

magazine archive features studio portal realtimedance

realtime 110

contents

[← back](#)

weather patterns & word dances

keith gallasch: interview lucy guerin: conversation piece & weather



Rennie McDougall, Alison Bell & Harriet Ritchi
rehearsing Conversation Piece
photo Jeff Busby

FOR HER NEXT TWO WORKS—CONVERSATION PIECE, COMMISSIONED BY BELVOIR, AND WEATHER IN THE 2012 MELBOURNE INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL PROGRAM—CHOREOGRAPHER LUCY GUERIN HAS CHOSEN SUBJECTS THAT SHARE CERTAIN DYNAMIC SIMILARITIES.

Chaos Theory informs us that a small variation in weather conditions can have enormous consequences elsewhere. In everyday conversation, a significant variable—a modest change in tone of voice, volume or topic—can result in a stormy exchange. Guerin's new works are also connected by our common inclination to talk about the weather.

However, there will be no talk in Weather, and Conversation Piece appears to be about talk that goes awry. I recently spoke with Guerin and asked her about the origins and evolution of Conversation Piece and Weather.

conversation piece

I was invited to do a development period with Belvoir on a work that involved dancers and actors. I was really interested in how I could work with these two different disciplines, to make something that really needed both of those elements. And I walked into the rehearsal room with no ideas—deliberately—I wanted the material to emerge in the process of working with these people. What came out was the idea that three people would just be having a conversation—like a foyer conversation—and that the whole show could emerge from that. Somehow that sort of triviality is an end point but a beginning too, to everything that we engage in—these fairly inane interactions. I don't mean that in a negative way.

The talk is improvised at the beginning of each performance?

I don't see it as improvisation. There's nothing to improvise on. It really is whatever pops into the performers' heads. I suppose it requires a certain amount of practice to be able to let yourself articulate this kind of idle chitchat in front of an audience. It's actually the dancers who have the conversation at the top of the show. I made that decision just because they're less experienced in a way. They talk over the top of each other. Sometimes you can't hear everything they say—you mostly can—but there's a naturalness about that, which I'm sure the actors could do as well but they have a more innate sense of how to speak and how to make themselves understood.

I gather that the work evolves out of this conversation.

That's right. The actors' skill comes in interpreting and extrapolating on this initial conversation which is recorded on iPhones by the dancers as it's happening. The actors aren't present then. The first thing they do is a sort of part verbatim rendition of what's just happened. You can see they don't have any of the natural gestures of the original and they're sort of straining to hear, to pick up the words and speak at the same time. It's kind of wooden and it's quite interesting to see it repeated almost like a text.

Then it starts to break down. Each performer has their counterpart—so the actor Matthew Whittet is repeating dancer Alastair McIndoe's part of the conversation while Alastair is trying to talk to him. It becomes quite dislocated. Then it moves into how you might feel about losing track of a conversation and your mind going into other places—the way you can have a dual consciousness.

How does this translate physically?

The dancing is mostly quite choreographed. It seems that those sorts of flights of fancy or the shift to another thought process are really well interpreted by the dance section.

Does the dancing, although choreographed, respond to the conversation?

Sometimes, but at others it just happens. It can erupt out of a conversation and obliterate it. I know it's a bit of a cliché but the dancing represents those aspects of us

that are really not about language and words and logic and being able to string sensible sentences together.

For quite a long time I've been quite interested in this idea of what it is that dance actually says to us. It's obviously something but I don't think I've ever been able to say what exactly that is. Nor have I heard anyone articulate that in a way that's been really satisfying. It's something I like to keep exploring. But at the same time, I think we can articulate our relationship to dance.

Then you've added the iPhone element, which is interesting in an age when people are umbilically attached to these things.

It's been a fascinating thing to work with. People behave completely differently from the way they did a decade ago. These phones are our connectivity nowadays, a huge part of the way we communicate. We're also using quite a few iPhone apps in Conversation Piece. Some of the music is being generated by iPhone apps and the phones are plugged into the sound system. Everything in life exists within this little rectangle of plastic. It's an amazing thing but it's also disturbing even seeing people on stage trying to get their conversation set up; it's very clear how isolating that is. Not that I'm against iPhones at all.

weather



Lilian Steiner, Kirstie McCracken, rehearsing Weather
photo Dian McLeod

How do you personally relate to the weather?

