



## **Untrained**

### **AC arts**

Lucy Guerin's *Untrained* is a highly enjoyable work, bringing together and fully exploiting the theatrical potential of two superb dancers and two other artists from outside the performing sphere.

*Untrained* incorporates a basic movement vocabulary and a great deal of improvisation, much of which is amusing, as in the sequences where the untrained attempt to mimic the trained, a formidable challenge when either of the dancers, Antony Hamilton and Byron Perry, let loose.

It's a mark of the respect the four performers have for each other that the untrained, visual artists Ross Coulter and Simon Obarzanek, are not belittled by their manifest inability to match the phenomenal skill of two of Australia's best dancers.

If the challenge for the untrained is great at times, the trained don't get it all their own way. Two scenes where Obarzanek and Coulter improvise on the dancers, especially Obarzanek's live photograph are taxing in the other direction.

The delight of all four performers is evident and infectious, to the extent that Perry failed entirely to keep a straight face at the hilarious attempts to keep up with the dancing Joneses. Laugh and the whole world laughs with you.

The sole set pieces of the night, a closing quartet, is a stroke of genius, bringing the trained and untrained together in a show that was otherwise a very individual affair.



**Untrained**  
**Lucy Guerin Inc.**  
**Perth Institute of Performing Arts**

Lucy Guerin didn't set out to make a humorous work, which seems astonishing because *Untrained*, being performed at the AWESOME festival, is really, really funny.

Four male dancers, two trained and two untrained, perform moves within a white-bordered square. In the first few stationary minutes it was difficult to tell who was trained and who was not, at least to my untrained eye.

While James Shannon had the poise and confidence of the professional performer, Dean Cross had a refreshing, slightly slumpy goofiness that belied his training. Adding to the intrigue, one of the rookies, Marco Cher-Gibard, had an almost snarling cockiness that was later revealed as a ruse for first-night nerves.

The sight of rookies attempting to emulate the sleek athleticism of professional dancers was hilarious but it was the grave commitment of the "untrained" that made the show truly compelling. Both Cher-Gibard and Ross Coulter gave their all, even as their trained counterparts compelled them to imitate lengthy handstands, flying leaps and push-ups.

Cher-Gibard almost held his own at times but watching Coulter, on the other hand, felt a lot like watching myself attempt such feats. Tall and gangly, he nevertheless exhibited a shameless bravery as he awkwardly tossed himself about. A show that demonstrated how hopeless mere mortals are at moving would have been funny for a little while but too cruel to sustain a full hour. Guerin is canny here; by forcing the dancers to also copy "moves" made by the untrained she manages to make them look silly too.

That said, the work as a whole could almost be construed as a rebuttal to the "I could do that" school of anti-art nay-sayers. The sheer strength of Cross and Shannon, their seamless sense of movement and the exquisite lightness of their bodies as they rolled through air and along the ground - no, you couldn't do this.

Though run through with humour, *Untrained* is also a poignant examination of maleness. Just as the prevailing joke appeared close to outstaying its welcome, Guerin introduced a non-dancing sequence in which each performer spoke candidly about his relationship with his father. It sounds bizarre but worked well, providing a meaningful respite from the sometimes slapstick nature of the rest of the show. Similarly, an interlude in which the performers revealed their bodily insecurities added a new dimension of emotional depth.

Naturally enough, the audience reserved its most enthusiastic response for the two rookies. It would be fascinating to see how this production played in a country less obsessed with barracking for the underdog. As it was, Coulter and Cher-Gibard were certainly the heroes of the evening.

March 17 2009

<http://theatrenotes.blogspot.com/2009/03/dance-massive-lawn-rogue-untrained.html>

Review by Alison Croggon



## DANCE MASSIVE: UNTRAINED

Lucy Guerin's *Untrained*, presented in the dance-friendly space at the Meatmarket, is another take on command and response. The premise is lucid and simple: four performers, two trained dancers (Antony Hamilton and Byron Perry) and two untrained (visual artists Ross Coulter and Simon Obarzanek), are given a series of tasks, which they perform before an audience. The tasks are listed on pieces of paper laid on the floor, and the performances take place in a small square outlined in the middle of the stage.

