

Making Structure and Sadness

By Lucy Guerin

'Structure and Sadness' has been an engrossing and challenging work. It is based on the Westgate Bridge collapse in Melbourne, which occurred in 1970 while it was under construction. I researched and read many accounts of the disaster and the experiences of the victims, some whose stories of escape were quite miraculous. The difficult part was to extract from this compelling story the elements of a dance piece.

The dancers and I spent a lot of time finding a movement vocabulary for this work. After a while it became clear that the physical forces acting on the bridge and the emotional impact on those involved, both had a similar movement vocabulary. The buckling of steel when applied to the human body as a movement idea creates a sense of emotional collapse. So it was the two interpretations of collapse, structural and emotional, one a result of the other, that became the central themes of the work.

Objects used in conjunction with the human body were a strong source of inspiration. Weeks and months were spent figuring out how the body might conform to bits of wood, boards, elastic under tension, a painter's plank. The dancers had an amazing capacity to pursue these physical puzzles but for me there was always an element of tension. Would a dancer fall off the plank, the elastic flick in the wrong direction, the wood hit someone. Although these risks were small it reinforced the element of danger that is present when hard materials, the human body and gravity come together.

All these ideas belong to the tangible world. A royal commission determined in great detail the events that lead to the collapse. "Error begat error ... and the events which led to the disaster moved with the inevitability of a Greek Tragedy." it stated. That tragedy is the unknowable, invisible cost in human suffering and loss of life. Grief has its own unseen trajectory that can't be measured or explained. Although the bridge was rebuilt and serves as a valuable connector between the west and the inner city communities, for many people who still recall the event, it is the dead that come to mind when they travel it.

Structure and Sadness

By John Bailey

What are the structural principles of catastrophe? Can we comprehend massive destruction and death by illuminating the material dynamics which produce disaster? Structure and Sadness is an ambitious work, perhaps unsettling so, which responds to the Westgate Bridge tragedy of October 15, 1970 by unearthing the great forces at work in its construction and downfall. It may seem strange, initially, to attempt to choreograph catastrophe, to dance the physics of collapse. These are invisible forces, certainly, but it is in this that dance becomes the ideal vehicle for exploring their complexity, since it is in these forces' effects, their impact and influence on the human body that we can come close to glimpsing the unseen. The forces which brought down approximately 2000

tonnes of concrete and metal are the same forces that shape the individual form. The dancers in Lucy Guerin's new work incarnate tension, balance, density and momentum. They construct for the audience a fragile house of cards, while at the same time this creation engineers their fate.

Structure and Sadness both extends and departs from themes which have underscored Guerin's earlier works. Duets feature strongly, but as in 2005's *Love Me*, we are confronted by the fact that every relationship involves a third partner: the world. Duets are not danced in pure space, but are mediated by the real and virtual obstacles which both conjoin and divide bodies. However, in works such as *Love Me*, *Plasticine Park* (2003) and, especially, last year's *Aether* the mediating boundaries dividing bodies have often been immaterial, incorporeal, electronic. Dancers whirl amidst a flurry of information, themselves reduced to data or image. In *Structure and Sadness*, conversely, the world is one of concrete and steel, and its substantiality is very real indeed. When this world comes crashing down, that reality becomes fatally clear.

The second half explores how material tragedy is translated into affective response; how the physical logic of catastrophe produces an emotional counter reaction within those whose lives it disrupts. Impact takes on a double meaning: we witness the impact of collapse on bodies, while at the same time being made aware of the corresponding impact survivors and families undergo after the fall. Grief is physicalised, not as an abstract notion but rather as a thing inextricably bound to the sequence of cause and effect that reduces bridges to rubble.

This is not to say that Guerin's new work makes sense of the Westgate Bridge collapse. To do so would be, in a sense, to justify a disaster, to explain something that is beyond understanding. This isn't the purpose of art: instead, *Structure and Sadness* turns our attention to the gap between the physical event and the emotional response it produces. It explores the way that a fact becomes both objective history and subjective impression. Catastrophe is both a social phenomenon and an individual experience, and it is in bridging these two realms, between the shared and the intensely private, that Guerin does justice to the charged territory with which the work deals. *Structure and Sadness* reminds us that we walk upon the backs of the dead, and that the past is a force we can never truly master.