

THE SECRET PROJECT

Moving with Technology – Irish artists delete Lord of the Dance

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When you think of Ireland, visions of shamrocks, Guinness and Riverdance may come to mind. But think again, my colonial friend. The Ireland of today is actually on the cutting edge of European technology and can't wait to scoop up all those loose Euros from the latecomers who still think a good creamy cheese will dance on the grave of a computer.

A dance company in Cork, Ireland is embracing modern technology as well as keeping up with traditional diddly-diddly Irish dance, and the mods are coming to North America, this time in the form of a dance troupe called **half/angel**. They are working on their new show called **The Secret Project** and it will likely make you forget the Lord of the Dance was even born.

"We're not working with that kind of traditional Irish dancing," writer-choreographer Jools Gilson-Ellis says over the phone from Banff. "We are very interested in forging a sense of what contemporary dance is like in Ireland and really trying to get away a bit from the Michael Flatley phenomenon, in the sense that Ireland is not just about a traditional notion. Ireland is in an extraordinary sense of change at the moment, with its economy burgeoning for the first time in, literally, centuries.

The **half/angel** dance-theatre company is currently at The Banff Centre putting the finishing touches to **The Secret Project**. They are incorporating dance with motion-sensing systems, video, sound, songs and text.

All these disciplines are right up the alley of Gilson-Ellis. She comes from a background of dance, theatre and literature. But don't expect a linear story that reveals a deep dark secret at the end.

"The tone of the work isn't actually narrative-driven," says Gilson-Ellis. "Though there are fragment of narrative, in the centre there is a short story. Rather than having a

secret we explain to the audience, we are more interested in the kind of processes of concealment and layering that happens in the making and taking and giving away of secrets.”

The other co-director of ***The Secret Project*** is Richard Povall. It’s his job to make the computer not only function, but become a member of the cast – sort of an embryonic Commander Data wanting to be an artist.

“The computer is finally acting as a human interface,” says Povall during his turn on the phone. “The technology we’re using is quite old. There are systems out there that are incredibly accurate. They can look at a moving body and really follow what it’s doing extremely well. It turns out that’s not terribly interesting.

“What is interesting is how you try to capture the essence of movement. How do you find the internal impulse of a movement? So what I’m trying to do is fool the computer into not trying to look at too much detail, but to look internally”.

One of Povall’s earlier experiments was a computer that followed colour – he had Gilson-Ellis dancing with a bright yellow strip around her finger. Povall spent 20 years tinkering with technology and performance. He has a classical music background, but it is the joining of media with humans that grabs him. It seems to work, too, as the *New York Times* gave a favourable review to the work-in-progress.

Povall is much more than a computer programmer for the dancers, he acts like a jazz musician, inserting the sounds live during the show.

“I’m not playing any music live. I am occasionally doing something that supports a moment that’s not really working. Or I’m tweaking things, or I’m making adjustments to settings. I also have a few buttons on the screen to cheat when something doesn’t work or things are too quiet. I am able to step in and help with the improv. Mostly it works, but occasionally it’s a disaster.

“But,” Povall assures, “it will be fine when we open the show.”