

Australian Stage

Human Interest Story | Lucy Guerin Inc

Written by Stephanie Glickman
Thursday, 29 July 2010 10:04

Over the recent years, **Lucy Guerin** has been filtering more and more of the personal into her abstracted virtuosic vocabulary. *Human Interest Story* is probably the farthest yet that she has come in this direction. Its subject is the deluge of information that the media hits us with everyday – newspaper, news feeds and Twitter alerts that talk of wars, environmental collapse and natural disasters - and how those horrific and heavy subjects inform our everyday lives that are so removed from such grand scale chaos.



Photos - Jeff Busby

Just like the life size army tanker that remains dimly lit upstage behind the dancers (set designed by **Gideon Obarzanek**), the information is incessant and even when it's not talked about, it's hovering like a grey cloud in the background. **Guerin** successfully creates a tension between the micro and the macro, the mundane and the grandiose, requiring her dancers to oscillate between text and pure movement, humour and horror, mannered gesture and seemingly out of control aggression.

The cast of six take it all in stride, convincingly going to dark places and just as adroitly reveling in the lighter side of the material – celebrity gossip, work anecdotes, mindless chatter. Seated in a line facing an oversized television screen, they mono-dimensionally talk and gesture news reports, flicking heads side to side or slipping off balance in dispassionate ways. They are equally assured in crisp, detailed duets that require one to manipulate the other with workmanlike-precision, punctuated only by the occasional bounce or slow run. When conversation shifts to **Stephanie Lake**, she doesn't have thoughts about Julia Gillard's climate change policy, but can ramble comfortably about her kids' dinner. Flopping around in a sloppy solo dance, she articulates her answers in a lack luster, slow paced drawl.

It's these sorts of back and forth scenarios between personal and public, highlighted by a guest appearance (via the television) by newsreader **Anton Enus** giving us the latest breaking news in the dancers' own lives that propel *Human Interest Story* through its 70 minutes. **Jethro Woodward's** sound score, in which white noise mixes with pop and

rock, drives the action with its constant presence that is sometimes an overt barrage and other times barely there.

By the time the work shifts into its final section - dancers in simple black outfits and sharp, diagonal lights (lighting by **Paul Jackson**) chopping the stage up with long shards of illumination, the work turns purely abstract. Initiated by a convulsing solo by **Harriet Ritchie**, the dance feels totally frenetic, yet there is no question that the dancers are in complete control. Duets form and dissolve, arms and bodies fly; there is a bit of trashy rock dancing, a lot of darting and whip-sharp arms – perhaps an evocation of the anarchy of war or a society out of control, or perhaps just the frustration of the individual, a cog in the relentless stream.

Guerin leaves this ambiguous, which works within the context of what has already evolved. Unlike the coolness, at times the (intentional) dispassion of the earlier material, this last section hits a nerve – it's visceral and emotional, occasionally spine tingling, bringing some real humanness into the whole *Human Interest Story* conceit.

It's not just the choreography that excels here though – each and every one of the dancers is right there in the moment, going somewhere far beyond their personal comfort zone. **Ritchie**, in particular, is so phenomenal that at times it's impossible to stop watching her and **Stuart Shugg** reveals a feistiness never seen before.

Human Interest Story

REVIEWED BY CHLOE SMETHURST

July 26, 2010

INFORMATION overload has been an ongoing concern for choreographer Lucy Guerin. In *Human Interest Story*, she focuses specifically on news media and its effects.

As in much of Guerin's recent work, this piece combines movement with spoken word. Microphones amplify the dancers' voices and breathing, which are then merged with Jethro Woodward's adroit sound design.

Real news items are plundered; violent images from political unrest in Iran, pleas for help from Haitian earthquake victims, to incite an emotional response that reverberates through the bodies on stage. There is no linear narrative, yet through carefully constructed and abstracted scenes, a powerful cumulative effect develops.

The media is portrayed as omnipresent, available at all hours and inseparable from daily life. One dancer's quasi-military costume is stuffed with newspaper, transforming him into something between a gridiron player and a kyphosis sufferer. As the news gets under his skin, he becomes grotesque, his movement deformed until it ends in brutality, which then becomes another event to be spectated.



Literal references to newsreader mannerisms and MTV posturing are combined with virtuosic dance and masterful dramatic timing. A hulking tank in the background is never directly referred to, but adds to the tension and sense that we are besieged by information, yet often powerless to do anything about the distant events we witness.

Lighter moments make the experience enjoyable as well as enthralling. SBS newsreader Anton Enus makes a guest appearance, before Harriet Ritchie presents a live bulletin, describing the situation in her best Sandra Sully voice.

Ritchie and Stephanie Lake stand out among the well-rehearsed young ensemble. Lake has a magnetic stage presence, while Ritchie is one of the most outstanding dancers working in Melbourne.