I'm a bit of a warm weather person, which has always been difficult living in Melbourne. I love Melbourne but there is that weather aspect that you might wish was different.

You don't get depressed?

No, I don't suffer what's called Seasonal Affective Disorder—no more than anybody else on a grey day. I spent a couple of years growing up on a farm when I was a young child and there was this strong connection to climate and especially rainfall. It was in a dry part of South Australia so there was this idea of really being affected by natural, uncontrollable forces in terms of when the rain fell, whether it ruined the crops or whatever. If there hadn't been any rain, your bath would only be a couple of inches deep. The weather had a real impact on our lives. But I think even living in cities it's amazing how dependent and attached and in tune we are with the weather. It's probably the main thing about the natural world that we really are connected to.

What drove you to make a work on the weather?

It's pretty simple. I just thought it would be a really great topic to explore

choreographically. Probably the thing that's been interesting for me this year with two quite large works on the go is that I've been able to split my interests a bit. I am quite interested in text—more of a choreography of words I guess. It doesn't really come from a theatre-making place; it definitely comes from my background as a choreographer. It includes words, emotions and almost creating characters—so that the choreographic pool of language becomes much larger in *Conversation Piece*. But I also have a real love for pure choreography and dance. So in *Weather* I have a subject that allows me to really explore movement, direction, force and emotion—to a certain degree. Plus it's just becoming so important now. Our awareness of the weather has really changed, the way we think about it. It's not just this thing from out there that we can't control; we are actually beginning to change the weather system. And the conversation about the weather is changing.

I read that you don't see *Weather* as episodic, but as evolving, perhaps like the initial chat in *Conversation Piece*. Why is that important to you?

It's also been something I've questioned in my work, or in choreographic work in general. You often go into the studio and you make sections, you make one part and then another part and then you put them together. It's unavoidable to a degree—you can't work on everything at once. I've attempted to make the shifts between things less abrupt and with more of a bleed into each other, similar to the way that weather changes—although weather does sometimes change quite suddenly. One of the things that's really become quite prominent in the work is a more abstract idea of weather as represented in maps and diagrams where you see the isobars shifting or the highs and lows and weather fronts moving. I've gone into more representational movement than I normally might. I'm more often attracted to quite abstract movement, but there's something about the simplicity of moving like the wind or like water. It's almost a child-like relationship to dance and movement.

Does sound play a role in *Weather*?

The sound is not what you'd expect. I'm working with the composer Oren Ambarchi. It starts with a pulse, which you might not associate with the weather which is so fluid and changeable. But it almost sounds like a motor that starts up and then the pulse pretty much goes all the way through the work. There's a section in the middle where it drops out and moves into speakers called Leslie Cabinets in which fans shift the sound, like a Doppler Effect, and then it returns to its rhythm. It creates a sense of time or of the world turning, building in a way that you have an expectation that something is about to happen, and it gets greater and greater.

What do you anticipate the audience might feel about the weather you create?

I don't know what they'll feel but I would like them to have more of a visceral response to the work. It's visually intricate and the choreography is very involved. I would hope they'd become absorbed and drawn into it in a kind of unquestioning way.

A reverie?

Yes, but also to question their own relationship with the natural world.

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Lucy Guerin Inc is celebrating its 10th birthday this year. The company was started up by Lucy Guerin and Angharad Wynne-Jones in a small office above the Malthouse carpark. The company has gone from strength to strength under the partnership of Guerin and executive producer Michaela Coventry, who joined the company in 2006. Coming performances include *Untrained* at BAM in Brooklyn, November 27-December 1 and at the Mondavi Center in Davis, California. Yorgos Loukos, Artistic Director of the Lyon Opera Ballet, has commissioned Guerin to create a work as part a triple bill, to be premiered in May 2013, with William Forysthe and one of Australia's most promising young choreographers, Lee Serle. Emma Gladstone from Sadler's Wells has commissioned a co-production with Lucy Guerin Inc which brings together English theatre director Carrie Cracknell, currently based at the Young Vic, and Lucy Guerin. There have been two creative developments of the work which will premiere in early 2014.

Belvoir: Lucy Guerin, *Conversation Piece*, Aug 25-Sept 16, [www.belvoir.com.au](http://www.belvoir.com.au);  
Melbourne International Arts Festival: Lucy Guerin Inc, *Weather*, Melbourne, [www.melbournefestival.com.au](http://www.melbournefestival.com.au)

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