourne Town Hall tonight.

Graphic display dazzles senses

DANCE

Aether

By Lucy Guerin. Lucy Guerin Inc. North Melbourne Town Hall, March 15. Tickets: \$15-\$21. Bookings: (03) 9685 5111. Until March 27.

THERE'S an irony about Lucy Guerin's use of archaic spelling for the title of her new dance work, *Aether*. It elicits connotations of pure air, stars and eternity from classical or romantic literature and metaphysics.

But there is little room for romanticising here as Guerin plunges her audience into an entirely contemporary world informed by modern astronomy and bombarded by information of every kind. The ensuing overload is not a mere syndrome but an epidemic.

What seems an innocuous beginning — five dancers sitting among shreds of newspaper, folding it into pellets and strange shapes — is soon disturbed by sensations of invasion and disorientation.

This is first manifested in Michaela French's motion graphics: faded, lolly-coloured text and circuit boards against a pale acid-green ground. With sudden shifts in Gerald Mair's sound score, the dancers rise and articulate swift connections with their arms across their torsos — like brain synapses — and execute complex, multi-dimensional trajectories to the ends of their limbs.

In the audience, eyes dart from text to bodies, to single words, while the text mushrooms and spills across the space, in tune with noisy, mechanistic sound, colonising the dancers' bodies.

And just when you think you can't



Text messages: Dancers make connections in Lucy Guerin's highly creative *Aether*

handle any more — the electronic imagery soon loses theatrical value — entering lighting artist Keith Tucker. His wonderful projected light throws a soft glow over the space and a long band of light at the back, as dancers settle into ingeniously crafted duets, using small points, like fingertips or shoulders, to connect. Crackly excerpts from *La Traviata* help to highlight the body's desire, and capacity, to make a direct personal impact — not replicating strings of information — although isolation, futility and diffidence appear too.

At this point Guerin and the dancers reach into startling new territory, combining wordless vocalising — open-throated, muffled, high-pitched whinnying — and a mix of robotic gestures and rubbery facial

expressions to generate *Aether*'s most compelling section. Dancers control one another with economical robotic gestures — folding, twisting, lifting and dumping in many wacky ways.

Guerin's humour is delicious here, but it's underscored with sadness. Anthony Hamilton is a loser among a bunch of youngsters. They stare at him dispassionately as he launches into an extravagant aria of frustration for body and voice, trying to be noticed, understood. It is a masterly, sad-denying dance of desperation, a stand-out among the stunning finesse and daring displayed by such a champion as Byron Perry, and by Kirstie McCracken, Kyle Kremerskothen and Lee Serie.

Lee Christofis

CHRISTOFIS

■ AETHER

Where: North Melbourne Town Hall, until March 27
Reviewer: Stephanie Glickman

AT FIRST, Lucy Guerin's *Aether* overflows with intricate movement.

The choreography is fast and furious, from prodding duets and folding, collapsing bodies to a linking chain of thrashing rolls and falls against a numbing sound score of bleeps and keyboard clatter.

The dancers are flying particles in a fast world expressed in the layering of relentless movement against Michaela French's equally busy motion graphics projected behind them.

It's all too much, but that is Guerin's point. Her choreographic overload assaults like nervous chatter. Such is the information overload of our daily lives.

The first half rests within the Guerin choreographic aesthetic, though more frenetic than usual; the second ventures into a different state.

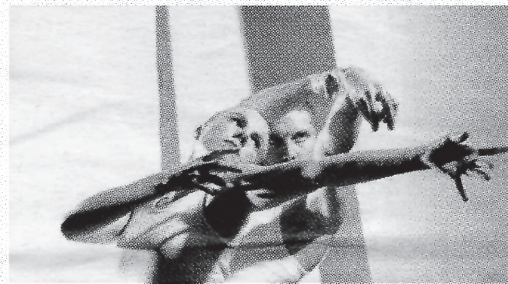
Close-ups of body parts — heads, arms, torsos — accentuate flesh and humanity.