It could be the essence of banality, a merely intellectual examination of the differences between levels of performative skill. Indeed, before I saw it, I read this withering review in the *Age*, which said that the work was simply going over old ground broken in the 1960s, and that although it was "mildly entertaining", *Untrained* was "ultimately uninteresting". Ouch.

After I had seen the show, this struck me as a rather ungenerous response: as with *Two-Faced Bastard*, I think you have to work hard to resist the unexpected charm of this show. But the review prompted me to do some reading about the post-modern dance that emerged in 1960s New York. Post-modern dance evolved in part from the dance of Merce Cunningham, although it was a reaction to the purities of modern practice. It famously began with an influential series of performances in the Judson Church Hall in Greenwich Village in the early '60s. And yes, Jordan Beth Vincent is quite correct: *Untrained* is indeed in the same area. Like those performances, this show draws on Dadaist influences, Cagean randomness and task-based activity, and the vernacular of the everyday, using both trained and untrained bodies to examine the nature of performance.

Does this mean Guerin is merely reinventing the wheel? Is it naive to find it engrossing? I'm not so sure. For one thing, you'd have to be absolutely certain that Guerin doesn't know that the wheel exists in the first place. Myself, I'd be taking bets that she is perfectly aware of the traditions from which she is drawing. And also, you'd have to ignore the immediacy of the performances, which engage your attention throughout the show (which seemed a lot shorter than its

90 minutes). I thought of Borges's story about the man who rewrote Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, and his assertion that, although the second text was exactly the same, word for word, as the original, the newer writing was an entirely different work, because an entirely different time and series of necessities had brought it to fruition. I think something similar pertains here. Only more so, because performance only ever exists in the now.

What emerged from this series of tasks, ranging from the mundane - say your name backwards - to the comic - do a slow-motion fall - was a surprisingly moving process of personal revelation. You would expect the non-dancers to be vulnerable, exposed by their lack of skills when juxtaposed with such skilled bodies as Perry and Hamilton; what you might not expect is the vulnerability opened in the dancers as the visual artists began to exploit their comedic incompetence to charm the audience.

More than anything else, *Untrained* is four very intimate portraits. Portraiture is an overt theme: during the course of the show the performers drew pictures of each other, as well as speaking to paper sculptures that were self-portraits. The show is almost cubist in the way it opens out differing perspectives of looking (I guess it's no accident that two performers are visual artists) - we are aware of the performers looking at each other as well as us looking at them, and of the differing expectations with which we look.

It demonstrates how revealing movement is, exposing a person's shynesses and extrovert defences as well as their generous expressiveness. And it shows how expressiveness expands through play, opening up privacies of which the performers are not necessarily conscious. A young girl in front of me was enchanted and shook with laughter all the way through it; it was certainly funny, but that transparent comedy was gently underlaid by something else, something profoundly humane, which was much more complex than it seemed.

UNTRAINED: CONCEPT/ DIRECTION: LUCY GUERIN, PERFORMERS: ROSS COULTER, ANTONY HAMILTON, SIMON OBARZANEK, BYRON PERRY. ARTS HOUSE, MEAT MARKET.

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<http://www.australianstage.com.au/reviews/melbourne/untrained--lucy-guerin-inc-2323.html>

Review by Simonne Michelle-Wells

## UNTRAINED | LUCY GUERIN INC

*Untrained*, a new work by choreographer Lucy Guerin and part of the first *Dance Massive*, is a wholly satisfying theatre experience. It calls itself a 'casual theatrical exploration'; an entirely appropriate summation of a show that's a fascinating combination of dance, theatre, improvisation and multimedia, all presented with just the right amount of quirk and irreverence.

