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NightDriving
Overview

Lisa Naugle & John Crawford

NightDriving is a new performance work from choreographer Lisa Naugle and video designer John Crawford, with music by Alan Terriciano. This twelve-minute piece integrates contemporary dance with digital video technology. Premiered in February 2003 at University of California, Irvine, *NightDriving* is now available for restaging in other venues as a group work for ten to twelve dancers.

NightDriving connects choreography for the stage with choreography for the camera, exploring interactions, in space and in time, between dancers and projected imagery. Video imagery is projected on a large transparent scrim stretching across the front of the stage. On the scrim we see the video, and behind the scrim we see the dancers, live on the multi-leveled stage, sharing the visual environment with the projections.

Photo: Philip Channing

Patrizia Herminjard & Donald Laney in *NightDriving,*
University of California, Irvine, February 2003

About NightDriving

> *… for night driving... our eyes must remove one kind of inner transparency and fit on another ....*
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> *Italo Calvino, The Night Driver*

The curtain rises. Suspended over a darkened stage, ghostly apparitions slowly twist and spin. A dancer bursts into view, quickly joined by another dancer. Watching the complex interplay of movement between the dancers, it slowly dawns on you – one of the performers is live, and the other is a projection on a transparent screen covering the stage.

As more dancers appear on the stage, more video dancers appear on the screen, images transforming from soft and ethereal to bright and colorful, weaving threads of digital imagery into the intricate tapestry of contemporary dance.

 NightDriving is composed of five sections, totaling twelve minutes. The stage is divided into four areas, consisting of the three platforms and the floor area between them, plus a fifth space created by the projections on the downstage scrim.

The *NightDriving* projections integrate pre-processed video animation sequences (played from DVD) with live video of dancers captured from surveillance cameras hung above the stage. The choreography flows back and forth between the dancers on stage, the video animations and the surveillance images.

The piece opens in darkness, lit only by the glow of surveillance images of the dancers on the upstage platforms, gradually becoming brighter as the stage lights fade up. The principal male and female dancers have brief solos on the downstage platforms, intercepted by animated beams, like headlights, flashing across the scrim. This introduces the fundamental visual landscape, highlighting the notion of energy being exchanged back and forth across a distance.

The next section of the work begins with two duets featuring two principal dancers. In each duet the "virtual" self of one dancer, in the form of an animated video projection, is paired with the "real" self of the other. These video animations were created from dance that was choreographed for the camera, then digitally manipulated.

The duets develop into a quartet for all four selves. The projected video selves start out the same size as the live selves. Gradually the video selves grow and fill more of the scrim, drawing the audience into a shared environment bridging "real" and "virtual" dance. These multiple representations are used theatrically to create a place of transformation and illusion. By juxtaposing the selves, we raise questions of identity, illusion and authenticity, challenging perception, asking whether what we see is real or a projection, a simulation of a real person.

In the third section we remove the video projections to focus attention on the dance, enhanced by pools of light. There are multiple places to watch: two dancers are on each of the downstage platforms and four dancers are on the upstage platform.

In the fourth section, the projections return to the scrim, and the virtual video selves get larger and more colorful, growing until they appear to fill the entire stage. The live dancers on stage become still, silhouetted on a glowing background. The projected videodance devolves into abstract, super-slow fragments of the choreography, inviting attention to nuance and subtle energies inside the movement, revealed through the animations. The abstract videodance animation sequences continue through section five, joined by complex group choreography onstage, building to the finale.

Projections and the Silver Scrim

The use of a silver sharkstooth scrim covering the entire width and height of the stage enables us to bring both real and virtual dancers into the same space. The projections on the scrim alternate between two kinds of representation: the "here and now" view from the surveillance cameras, and the pre-processed abstract dance imagery played from DVD, introducing virtual figures in counterpoint to the live dancers.

The four surveillance cameras, pointed down, overlap to capture the upstage platform. This view from above contributes a unique perspective for sections one and five of *NightDriving*. Choreographed for the overhead camera zones, the dancers respond to the cameras' presence, supporting the theme of the messenger becoming the message.

The scrim also supports the development of a shared visual space, with the combined view of real and projected dancers contributing to a sense of immersion, creating an integrated performance environment. The projections alter the size and apparent position of the virtual dancers in relation to the live dancers. At the beginning of the piece, the virtual and live dancers are exactly the same size, and the virtual images appear almost lifelike. By the end of the piece, the virtual dancers become very large, fragmented, obviously "unreal", but still clearly connected to the live dance.

Development Process

Our intention with *NightDriving* is to create a performance environment that expands the perceptual experience of dancers and audience, making connections between dance and technology across various dimensions of space and time. The development process for this piece was especially exciting because it involved exploring the expressive potential of dancers with technology, opening up new practices for expression of cultural ideas. The technological aspects of the work were developed with careful consideration of how the technology can support the dance performance, ideally offering new insights or approaches for thinking about dance.