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Dancers who watch news readers

By Jacqueline Maley
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Read all about it ... choreographer Guerin, with partner Gideon Obarzanek, studied newsreader Lee Lin Chin for *Human Interest Story*. Photo: Roger Cummins

It was a New York summer in the early 1990s and there wasn't much work on, so Lucy Guerin rented a classroom in a disused school near her apartment in Alphabet City, and set about creating her first solo piece after six years of dancing other people's work.

The weather was hot and the work was difficult but by the end of summer Guerin had finished. She had made the difficult transition from dancer to choreographer.

"It was quite torturous, actually," she says. "I remember it with fondness but also with horror because being in a studio on my own for that amount of time I really found difficult, being confronted with all these choices and possibility. When you start, all you've got to refer to is this history that's embedded, literally physically, in your body by these other choreographers.

"It's like a muscle memory; you go in to make a start and that's what comes out. A lot of that time was spent deprogramming the aesthetics imprinted in my body and trying to find something that was mine."

Guerin found that something, and has spent the years since building on it and teasing it out during different creative endeavors.

The loneliness of that New York summer in the abandoned classroom is long gone. These days she works in close collaboration with dancers, sound and set designers, and other choreographers, including her partner, Gideon Obarzanek.

Her latest endeavor is *Human Interest Story*, which opens at Belvoir St Theatre next month - the first dance performance at the theatre in years.

The piece, which Guerin created in conjunction with her dancers, is an abstract work about mass media and the way it is inserted into our daily lives. Huge themes, tragic events and complex issues are all absorbed as we throw down our breakfast cereal, dodge traffic on the way to work, or queue for a drink at the pub.

Guerin says she was interested in the juxtaposition of the drama of the news with the mundanely of the settings in which we consume it, particularly in the era of the 24-hour news cycle, when news and media are almost impossible to avoid.

"I think I wanted to make this work because I have a rather uneasy relationship with current events myself," she says. "I find myself really going in and out of the news.

"Sometimes I'm able to engage very well with it but then there's other periods of time where I just lose the threads completely and I find I'm in my own bubble and a world of my own."

When we meet in Canberra, Guerin is just switching back into news mode after a two-week holiday in Indonesia.

It's a hell of a time to be re-engaging with the news - the Norwegian massacre is still on the front pages, Cadel Evans recently won the Tour de France and singer Amy Winehouse has died.

We discuss the Norway killings. "On the one hand, you have this terrible tragedy that we try to empathize with but, in a way, you just can't," Guerin says.

"You can't imagine the terror of a situation like that. Generally these things come to us in a pretty domestic environment, very much embedded in ordinary everyday activities, so it's a strange schism between mundanely and these incomprehensible events."

The contrast is interesting but also abstract - how can such tangential ideas be translated into physical movement and visual ideas?

Human Interest Story is divided into three parts. In the first, the dancers mimic the mannerisms and speech of newsreaders. They spent a lot of rehearsal time closely studying the head movements of SBS newsreader Lee Lin Chin.

There is a lot of spoken word in the first section, which changes slightly from performance to performance - nothing is too scripted or heavily scored. There are some jokes, which were not intentionally written in, but imported from the levity of the rehearsal process.

"I really like to create a sense of equality and permission to make jokes or have fun, or not, or express anger in the rehearsal room," Guerin says.

In the second section, the atmosphere becomes darker. The dancers line up in front of a grid of single newspaper pages and progressively step forward, pick up a page, scrunch it into a ball and drop it. Their automaton-like movements underline the mindless way we often consume news.

The final section opens with a solo by Harriet Ritchie, which grows progressively more intense. The sense of foreboding is augmented by the sound, costumes, lighting and sets - the latter designed by Obarzanek. Guerin says her creative process always begins with a spirit of inquiry.

"I ask myself a question: 'What is dance? What is its purpose? What is its function and its power as an art form? How can it be relevant to the world around us, as its own logic and its own art form?'"

She finds it more difficult to explain the way she makes her abstract ideas real, in the form of the physical movements that make up her dance pieces.

"There may be a very, very physical dance happening, where you see the effort and physicality of the dancer, and the struggle..." she says, before trailing off.

"It's not so much about what is being said but the way it's being said ... it's almost an extension of the physical body with sound and words and colloquialisms or different types of conversations we might have."

After our interview, Guerin worries she has not expressed herself clearly enough on this point but it's perhaps the nature of the alchemy of dance that it's impossible to describe how ideas become movements - it's something you watch, rather than intellectualize.

The artistic director at Belvoir, Ralph Myers, says Guerin is one of a new breed of choreographers blurring the lines between theatre and dance. "People like Lucy are making work that is as much theatre as it is dance," he says.

"It's just made in a process that is different to how we make and rehearse spoken drama ... If you were an alien from outer space coming to Earth and looking for distinctions between dance and theatre, you would have a difficult time deciding which category her work falls into."

The Sydney season of *Human Interest Story* - which premiered in Melbourne last year - has already sold out, giving Myers confidence that audiences are willing to embrace unconventional offerings.

Guerin's next project, which is in development, is about weather and climate change.

"I'm interested in the depictions of weather, maps and pressure charts and isobars, the abstracted nature of how weather is studied."

Weather events have always been used as a literary metaphor, she says, to represent the cruelty of fate, which is unchangeable.

But the science of climate change has shown that we have more control over weather patterns than previously thought and it is this change in thinking Guerin wishes to explore. "It used to be this thing beyond our control, this force we were completely subject to," she says.

"Now we've created a cycle where we're somewhat responsible for those extreme forces as well. We're no longer separate from it."

Guerin says her time in the US taught her a key difference between Americans and Australians - a lesson that has stayed with her.

"Coming from Australia and being Australian, I tended to criticize myself before I praised myself," she says. "I found that Americans do the opposite."

Perhaps it's this learned optimism that has allowed Guerin to take so many risks in her work. She tries to return to the US at least once a year.

After *Human Interest Story* in Sydney, she will head to Minneapolis and St Louis to tour one of her older pieces, *Structure and Sadness*, about the collapse of Melbourne's West Gate Bridge in 1970.

"Telling a story can be difficult in dance, anything that has any complexity or layering," she says.

"I am always looking for a way to incorporate something really concrete about our experiences but also find a way that features from the outside world can be meaningful through the physicalities of the body."

Human Interest Story opens at the Upstairs Theatre at Belvoir on August 31. The season is sold out but returns or standing-room tickets may be available closer to the show's performance dates.

A life in dance

1961 Lucy Guerin was born in Adelaide.

1982 Graduated from Adelaide's Centre for Performing Arts.

1983 Joined Dance Exchange in Sydney.

1988 Moved to Melbourne for Dance Works.

1989 Moved to New York, where she stayed for seven years, and produced her first choreographic works.

Mid-1990s Won choreography prizes in France and the US, including a Bessie (New York Dance and Performance Award) for choreography for her work *Two Lies*. This piece was later included in Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project.

1996 Returned to Australia and worked as a freelance artist, creating works including *Robbery Waitress on Bail* (1997), *Heavy* (1998) and *The Ends of Things* (2000).

2002 Established Lucy Guerin Inc in Melbourne to develop new works. Recent pieces include *Structure and Sadness* (2006), *Corridor* (2008), *Untrained* (2009) and *Human Interest Story* (2010).