*Untrained* presents the audience with four performers: two trained dancers (Byron Perry and Antony Hamilton) and two professional visual artists with no dance training whatsoever (Ross Coulter and Simon Obarzanek). The basic premise here is that all four are asked to perform the same instructions. How they execute these then creates individual portraits of each performer, as well as allowing for comparisons between them. As the show progresses and we are given more information and further insights into each performer, we see their commonalities as well as their differences, as performers and as people.

The piece doesn't become, however, merely a simple exploration about difference; it's also about art itself: about what it means to watch a performer and what is really worth watching in a performance. This is the basis of what is truly unique about *Untrained*. It was hard to gauge what was improvised and what wasn't, and there were some sequences that left you wondering why on earth you were watching four men do that, while, at other times, the audience erupted into spontaneous applause because what they offered was so theatrically engaging and somehow simultaneously so intensely personal it was very moving.

Byron Perry and Antony Hamilton are beautiful, seasoned dancers and a delight to watch. The attempts by Coulter and Obarzanek to match their movements, as well as providing huge amounts of comic entertainment and an insight into how untrained dancers use their bodies, also served to highlight their skill and grace a hundredfold. Perry is mesmerising. His skills clearly extend beyond dance, since he displayed strong voice and theatrical skills too.

Guerin says of the show,

"In watching trained dancers I think we feel confidence about how the movements are executed and that they will be in control of what they are doing. The untrained dancers offer us a more precarious, unpredictable experience...there is an element of risk in their attempts."

Indeed, there were more than a few moments in the show where the audience held its collective breath as Coulter and Obarzanek attempted a few back spins and head slides across the floor. Watching the trained dancers, you had an expectation of where their movements would take them, not to mention the grace displayed

in getting there, but with the untrained dancers, there was a big element of the unknown and a real sense of protection extended to them by the audience.

Guerin also adds, "With non-dancers their movement training is their daily lives and their inherited physicality. So they are more able, in a way, to create movement that is 'new' or undefined from a dance perspective; and that movement is very difficult to reproduce, even for a dancer."

I'm not so sure about the "even for a dancer" bit. This sequence in the show, where first the untrained and then the trained dancers dance (improv) and the other has to mirror them, is a lot of fun. But the trained dancers were phenomenally good at copying the mostly unorthodox movements of the untrained dancers. It was surprising how precisely they actually could match such 'undefined' movements.

There is a lot of joy in *Untrained*. The performers clearly have a good time. And why wouldn't they? At one point Coulter (untrained) has a go at creating some choreography for Hamilton (trained) and tells him to 'move like seaweed on the left side of your body and a robot on the right' and somehow Hamilton does it and does it well! Later, each of the performers describes to the audience what their experience in collaborating on the show was like; Obarzanek says matter-of-factly, "They [the trained dancers] know what each little hair on their knuckle is doing, while it takes me half an hour to get my foot to move".

*Untrained* closes with a choreographed dance sequence, clearly rehearsed by all four performers beforehand, and this is a fabulous way to end the show. This not only counterpoints the improv content, but also hints at the difference that can be made by practice for the untrained. I left wanting to sit down and see it all again. It's wonderful, inimitable stuff.



PHOTO BY BELINDA

## NOTHING HIDDEN, MUCH GAINED

The titles of Lucy Guerin's recent works have been marked by clarity and transparency, even literalness. *Structure and Sadness* dealt with the aftermath of grief caused by the west gate bridge collapse. *Melt* was a duet for two water molecules that move from ice through to steam. *Corridor* limited itself to a long traverse stage and took a corridor scene from Kafka as its inspiration. And now *Untrained* juxtaposes two artists trained as dancers with two artists untrained as dancers.

Contrast these examples with the titular and choreographic opacity of Shelley Lasica's *Vianne* and there would appear to be nothing hidden in Guerin's world, nothing that is so mysterious that it cannot be elucidated in a simple, perfectly decipherable title. For her critics, this is a cause for frustration: her works can be seen as the physical equivalent of begging the question in rhetoric, where the proposition assumes its own truth before being argued. In other words, is the dance redundant once you read the program notes?

