

Embracing an uncertain forecast for our future

Lucy Guerin reflects on the notion that humans have a lot in common with weather in new work



Lucy Guerin's *Weather* — featuring Harriet Ritchie, Lilian Steiner, Alisdair Macindoe, Talitha Maslin and Lee Serle — “finishes on an open note,” the choreographer says, “not hugely optimistic or hopeful.” Photograph by: Heidrun Lohr

**BY VICTOR SWOBODA, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE
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MONTREAL — With global warming threatening the planet, the weather is no longer just a matter of small talk, but rather a major subject for discussion — and, it would seem, for choreography. Next week, *Weather*, by the Australian dancemaker Lucy Guerin, will be the third major climate-inspired piece to be presented here in the past six months.

In May, New Zealand choreographer Lemi Ponifasio's *Birds With Skymirrors* used subtle symbols to show a world being polluted by man-made debris. The urgency of Ponifasio's warning was largely overshadowed, however, by the fascinating spectacle of mysterious figures moving in ghostlike silence across a shadowy stage.

A far more dire weather report was seen last month in Carolyn Carlson's *Le Recours aux forêts*. Its final image of a lone, shivering person surrounded by rising sea levels was a frighteningly dismal forecast for the future.

Of course, why should we put any stock in predictions by lay people like choreographers if even meteorologists and scientists cannot say which way the wind will blow several decades from now? Guerin admitted as much to herself when she was looking for a way to end her work.

"It was difficult to know how to finish it," she said in a telephone interview last week from Los Angeles. (Her Melbourne-based troupe, Lucy Guerin Inc., performed *Weather* a day earlier in San Diego.) "We don't know what's going to happen. ... (My work) *Weather* finishes on an open note — not hugely optimistic or hopeful."

In other words, our climate's future defies prediction just like the weather, which asserted itself in sunny California on the day of Guerin's performance by unleashing an unusual torrent of rain. The witty fellow who introduced the company's performance, Guerin said, thanked them for bringing rain and expressed hope that next time, they might stage a work about world peace. Wouldn't it be nice if issues surrounding peace and global warming could be resolved so neatly?

The seed for *Weather* was planted in Guerin's hometown of Adelaide, where she met Michel Gagnon, program director for Place des Arts, at an arts market. As part of his mandate, Gagnon has been getting Place des Arts into the business of producing shows, not simply presenting them. As a consequence, *Weather* became a co-production between Place des Arts, the Melbourne Festival and the Brisbane Festival. Part of the show was created in Montreal in 2011, an arrangement made possible thanks to travel expenses paid by the Australia Council for the Arts. (Apparently, Australia's government still sees value in helping to send its artists abroad, unlike the Harper government in Canada, which eliminated its arts travel grant programs a few years back.)

It was something of a revelation for Guerin to realize during the creation of her work that human beings have a lot in common with the weather.

"We worked a lot with fog, big fans, spray and hair dryers to make heat. After a while, we realized that all these things are part of our bodies."

Breath and breathing turned into important elements. During the middle section, Guerin explained, the six dancers' breathing develops into sounds that build up into more emotionally charged physical movements.

“It’s interesting how we internalize the weather. We relate to it emotionally — a storm in art will often represent passion.”

The set design by Robert Cousins features a “cloud” ceiling made of white supermarket bags.

“It responds to air movement, it floats, gives a sense of wind. But it’s also a symbol of how we destroy the Earth through waste. There’s a place in the Pacific near Australia where there’s a big whirlpool of bags and debris. That spiral image is an important one in the work. Sucking in all this rubbish — it’s quite distressing.”

Guerin is an Australian of distant French heritage — in Montreal, she loved hearing her name pronounced in the French fashion rather than the anglicized pronunciation, “Gerrin,” used at home. She founded her company in Melbourne in 2002 after spending several years in the 1990s dancing and learning to choreograph in New York.

“I came under many influences compared to Melbourne, where there wasn’t much of an independent dance scene. Going to New York allowed me to find ideas, individuals and styles of dance that I really connected with.”

Guerin created a trio called Two Lies, which won New York’s Bessie Award in 1996, for herself and two other expatriate Aussie female dancers. She has since created works for many foreign companies, including the White Oak Dance Project and the Lyon Opera Ballet, and has won other prizes, including Australia’s Helpmann Award.

Guerin described the Melbourne contemporary dance scene today as “small but strong, with a lot of range. Many independent artists are working, which wasn’t the case when I was a young dancer. Classes, workshops, international exchanges. Australians are performing more internationally.”

She could not, however, recall seeing any Quebec troupes performing there recently — which, of course, is a pity. Seeing a local group appreciated abroad is a gratifying experience, which I felt last month listening to sustained applause after a performance of Daniel Léveillé’s *The Modesty of Icebergs* in Prague’s reputable Archa Theatre.

Guerin’s *Weather* — presented here under the Danse Danse umbrella — has been a hot ticket by all accounts. Global warming has apparently hit the box office, too.

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