San Francisco Chronicle

Dance review: Jess Curtis' love/hate relationship with technology

By Allan Ulrich
Published 1:06 pm, Friday, December 5, 2014

Let's deal first with the intermission.

Two-thirds of the way through Jess Curtis' appealing new performance piece, "The Dance That Documents Itself," the break is announced, and choreographer-ringmaster Curtis exits the performance space at CounterPulse. A moment later, the walls shimmer with a live transmission of Curtis feverishly riding his bicycle through the South of Market area, where the choreographer pauses at sites that once served as venues and rehearsal spaces for body-based artists.

Those halls are no more, the re-entering Curtis informs us while doffing his clothes; they are victims of the technological boom that has besieged San Francisco (a list of extinct spaces is posted in the lobby). This combination of elegy and striptease, antic to say the least, gets to the core of "The Dance That Documents Itself." Digital technology has physically displaced live artists, and it threatens to corrode those artists spiritually, too.

Technology is both alluring and repellent, an ambiguity that Curtis explores in word, image and movement for 90 minutes with the collaboration of performers Rachael Dichter, Abby Crain and Dag Andersson. What you won't find here is a linear thread, but a series of episodes,

many of which hit home, some of which definitely don't. In a more profound sense, technology is simply one way by which we abstract experience, capturing and recording it without enjoyment or engagement. Everyone here seems to be italicizing their experience, taking photographs of each other and projecting them on the walls.

There are other ways of removing oneself from the act, and Curtis demonstrates one of them near the beginning, as he revives a classic pedestrian walk-talk solo by Steve Paxton and restages a notorious ambulatory Bruce Nauman video. An episode in which Curtis squeezes single words out of Andersson falls flat, but there's pleasure and a bit of suspense in an acrobatic sequence that sees Crain ascending to Curtis' shoulders and dropping into Andersson's arms.

Throughout, the performers are constantly seduced by the digital technology they deplore. Dichter goes off and soon we see a real-time projection of the dancer in a bubble bath, giving orders to Crain and Curtis, huddled in a duet onstage. Then Andersson rolls around the floor. The sequence looks strenuous in the live version. Yet the motion-capture version makes his crumpled body seem mysterious, even poetic.

The Gravity members are listed as creators, and they're a resilient bunch, who you believe under other circumstances would run away and join the circus. David Szlasa created the immersive video and lighting design. Sheldon Smith, with the assistance of Samuel Hertz, compiled the witty sound design. It includes cell phone rings, bloops and bleeps, a snatch of the aria from Bach's "Goldberg Variations" and episodes of hard-driving rock.

That score goes nuts in the finale, where the performers thrust their bodies through space, rolling, hopping and flailing, while their images are transformed into components of a gorgeously colored mosaic. Do they succumb to the beauties of technology? In their frenzy Curtis and company suggest that capitulation may be, sadly, inevitable.

Allan Ulrich is The San Francisco Chronicle's dance correspondent.

Jess Curtis/Gravity: "The Dance That Documents Itself." 8:30 p.m. Through Dec. 14. $20-$30. CounterPulse, 1310 Mission St., S.F. (877) 297-6805. www.counterpulse.org.

Original Link: http://www.sfgate.com/performance/article/Dance-review-Jess-Curtis-love-hate-5938051.php#photo-7227352