Yet, aside from the inherent value judgements involved in meriting metaphor over literalness, describing Guerin's dance as redundant is to deny its capacity to transcend the admittedly literal text that tries to encapsulate it. Guerin is not given to ornateness in her language but her sensibility for the human form is far from plain—the duets across her body of work are remarkable in their mesmerising intimacy, their detail and their capacity to enliven the space between the dancers as much as they animate the bodies themselves. Moreover, by starting with such conceptual distillation, Guerin's work emerges from a kind of purity, with every subsequent extrapolation seeming to fit and flow on perfectly from the last.

Indeed, it is a questioning of purity that lies at the heart of *Untrained*. The title is easily decipherable, yes, but what is it to be untrained? Is the untrained body pure in its movement—unfettered by the conditioning of choreography and exercises? Or is it the trained body, in its refinement and exactitude, that achieves purity by sublimation? Guerin is certainly not looking for an easy solution to this dialectic. She is interested in what it does to us as an audience and to the performers themselves to see these questions made manifest by exploring the continuum from pure naivety to pure technique.

Her staging of *Untrained* maintains this notion of purity. The set is nothing more than a grey playing square marked out by broad white lines. It is a clever delimiter, its form suggestive of a playground ball court or a boxing ring—both stages perhaps but ones not restricted to the arts. The performers never leave our sight, yet, with just one exception, only when they enter this square are they viewed. This is no geometrical sleight of hand. What we are witnessing is an experiment where we are the lab technicians and this square our Petri dish. By placing contrasting physical presences in the same space one



PHOTO BY UNTRAINED ARTIST

after another, Guerin provides us with a microscope through which to examine the idiosyncrasies, the likenesses, the differentiators and the foibles of four bodies in motion.

The identities of these four bodies are important to note. Byron Perry and Antony Hamilton are two wunderkinder of the Melbourne dance scene. Not only are they ubiquitous presences in the works of Lucy Guerin Inc and Chunky Move, but they are also celebrated choreographers and visual artists. Their untrained co-performers are Simon Obarzanek and Ross Coulter, who are both visual artists. So, as it happens, all are men and all are visual artists.

To begin with, the performers present themselves to the audience one at a time by standing in the centre of the square for a few seconds, doing nothing. They have been asked to be neutral. However, each of them carries a stamp of personality and of habit, and we see this. From this starting point, Guerin uses a succession of provocations to tease out different performative languages: sing a song, be a cat that gets electrocuted, copy your partner. At times, the audience laughs at the ineptitude of the untrained. At times, they laugh at the hubris of the trained. As the work progresses, the laughs dissipate and the analytical eye is no longer restricted to the audience—the performers themselves begin to reflect on how they compare with the others and, vitally, are asked to speak to their own image.

LUCY GUERIN INC, UNTRAINED, CONCEPT, DIRECTION LUCY GUERIN, PERFORMERS ROSS COULTER, ANTONY HAMILTON, SIMON OBARZANEK, BYRON PERRY, MUSIC CUSP BY DUPLO REMOTE, PRODUCER MICHAELA COVENTRY; ARTS HOUSE, MARCH 11-14; DANCE MASSIVE, MELBOURNE, MARCH 3-15

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## REALITY DANCE

**There are performance works that play with and disorient the senses—in Dance Massive, Simon Ellis and Shannon Bott's *Inert*, the Helen Herbertson-Ben Cobham *Morphia* series and Chunky Move's *Mortal Engine*; in recent theatre, Barrie Kosky's treatment of Poe's *The Telltale Heart*. At the same time, game and task-based works for performers and audiences are on the rise in live art events around the world, and in provocations such as Panther's exercises in happiness at the 2008 Melbourne International Arts Festival.**

These phenomena resonate, on the one hand, with the immersive media arts and virtual realities of the 21st century and, on the other, with computer game playing and the ongoing surge of popular competition, from quiz shows to reality TV. With none of the latter's dumbed down Darwinism, Lucy Guerin Inc's *Untrained* benignly offers us reality dance—an extended set of tasks that pit two trained dance artists (Byron Perry, Antony Hamilton) against two visual artists (Simon Obarzanek, Ross Coulter)—revealing much about how we perceive the human body and what we think we know about dance.