Byron Perry and Anthony Hamilton, in a robotic courting ritual, humorously try communication through mechanical gibberish and facial expressions.

As crazy and disorienting as *Aether* is, it is well-conceived and clear in thematic intent.

dance lucy beaumont

Aether, Lucy Guerin inc



WHERE: North Melbourne Town Hall

WHEN: To March 27

TICKETS: \$22/\$15. Bookings: 9685 5111

★★★★☆

From news bulletins to text messages, emails and 24-hour phone contact, Lucy Guerin's latest work focuses on a modern problem: what to take in and what to swat away. It begins with five dancers at various points on a spidery trail of shredded newsprint, a blank green screen above them. As their movements surpass binary simplicity, so too the screen becomes dense with chaotic data, impossible to decipher. Then a shaft of light cuts through the darkness, providing a window through which body parts and connections are selectively shown. The dancers aren't human yet, but the sequence, and the shadows cast, show the potential for beauty amid the chaos of communication.

Next, things get a lot more animated. Attempts at human connections are accompanied by grunts, squeals, moans and growls that (apart from a spot-on vacuum cleaner impersonation) could only be made by non-machines. Occasional glitches pose questions about technology and our control of it.

This is not the first work to tackle the digital realm but, in examining our interaction with it, *Aether* is concise, effective and original, with fantastic performances on stage (Byron Perry is always magnetic and is well matched by Kirstie McCracken) and a skilled behind-stage team.

Complications of contemporary communication

DANCE REVIEW AETHER

Lucy Guerin Company, North Melbourne Town Hall, until March 27

Chloe Smethurst Reviewer

THERE are two very distinct halves to *Aether*. The first is intensely dense and complex, with streams of information looping back over each other until it becomes impossible to absorb in one sitting.

The dancers are surrounded by trails of torn and scrunched newspaper that run between them like visible lines of communication. Kirstie McCracken sits upright as her disembodied, creepy, scrambling fingers explore her body. Her hands occasionally pause, as though extracting data from her, before scuttling on to the next juncture.

The choreography continues in this vein, as the dancers randomly meet and disconnect

from each other. Their movements escalate from balletic stiffness combined with compulsive twitching, like a video stuck on pause, through to spiralling leaps and dynamic partnering work.

At one point they join hands in a turbulent knot that imitates cells multiplying. Even while physically connected they appear as discrete bytes of information, lacking even eye contact with each other.

Michaëla French's motion graphics design substantially contributes to the chaos. Images, formulas, rehearsal notes and a million fragments of data gradually overwhelm the dancers and performance space.

The accompanying sound is digital and atmospheric. At times it seemed that composer Gerald Mair had recorded sound inside an internet server, capturing the traffic of information, uploading, downloading, compacting and



Dancers from the Lucy Guerin Company perform *Aether*.

more different from the first. Clearing away the projector screen, newspaper clutter and recorded sound, the dancers begin a series of disjointed physical-theatre type skits, almost entirely abandoning dance.

Here Guerin tries to focus on the difficulties we have in relating to each other. There are priceless sequences, such as Byron Perry and Kyle Kremerskothen's hydraulic vacuum duet, complete with appropriate sound effects, and Antony Hamilton's humorous, plasticine-man conversation with an equally mobile Perry.

Yet overall the second section was too slow, awkwardly directed and overly long. While a valid experiment, it could not compare with the refined and detailed first section.

Aether is cleanly executed and charismatically performed, but above all, it features remarkable artists presenting some fantastic choreography.

expanding. Guerin's concentration on contemporary means of communication is rather inorganic, yet the overall effect is of a cybernetic organism with digital veins, connecting synapses and vibrating blood cells.

This is science-fiction dance, yet the impersonal information overload rings uncomfortably true to real life. The second-half of the performance could not have been