

DANCING WITH WINGS

A project that uses interactive technology to create new dance movements shows its results in Cork.

Michael Seaver

[published in: *The Irish Times*. (November 4th, 1999): 16]

If computers have changed the way we live, then they have also changed the way we think. In our technological society the mind has replaced the body in importance and value. Mind power is now supreme and the physical conditioning that occurred naturally through manual labour now has to be done in gyms, and extra task in our already busy lives.

Despite the efforts of homeopathy, we are still devoted to traditional medicine, which cures the body but hardly ever heals the person. Drugs help us when our bodies "let us down", Viagra for sex and nandralone to win races. Universally, the classical harmonious body as the ruling metaphor for good government has been replaced by computer-inspired "systems".

Dance, as an art form would seem to be at odds with these values. It links mind and body (in a society that tends to view the body with distrust) and affirms kinaesthetic intelligence in a culture that tends to measure knowledge in words and numbers.

Linking computers (mind) to dance (body) throws up interesting questions about our values on both, and at the Firkin Crane in Cork, **half/angel** presents the premiere of *The Secret Project*, a dance work which uses interactive technology. Funded through the Arts Council's Interdisciplinary Fund and by Firkin Crane and the Banff Centre in Canada, the performance is the result of a long period of research and development, both technological and artistic.

The three dancers, Jools Gilson-Ellis, Cindy Cummings and Mary Nunan, perform in a specially constructed environment where motion sensors and video camera sense their movements and trigger sound or video. The performers control when these events happen and to small extent can dictate the form of the piece. But **half/angel** want to do more than that.

Richard Povall, co-director of the company with Jools Gilson-Ellis, describes how they are trying to increase the subtlety of these triggered responses: "In *The Secret Project* we are trying to sense not just the precise movement of the dancer but the sense of the movement – the inner meaning and impulse behind a movement. One of the earliest pieces we made with this in mind is the piece called "breath", which opens *The Secret Project*. It's one of our oldest pieces, and still the one that is perhaps best received.

"For this piece, we recorded a sequence of breathing sounds from Jools as a performer – from the quietest, calmest breathing to the almost hysterical gasps. From this source, I pulled out around 150 separate breath sounds, and classified them into five layers, again from the quietest to the most troubled or loudest. In the final piece, the way Jools moves determines what level of sound we are listening to.

"It begins with Jools breathing (live) alone, as she moves up from a bent position. The piece is stationary – it doesn't travel at all – and almost all the movement is in the hands and the upper body. As she becomes more upright, the breath sounds triggered by her movement are added into the sonic mix. If she is moving gently, we hear the gentler layers, if she is moving (at the other extreme) in an almost hysterical way, we are hearing the most agitated layers – and everything in between. In this way, it is the impulse and the emotional content of the movement that is controlling the sound".

But isn't it easy to get infatuated with the technology and let that distract you from the dance? "Yes of course. It has always bothered me that artists working with technology have a tendency to become obsessed with their technological tools" says Richard, suggesting that "new" is not necessarily "better".

Perhaps we need to draw a distinction between the idea of innovation and the idea of 'newness'. Version 4 of Quark Xpress is new, but it isn't particularly innovative. Striving for innovation is probably inherent and perhaps essential to any creative act, but the sheen of newness is just a tawdry dressing that all too often disappoints and which rarely has any substance".

Jools is also a writer, and text is an important element of the work. "Actually the whole notion of *secrets*, the theme for The secret Project came about from me moving in an environment where I had to be aware of where the sensors were," says Jools. "and my movement reflected this – everything was very careful and furtive, so this prompted the notion of secrets. But right away I knew that text would be a crucial element.

"When we started working in Banff I gave Mary and Cindy journals to write down thoughts on secrets. I think they might have been a bit reticent at first, but soon all sorts of interesting stuff came up, not in any bad way, but lots of old secrets that were important at the time but now seem trivial or just plain daft. We found ourselves using spoken text a lot and hard to work on trying to make that a part of the dance, almost like another limb. It's something that dancers are not trained to do. We either dance or talk, but never try to really refine the relationship between the two."

The relationship between text and movement is something that she would like to investigate even further. When talking of the physicality of the spoken word and the breath, one thinks of French critic Helene Cixous, who suggests all writing comes from the breath. And of course we are told in dance classes every day that every movement begins with the breath. Finding the links in the physicality of writing and dance is yet another strand of **half/angel's** work. A sort of "can you tell the dancer from the text?"

Having spent nearly a week setting up in the Firkin Crane. Repeat performances will rely on the goodwill of the venues in allowing a long "get-in" time. Future touring in England is now guaranteed due to a recent grant from the New Audience programme from the Arts Council of England. But it seems to be the time spent investigating and developing work that will yield the greatest returns for a company like **half/angel**. And long may that continue.