The 'reality' of *Untrained*, however well constructed the overall work might be, is that the non-dancers' lack of dance skills provides a considerable likelihood of risk and of chance happenings, moments of surprising verve and sheer failure. Nor are the tasks simple for the trained dancers: there's a large quotient of improvisation and passages where they have to closely mimic the unpredictable moves of the untrained or interpret their choreographies. As much as these amuse, they're also telling. The untrained pick up the broad patterns of movement, but rarely the detail (hinged on acute degrees of propulsion, balance and articulation), while the trained briskly realise additional layers of possibility.

So, instead of a finished dance work, we are witness to a series of revealing portraits and tests with a chancy, cumulative impact. Above all, we are implicitly asked to look very closely at, and listen to, these four men, our role as observers considerably heightened. This is accentuated by the spare staging—a large open space with a square marked out in the middle, a frame in which everything happens as soon as the men enter it from the queues they form either side. Initially, each man stands before us, motionless. We take each in. We'll subsequently see these same faces, these same bodies again, at rest (as if asleep), pulling faces, making weird sounds, reading aloud comments they've made about themselves. Towards the end, each of them simply stands before us again, but now we know more about them—not a lot (this is not the confessional faction of reality TV), but details of physiognomy and assessments of mobility, risk-taking, engagement with each other and us. We have guessed at and largely learnt this not from the brief images of the men alone, but from their work together.

There's even a moment where, with cards and textas, the men stand at the four corners of the frame and sketch each other's faces, then show the results to the audience. In another, they display photographs of themselves, and elsewhere, videos they've directed. They even comment on each other's dance and visual art capacities. But it's the dancing itself which is most revealing. One after another the performers execute a move; as the image mutates the effect is of a visual Chinese whisper. More brief moves—balances, kicks, spins, painfully slow motion extensions—ensue and morph. Ross Coulter wittily removes his shoe and uses it puppet-like to mimic a slow motion fall while his body remains at rest. The tasks grow more demanding, if leavened with moments of yawning or sighing, or long jumps, or solo songs or speaking backwards, or performing favorite pop culture figures. The extended copying duets break the frame as each trained performer follows an untrained around the space and then the roles are reversed—concentration, effort, surprise and amusement are palpable.

These competitive duets tell us much. Obarzanek tries very hard, he's a bit of a performer (naturally inclined to dance when he sings in his emphatic baritone); Coulter is economical, more low key, laconic, if nonetheless committed. With the trained dancers the differences are subtler; theirs is an easy-going naturalism, the singing more polished, personalities less overtly expressed. Not surprisingly it's their dancing which is telling: Perry's spring-loaded, quietly dramatic articulacy, Hamilton's sinuous, rippling intensity.

As well as the duets, there's recurrent group work which comes affectingly into its own at the end—where you find yourself wishing that there'd been more of it, as big a demand as that might be. In the course of the show, the group moans, cries and, among other things, demonstrates various, revealing techniques for removing and putting on t-shirts. Above all the men collectively convey an undemonstrative competitiveness, mutual empathy and good humour as they perform their long list of tasks, while the audience doubtlessly reflects on what its own dance abilities might be in the same circumstances.

Perhaps, too, the audience think about the pleasure of witnessing a benign image of men collaborating and competing without corporate, militaristic and sporting straitjacketings. However well or not they can dance, these men flow, as Klaus Theweleit put it in his anti-fascist classic *Male Fantasies* (1977), and the sense of them as real and complex, beyond artifice, is rooted in the lucid pragmatism of Guerin's task-based formulation for *Untrained*.