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Lucy Guerin: The Raw and the Cooked

Posted by *Joan Acocella*



A number of the dances that the excellent Lucy Guerin has brought to these shores from her native Australia have been pretty creepy. Pasty-faced people convulse, attempt suicide, and the like. In “Untrained,” which she showed at BAM’s new Fisher Theatre last week, she took a break from all that. What she does here is to put two professional dancers—Alisdair Macindoe, from modern dance (I believe), and Ross McCormack, from ballet—onstage with two non-professionals—Jake Shackleton, an environmental engineer, and Michael Dunbar, a software designer—and give them a series of largely identical movement tasks to do. Some tasks are just plain dance maneuvers, such as a pirouette à la seconde (the multiple pumping turn). In these sections, the non-dancers of course looked ridiculous. (Dunbar practically fell down.) But in some of the other assignments—perform a scene from a film, slither around like a cat, get into a sleeping position, sing the opening of Beethoven’s Fifth—they were more evenly matched. A few of the routines were charmingly stupid. At one point, McCormack choreographed a dance for himself and Dunbar. The instructions were funny enough (“We kind of see each other ... then we make one big robot,” etc.). The dance itself, which featured an electrocution passage, was heaven.

Elsewhere, the men talked to us, in a somewhat Pina Bauschian manner. They reminisced about their fathers. They described things about their bodies that embarrassed them. Again, some of this was fun. McCormack confided that his chest hair had started growing in asymmetrically: “It’s just sort of been thrown at me.” (This was a fabrication, I believe. In one of the tasks, all the men took off their T-shirts. McCormack’s chest hair looked perfectly fine.) There was some non-fun, too. Dunbar talked about being overweight: how he was teased at school, how he grew up to be

obese. (That's his word, and again it seems wrong. To me he just looks cutely fat.) Guerin also threw in a section or two that was merely strange and piquant—a specialty of hers, which I love. Dunbar told how he likes to drink out of his hands. Then a video began playing on the cyclorama, showing him lustily scooping up water from a hose. "My wife hates it," he says. "She tells me, 'Why don't you get a glass?'"

What was Guerin's idea in assigning dance to non-dancers? Did she think that they would seem more authentic? In the show, she had McCormack express that Romantic view. He rhapsodized about the "honesty" of the non-pros' movement: "It's just so beautiful." Here, it seemed, Guerin was heading us off at the pass, pointing out the sentimentality and condescension of such a position, disassociating herself from it. But in her program notes, she subtly says something similar. What do we respond to most in a performance? she asks. "Is it dancers doing remarkable, virtuosic things that we as audience members could never achieve? Or is it the visible effort by people like ourselves, who try something to the best of their ability?" You know what you're supposed to answer: number two. But if I have no idea how to drive a tractor and I try to do so, is that more interesting to watch than a person who drives tractors professionally? Go further. Is it touching? Guerin implies this. Note her words: "visible effort," "people like ourselves," "best of their ability." How sweet! And I do think some of the appeal of the show lay in that Rousseauian idea.

But Guerin also, a little bit, knew better. A counterweight to the sentimentality was the comedy. Those non-professionals were pretty funny, not just when they were trying to do pirouettes but also when they did completely ordinary things, like removing their T-shirts. There is no question in my mind that they played up their awkwardness here. I have stressed the big, sweet, soft Dunbar, but Shackleton, Dunbar's opposite—stiff as a board, small and dignified, take-no-crap—was just as funny. The audience laughed and laughed.

They were right, sort of, but I got tired of the laughter, because it was always in response to the broadest jokes: the chest hair, the robot, the falling down. In the end, the most interesting thing about the show was that, by contrasting two movement styles—four, actually—it showed us the force and poignance of movement. That's a simple achievement, but surely the simplicity is part of the success of this show. In the program notes, Guerin says that last year "Untrained" was performed in seventeen regions of Australia. That's at least seventeen hundred more people who now know that movement is an art.

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