

## KEEPING SECRETS DOWN TO EARTH

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A new dance company is stretching the frontiers of dance to incorporate poetry and technology – but don't tell anyone.

Like a lot of people, Jools Gilson-Ellis finds it hard to explain exactly what she does. In the arts world traditional categories have broken down and people find themselves operating in several arenas at once. Few, however, are as eclectic as Gilson-Ellis. She is a trained dancer and choreographer who writes and performs poetry and fiction. Her new project with Richard Povall uses computers, video cameras and motion-sensing technology. She also lectures on drama at University College Cork.

Povall and Gilson-Ellis have formed a company, *half/angel*, as a framework for a performance called ***The Secret Project***. The ambiguous undertones of the name are deliberate. Povall is a musician, composer and digital artist and directs the technical side of the project. Gilson-Ellis is one of three performers, along with dancers Cindy Cummings and Mary Nunan.

Although computer technology is central to the work, Gilson-Ellis and Povall emphasise that ***The Secret Project*** is not about technology – there are no space suits or laser beams. It is a work performed by three dancers, but it incorporates elements from video, theatre and the visual arts. It could be a gallery installation or an experimental play.

At its most basic, a video camera captures an image of the dancer on stage. Based on the quality of that image – not just the space occupied but the body, but the speed of its motion and the fluidity of a particular gesture – a computer triggers a pre-recorded piece of music or text. The performers then respond to the triggered effects, completing the feedback loop.

Language is usually taboo in the dance world because speech represents the clearest boundary between dance and theatre. The dancers in ***The Secret Project*** not only speak, but sing. More difficult still, they have to listen.

Gilson-Ellis describes the result as being somewhere between improvisation and set choreography. "It radically changes the way people perform," she says. "You cannot rely on a set sound emerging, so performers need to listen actively all the time, to listen in a way that we're not used to listening. When it works, it works brilliantly. But when it fails, it fails magnificently."

This may sound abstract and over-refined, but the project is meant to be accessible. The texts written by Gilson-Ellis are simple and poetic, rather like an extended form of haiku. She is also given to an earthy brand of humour: some of the texts used, she says, consist of "rather rude jokes". This is not a piece about cyber-dancers or cyber-poets. It is, as the name suggests, about secrets.

The technological change that permits advanced motion sensing also creates an obsession with codes, ciphers and electronic cryptography. As the internet extends into different areas of human activity, people place a higher premium on privacy. The secrets that interest *half/angel* are not earth-shattering revelations, but all the quirks and oddities that people define themselves by. This comes back to the idea of personal space – something with which the dance world is familiar. Contemporary dance is centred on what is often called body work – the way in which gestures and movements convey emotion. By adding speech, Gilson-Ellis moves the performance on to a different plain. She is interested, she says, in the effect that speech has on the body and, conversely, the effect of the body on speech.

Dance is often choreographed to give performers a breather after any strenuous exertion, and their reaction to exertion tends to be masked. However, Gilson-Ellis throws herself back into a situation where the audience can hear every puff of breath and does away with those masks.

Gilson-Ellis and Povall plan to take *The Secret Project* on Tour but, longer term, Povall is interested in extending the idea on to the internet "so that the gestures come from the audience or user rather than the performer". This would alter further the relationship between artist and audience. If they reach that point, the project would be anything but secret.