



## The Australian

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# Dancing the small talk into Chinese whispers

## THEATRE

Conversation Piece  
Choreographed and  
directed by Lucy Guerin.  
Belvoir, Sydney, August 29

THREE dancers chat inconsequentially on stage, recording it on their iPhones for about eight minutes. Three actors come in and take the phones and listen through earphones, re-creating as best they can the tone of what we have just heard. From this simple beginning, Lucy Guerin and her performers build up — using dance, songs and more improvised talk — an intricate pattern of cleverly repeated versions of the original conversation.

On one level it is all rather banal. A lot depends on the original talk, which will vary from night to night. On opening night it included all-you-can eat restaurants, sex dolls and looming seafood shortages. The progression of what becomes the "script" has the structure of any light chat in which people are trying to make conversation.

But as the words are copied,

repeated, interacted with and danced we get an intriguing performative meditation on what exactly performance is. To what extent are the original talkers contriving to be theatrically interesting? How do the actors, for all their initially stumbling re-creation of the recorded words, bring character and colour to it?

How do you dance a conversation? There are some choreographed dance sequences and all the performers have songs and soundscapes on their phones that are occasionally plugged into the theatre's sound system and danced to. As the complications multiply and as the actors and dancers interact and start to compete with other, an element of drama creeps in. They are starting to make up theatrical situations, not just things to rabbit on about.

Towards the end there are some scenes of tension. An actor watches a dancer and then unplugs his phone and puts her own song on, and dances in her style to that. He films her on his phone and then later copies her dance as he watches it play back. Another actor listens to one of

the dancer's lines of talk from the original conversation and delivers a withering commentary on it. The effect is electric, not just electronic.

Guerin has assembled a group of very fine performers with strong personalities — Alison Bell, Megan Holloway, Alisdair Macindoe, Rennie McDougall, Harriet Ritchie and Matthew Whittet — and within the framework that she has established they create a lot of the show themselves. Their relationship with their phones seems for a long time to be more important than their relationship with each other, and even at the end the phones predominate. This is alienating, just as it is when we watch people conduct intimate conversations in cafes or on buses, or when we use our own phones and ignore people around us.

Perhaps we should all talk to each other more.

**JOHN McCALLUM**

*Tickets: \$42-\$62. Bookings: (02) 9699 3444 or online.  
Until September 16.*



BRETT BOARDMAN

**Conversation Piece is a meditation on performance**