

Using Tech to Augment Dance’s Possibilities

BY JEAN SCHIFFMAN

A rehearsal is underway for Mark Foehringer Dance Project/SF’s latest world premiere, “Dances of the Sacred and Profane.” The five-member ensemble of locals as well as New York-based dancers is working on a section in the middle that’s set to Debussy’s “Nocturnes. I: Nuages.” This is one of six sections that comprise the evening-length piece, which is inspired by the art and music of the Impressionist era. (The other sections are set to Debussy’s “Rêverie,” “Danses sacrée et profane” and “La cathédrale engloutie”; Fauré’s “Après un rêve”; and Ravel’s “Pavane pour une enfante défunte.”) For now, the performers are working without the music; Foehringer, who’s wearing glasses and a loose-fitting black shirt, stands by, recording the movement on an iPad. The dancers enter the stage area silently one by one. They seem to approach a precipice and halt, come together, pair off and come together again, glide, leap straight up then pivot sideways with an arm extended, twirl, roll on the floor.

It is still weeks away from the opening at the Cowell Theater—the first production to be staged there since its new, \$20 million upgrade—and Foehringer’s collaborators are also present: costumer Connie Strayer sits on the sidelines; her silvery, diaphonous skirts for the women and matching loose pants for the men will extend the dancers’ movements gracefully in space. At a long table, with a laptop, sits sound designer Michael St. Clair, in the process of creating “generative audio” that will—to various degrees—manipulate the classical score in response to the dancers’ movements.

Next to him is his Stanford faculty colleague, media artist Camille Utterback, with a laptop, a desktop keyboard and several monitors. On the monitors are images, or avatars, of the dancers, captured in motion (at the Cowell, five cameras will be positioned downstage) thanks to a computer system that simulates an atomic-particle response to human movement. With Utterback controlling the keyboard, the shape-shifting avatars form flowing patterns that essentially interact with the choreog-



Choreographer Mark Foehringer presents “Dances of the Sacred and Profane” Sept. 13-14 and 18-21 at Cowell Theater, Fort Mason. Above, from left: Melissa Kaufman-Gomez and Thomas Woodman.

raphy; at various times the images are a blurry abstraction. They fade and reappear in various colors and sizes and tempos, morph and melt, self-erase as in an Etch-a-Sketch. They are watery-looking or punctuated by sunburst designs. You can imagine an invisible master hand wielding an ethereal paintbrush. Summer intern Melissa Kaufman-Gomez, a computer science/dance student who is also present, explains the process this way in her blog: “Cameras capture human motion in real time, and a projection of the motion represented as an energy field interacts with a simulation of the nanoworld.” In performance, the projections will appear on three enormous upstage screens arranged in a semi-circle.

“My fantasy is they’re on top of the clouds,” explains Foehringer, as the dancers pause to regroup. “They’re running along and they suddenly stop because they’ve reached a hole at the edge. And they’re having to problem-solve about how to move forward—or back—and they turn around and go the other way.” He is exploring obstacles, and spatial relationships.

As lofty as the title “Dances of the Sacred and Profane” may sound, Foehringer is approaching the concept as a meditation upon contemporary notions of what we hold holy, or precious (“things we can’t control, otherworldly things”) and what we consider mundane, everyday, corporeal perhaps—as well as, writes Kaufman-Gomez, “the sacredness within the ordinary.”

It’s a multi-layered presentation, both visually and aurally. Foehringer, 39 years in the dance field and an acclaimed choreographer and two-time Fulbright Fellow who began his career in Brazil (he considers himself half Brazilian), established his company here in 1996. The collaboration with Utterback, a MacArthur Fellow

whom he met when they were both at the Djerassi Resident Artists Program, is a new and exciting experiment for him; he views her installation-like contribution as augmenting the performance in significant ways. “Time is really important in all of my work,” he says. “So the visuals are adding a layer of time passing.” With Utterback’s use of “danceroom Spectroscopy”—a hardware/software system created by physicist David Glowacki, a visiting scholar at Stanford, and tweaked by Utterback for this production—the audience can, in a sense, experience the past and the present simultaneously. “It’s important to say that it’s happening live,” says Foehringer. That is, as Utterback explains, some of the imagery will be pre-set for performance; how much she will fine-tune night by night in response to live movement is being worked out in rehearsal.

Even the projections themselves are multi-layered: In the case of “Nuages” (“Clouds”), for example, a video of clouds will waft through the on-screen avatars; in other sections, Monet’s water lilies will appear, with a background that resembles a pond, a painterly look: illusion upon illusion. Clouds, for Foehringer, represent the celestial, one of those elements not part of the material world as we see it—the sacred, so to speak.

The classical music, of course, is sacred to many, and Foehringer and St. Clair are aware of the delicacy required in modifying the score. “What sounds do clouds make?” Foehringer wonders, and chuckles. “What kind of sounds would one make on a cloud?”

“In contemporary music, clouds sound like granular synthesis,” says St. Clair—a process surely more profane than sacred. “You take a sound, a big, long, complex sound, and chop it up into lots of tiny bits and then reorganize the bits,” he explains. “Sometimes people even talk about this as ‘making

clouds of sound.’ Because you’re kind of breaking it down into particles and spraying it all over. . . . I can skip back a quarter note or a half note depending on how fast the dancer is moving, or repeat sections.” His challenge is to truly respond to the dance and at the same time respect the music: “to process it in a way that leaves it coherently classical,” he says, “but moves it in space or time or timbre or quality depending on dancers’ motions.

“It all makes me a little anxious, but at the same time it’s thrilling,” confesses Foehringer, who wants to always be experimenting with new ideas. “Because it’s happening right here! It’s not like, here’s a video of the dance, go score it, or go design—it’s sort of coming together, unfolding, at the same time, in an almost organic way.” However, he doesn’t want the audience to be overwhelmed by the various media effects, and intends for the layers to be added judiciously, and not continuously: It is ultimately a dance performance, he emphasizes.

Of the Impressionist art—Rodin, Monet and more—that inspired the piece, he muses, “I didn’t want the dance to be about repeating the art. I wanted it to be about the feeling I was getting from it, the different ways to present those feelings on the stage . . . not a literal exploration of these things, or of the music . . .” For her part, Utterback talks of hitting a “sweet spot” in the computer imagery, of creating “a response to the dancers’ movement that doesn’t overwhelm it, and is not exactly it but is another way of thinking about that movement.”

Observes Foehringer, “We’ve defined what is sacred and what is profane in so many different ways.” For example, in the section that is a male/female duet set to “La cathédrale engloutie” (sunken cathedral), he imagines the cathedral (sacred) as shattering, and the dancer as a statue that falls through the air and transforms into a human being (profane), and he and Utterback have devised a ravishing illusion—a seamless combination of screen image and live dancer—to portray it.

The dancers move on to rehearse the opening section, “Dances of the Sacred and Profane,” which gives the full-length piece its title. Today they are building sequencing for the second, full-cast part of that section, which itself is divided into two halves: one for “sacred” and one for “profane.” In a loose narrative arc, the entire production can be perceived in terms of light, proceeding from the spare darkness of morning through to full-color afternoon and on to blue twilight. Foehringer demonstrates a few moves for the dancers. “Go!” he says. They dance, and the technology follows them.

Sept. 13 → 21
Cowell Theater
Marina & Buchanan Sts., Fort Mason
mfdpsf.org