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Lighting, projection take center stage in *Symphonie 5.1*

By ROBERT EVERETT-GREEN

Symphonie 5.1 offers an explosive demonstration of what marvels are possible when pairing lighting and projection with movement

In an essay on opera, musicologist Alfred Einstein reflected on how different figures had become prominent at different times – first the stage machinist, then the librettist, then the star singers and finally the composer.

The new rising power in the theatre is the lighting designer, whose technical means have advanced enormously in recent years. Computerized control alters not just the light that enters the playing space, but how it engages, spatially and moment by moment, with the surfaces and bodies it encounters.

An explosive demonstration of what's possible opened Wednesday night at Montreal's Agora de la danse. *Symphonie 5.1* is nominally a dance work by Isabelle Van Grimde, but human movement is only part of what drives the piece. For much of the show, the stage seethes with grids of interactive light that flex and tear open around the moving bodies of the dancers. There are four performers, but several more who are mere avatars – projections of moving dancers that can be scaled up or down, and that perform duets with the live ones.

These marvels of lighting and projection (designed by Jérôme Delapierre, with Émilie Bérubé-Dionne) fuse with an immersive live sound design (by composer-performers Tim Brady and Thom Gossage) to create an environment that's saturated with energy even when the dancers remain still. Van Grimde's dancers stood up to this environmental barrage with powerful movements and strong poses. They often took a wide-legged stance and slashed their arms about like swords, or came up from a prone position into sphinx-like sculptural attitudes. They pushed their rumps out, and flexed their spines like serpents, sometimes echoing one another's movements in canon. One favourite and distinctive gesture moved the palms together down the core of the body, as if to focus the energy flowing through the trunk.

Sometimes all strength fell out of the movement, and a dancer curled into the fetal position. The grid of lights would swirl around, or shatter into a mobile pixelated texture that seemed to flatten the inert body under a flood of visual activity. One of these episodes sprayed so much light around the room, the whole stage became a disco ball.

In another segment, Van Grimde choreographed a narrow vertical band of light, by rippling a dancer's body at the edge of it, so that the light flexed and raced down head, breasts, hips and knees. Another very beautiful scene abruptly rotated the playing space, with a static triangulated grid that sliced the stage diagonally and played on the slowly moving dancers' bodies like an all-over tattoo of light.

The dances with avatars were eerie and fascinating, but relatively simple, being mostly rooted before the nearly invisible screens where the projections happened. The live dancer would stand in front of his or her filmed image, and they would move almost together, like an animated double exposure. It was impossible, sometimes, to tell which was

live, and which was the ghost. There was also a suggestion that these ghosts had seductive powers, as so many of our digital toys do. When dancer Georges-Nicolas Tremblay broke away from his avatar and strode briskly across the stage, it felt like a liberation.

Two young dancers from l'École supérieure de ballet du Québec (Samaël Maurice and Maya Robitaille) joined Tremblay and Marie-Eve Lafontaine, wandering through the stage as if it were a garden of wonders they'd never seen before. Again, Van Grimde seemed to be allegorizing our relationship with technology, as well as adapting her kind of movement to slimmer, more elfin bodies.

In a section near the end of the piece, the interactive lighting control was synched suddenly to Gossage's drumsticks. Every time he struck something, a light flashed on the stage, then many lights in near-stroboscopic fashion as he drummed faster. It overwhelmed the dance, and pushed the immersive quality of this environment from high to oppressive.

Behind this display of gee-whiz stage magic, Van Grimde was negotiating with her own avatar: Oskar Schlemmer, the Bauhaus designer and choreographer who imposed rational geometries on his dancers' bodies through costuming and props. Van Grimde does it with light. As splendid and stormy as the results can appear, her aesthetic is tied, like Schlemmer's, to a preference for simple forms and classical order. That tension is part of what makes this an arresting show.

Symphonie 5.1 continues at Agora de la danse in Montreal through Jan. 30.

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