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Lucy Guerin Inc

By Eva Yaa Asantewaa



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Next Wave Festival

Brooklyn Academy of Music

BAM Fisher/Fishman Space

Brooklyn, NY

Nov. 27–Dec. 1, 2012

Performance reviewed: Nov. 27

So, Lucy Guerin, what is this fascination with civilians? I silently asked this question every time I saw promotion for the U.S. premiere of her 2009 work, *Untrained*. The Australian choreographer apparently enjoys the looks of untrained dance performers—the way they throw themselves into an exercise with no tricks to fall back upon, no theoretical filter, no prior orientation to space or to a “dancerly” use of their bodies.



Guerin’s one-hour quartet for men—two of them superbly trained and experienced dancers; two, untrained and wonderfully brave guys from other fields—seems, in its description, a slight project to bring to BAM’s prestigious Next Wave Festival. And maybe that’s why the packed opening night audience in Fishman Space fell head over heels. Unpretentious, at times moving, *Untrained* is unabashedly all about being flesh-and-blood human. In its ability to draw performers and audience into a big embrace, it puts a lot of highfalutin’ dance experiments to shame.

The current cast includes dancers Ross McCormack and Alisdair Macindoe along with Michael Dunbar (described as a “freelance interaction designer,” a mournful-faced bear of a guy) and Jake Shackleton (an environmental engineer whose education ranged from music to chemistry to business management). This is not *Dancing With the Stars*. Scruffy-looking T-shirts and sweat pants or shorts bring everyone to the same ordinary, unkempt level. Dudes willing to play Follow the (trained) Leader in ballet flourishes, b-boy downrocking, or the gnarliest, wackiest abstract sequences make us root for them. We come to expect neither more nor less of any of them, and that makes us lean forward for a closer look at everything they do. Guerin is not alone in her fascination!



Michael Dunbar, Ross McCormack, Alisdair Macindoe, and Jake Shackleton in Untrained.

Photo by Julieta Cervantes, Courtesy BAM.

McCormack has facile, minute control of his rubbery body, but it's every bit as much fun to observe Dunbar and Shackleton making sense of his outbursts in their own way. We learn that there's a sharp line between what's awkward and what's alternative; Dunbar and Shackleton walk that line like Philippe Petit on a high wire. It's marked by genuine humor relished by the audience out of empathy, I believe. Dance critics who imagine cruelty in the audience's chuckling are projecting their own expectations and discomfort at the sight of untrained movers.

Shackleton reveals himself to be great at suggesting imagery to Macindoe (who must play an expanding and deflating hot-air balloon) and a natural at reenacting over-the-top movie scenes. I'm tempted to say "A star is born," but *Untrained* really leads us back to Sly Stone: "Everybody is a Star."

Along the way, Dunbar reveals that, because of his weight, he suffered bullying in school. As a new husband, he says, he suddenly feels more concerned about health. Macindoe explains the red skin blotches that we've all noticed and wondered about, and other bits of background and interior life are offered up in straightforward, concise ways—just enough to make all of these men, trained or untrained, less objects of our gaze than our kin in this thing called life.

Untrained [continues at BAM](#) through Dec. 1.

Pictured at top: Ross McCormack, Alisdair Macindoe (center) with Michael Dunbar and Jake