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REVIEW

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Van Grimde Corps Secrets

Symphonie 5.1

By Philip Szporer (/contributor/philip-szporer)

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SYMPHONIE 5.1 (/EVENT-
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Montréal (/city/montr%C3%A9al%C2%A0)
January 27-30, 2016

Over the years choreographer Isabelle Van
Grimde has been skillfully providing a
platform for a team of other leading artists to
create work within the context of her larger

Symphonie 5.1 by Isabelle Van Grimde / Photo by Jérôme Delapierre

canvas. This encyclopedic approach to conceptual innovation is inclusive and offers an idealistic broad-based vision to creativity. Now she's collaborating with, among others, the visual artist and interactive designer Jérôme Delapierre, composer-musicians Tim Brady and Thom Gossage (Van Grimde's long-time creative partner), dancers Marie-Ève Lafontaine, Georges-Nicolas Tremblay and two young performers from the École supérieure de ballet du Québec, Samaël Maurice and Maya Robitaille (what a terrific opportunity for them!).

Multimedia experimentation is the driving force behind *Symphonie 5.1*, a platform for applying video projections as a light source, working to reveal dancers' bodies, or a sense of them, rather than showing other pre-recorded images alongside them. Van Grimde and her collaborators are inscribing information from the moving human body to create new motion graphics in an organic yet seemingly unwieldy setting.

An eerie and cold sci-fi/biotech sense fills the space. Dancers emanate from the penumbra or retreat whence they came. What's viewed onstage does not reconcile with the rational world. In the sonic environment, the score of electric guitar and percussion builds with its own fantastical quality before subsiding, and it appears the dancers' movements are also processed to generate modulations of sound.

Vast geometric planes of grey, black and white images, flashing angular abstractions, or radiating beams of pulsing light, animate the previously bare black floor-cum-"screen." Visual noise envelops Lafontaine's prone or upright stretching body, as she rolls or slides. Upright, she punctuates her motion on the stage with expansive arm gestures, small thrusts of her legs or gentle backward rotations of her head , elongating the side of her neck. She's not so much ensconced in the elements but seems to be buffeted within the shape-shifting, voluminous space. The other dancers are introduced in other sections and inhabit the stage in similar ways. Each cast member performs a recurring genuflecting phrase mechanically, wherein hands rise and fall, snapping up and down the torso, the solar plexus open, the head cocked back. The disembodied feel to this repeated sequence, where the body appears to be a mere frame, adds to the sense of a dehumanizing universe.

While the technology tells its own "story," *Symphonie 5.1* examines relationships in a relatable yet played out fashion. For most of the piece, the performers never appear to be quite human, as there's little to no contact either physically or emotionally between them. Eventually, the adults (Lafontaine and Tremblay) become more expressive and look on to the younger dancers (Maurice and Robitaille) with doting eyes. In that moment there's the suggestion this is a perfectly ordinary family unit, a mom and dad with two kids. Briefly the adults enact a mating scene, a desperate clutch really, their intimate lives recharged. Meanwhile the children appear frozen in time and look on as guardians.

Suspended floor-to-ceiling vertical, translucent screens, twice the width of a human adult body, dot the sombre stage. The technology also casts synergetic clone-like silhouettes of the dancers onto the screens, mirroring the live bodies behind them, the virtual entities collapsing dimensions while fusing space.

Responsive multimedia activity in dance is not a new stream of research. But, as always, it's what you do with the technology that counts. Pioneering artists such as the American Alwin Nikolais chartered the evolution of this kind of kinetic presentation from the 1950s through to the 1980s, shunning narrative

texts and instead embracing light and sound as the visually compelling subject itself. While the modern greats such as Martha Graham were dancing about "something," Nikolais was audacious, intent on breaking with the past.

Over a decade ago, Gideon Obarzanek, choreographer and then-artistic director of Australia's Chunky Move, famously worked with the computer software engineer Frieder Weiss creating interactive performance work marrying the moving body, dance and technology. They channelled information from infrared cameras to a computer and applied that data to video generating software and systems, employing various logarithms to convincingly drive the ever-shifting projections back onto the dancer's body, their dynamics and the stage itself.

Delapierre seems to be working with a similar design conceit for Van Grimde. In this new work, where the "liveness" of live performance is everything, they emphasize a synesthetic experience, a reorienting of the senses, so that we can potentially "hear" what the movement looks like and "see" what the sound sounds like. I wish the audience wasn't seated strictly looking down upon the reality/virtual reality exchange on the proscenium stage. It would have been interesting to gauge the other audience members' reactions; though, I don't think the "magic" they were creating would have worked in another configuration.

The endless possibilities of changing digital technologies has implications for the ways in which dance artists proceed with research, engineering, interactivity and the engagement of sensual flesh and bone. Beyond projections, music and lighting controlling dancers' movements, *Symphonie 5.1* circles around another central question. The stakes rise with the consideration of perception and responsiveness in the subjective viewing experience. Another dance-tech pioneer, Robert Weschler of Palindrome, a performance group that started in the early 1980s in New York before moving to Germany, once stated, "We do not really see what is there, but instead we see something that is effectively transformed by the viewer." The pitfalls of the technological interplay and experimentation couldn't be better expressed. Everything is filtered through our own experience of all this tracking and mapping. What's engineered in this kind of production is not so much an opportunity to ponder where any one live or virtual body is, but a chance to grapple with the concept of the "imaginary body," how it's communicated and how is the viewer susceptible to it.

Posted February 12, 2016

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