Guerin's combination of understated drama, unique movement vocabulary and sleek staging make this story compulsory viewing.



HUMAN INTEREST STORY

Friday, 30th Jul 2010

Reviewer: Kathryn White

Date of Show: Wednesday, 28th Jul 2010

Venue: CUB Malthouse

News travels fast and frenetic in the big city.

Lucy Guerin Inc has created a confronting and truly thought provoking piece of theatre. Choreographed by Guerin herself, this production is so much more than just dance. The piece looks at a dichotomy that all of us experience; that is, the way we can become wrapped up in the trivialities of our own daily existence in the same way that we can become emotionally invested in the stories behind the news headlines we see every day. Through dance, Guerin contends that we can neither be trapped in our own day to day problems, nor be constantly responding emotionally to the headlines in the media. Finding a balance between the two is the key; we have a responsibility to be aware of what is going on in the world around us, yet many of us can become consumed by the headlines and experience feelings of helplessness and anxiety.



Set on a dully lit open stage, the blackness and emptiness of the space seemed endless. The only break in the void was the presence of a life size reproduction tank, lurking ominously in the background. The tank initially seemed a rather incongruous choice of set piece, and was never fully lit or interacted with in any way, nor specifically referred to. Yet as the performance progressed, its

presence created a real sense of tension and even fear. Perhaps it is not what a tank is, but rather what it represents that made the point; the presence of a tank in any situation is indicative of a situation gone wrong. A large television to broadcast a news bulletin and pieces of newspaper were also included in the set and each contributed to the performance. The pieces of newspaper in particular were laid out, spread out, scrunched

up, and stuffed into one dancer's costume before being pulled out again and kicked off stage. As props, they became an effective additive to the exploration of the notion that newspaper headlines can consume us.

The six dancers, Stuart Shugg, Stephanie Lake, Alisdair Macindoe, Talitha Maslin, Harriet Ritchie and Jessica Wong, executed the choreography with a preciseness that was utterly mesmerising. Much of the movement, particularly in the opening section, was set to the rhythmic recital of news headlines by the dancers themselves. With very little music initially and only the intermittent buzzing of white noise, this proved quite impressive. There were moments when all six performers spoke and danced in complete unison, producing an effect that was robotic and, at times, quite comical. The comedy continued when the dancing was interrupted with a televised presentation of mock headlines about the more mundane aspects of the dancers' actual lives.

This salute to the normality of the everyday was directly contrasted with the intensity of the events we constantly see broadcast in the news. To demonstrate this, two dancers had a benign conversation about working at Coles and, as they chatted, the audience watched as they deliberately and violently forced their dance partners into subversive and uncomfortable shapes. Guerin continued to explore this juxtaposition during Macindoe's



solo in which he was quite literally stuffed with newspaper headlines, and performed a dance that was both grotesque and humorous. As he was symbolically disembowelled by his fellow performers, the point that Guerin is trying to make became clear; that we can be torn apart by the news we hear if we allow ourselves to give in to emotion and anxiety.

The final section of the piece seemed to embody a real sense of panic and the dancing could only be described as brutal. Dressed in blacks, a stark contrast to the colourful patterned trousers and tops of the opening section, the dancers embarked on a sequence of furious and frenetic choreography. This was accompanied by the amplified heavy breathing and vocalisation from the dancers and a soundtrack by Jethro Woodward that brought together a choppy mix of music, static and sound effects that was deliberately pushed to an ear-splittingly high volume. It was punctuated by a series of freezes, in which one dancer would visibly break character and have a 'breather'; at one stage even leaving the space to get a drink from the foyer. Clearly, Guerin used this device to make the point that we need to have a 'break' from the bombardment that the media presents us with.

Every time the dancers broke character, the audience relaxed, enjoying the insight into the ‘everydayness’ of their lives. Guerin, however, never allowed us to get too comfortable, yanking us unceremoniously back into witnessing a dance sequence that jarred our senses and confronted our sensibilities. During the moments of quiet in the performance, one couldn’t help but feel a little relieved not to be so bombarded with noise and activity; yet at the same time, the energy of the movement was completely engrossing and emotionally loaded. And it is this confusing mixture of intrigue and denial felt by the audience that precisely illustrates the point ‘Human Interest Story’ is trying to make.

Kathryn has been involved in a variety of productions over the past ten years, performing in both musicals and plays. She has worked in all facets of theatre; on production teams, backstage, as a costumer and designer and as a performer. She has most recently appeared in productions of Oklahoma!, Julius Caesar (Metellus), The Witches of Eastwick (Gina Marino) and Oliver! (Nancy). This year, Kathryn directed and choreographed MDMS’ production of Jesus Christ Superstar.