

Review: In ‘+/- Human,’ Just Us and Our Orblike Shadows

 nytimes.com /2017/08/14/arts/dance/wayne-mcgregor-roundhouse-london.html

By ROSLYN
SULCAS

8/14/2017

LONDON — “How do you know that something is alive?” That question is posed in the program for Wayne McGregor’s new “+/- Human” about the seven white computer-programmed orbs that float above 15 dancers, moving in ever-changing swarm-like patterns. The giant spheres are by the experimental art collective Random International (famous for its immensely popular “[Rain Room](#)”), and they maintain a mysterious relationship to the dancers throughout “+/- Human,” which opened at the [Roundhouse](#) here on Friday.

Mr. McGregor’s choreographic career has been characterized by relentless curiosity about the relationships between body and mind, science and art, human and artificial intelligence. His works have explored neurological function and dysfunction; paired dancers with virtual counterparts; placed performers in changing digital landscapes; and given dancers prosthetic limbs.

Even when he began to regularly choreograph for ballet companies — he became the Royal Ballet’s resident choreographer in 2006 — his [pieces](#) showed ballet technique itself as a kind of technology, a distinctive and fascinating way for the body to function.

In “+/- Human,” the orbs are given equivalent status to the dancers — five from the Royal Ballet, including the principal Edward Watson, and 10 from Company Wayne McGregor. The orbs are first to enter the soaring circular space of the Roundhouse, a Victorian-era engine repair shed that has long been a place for [experimental](#) work. The orbs are followed by the dancers, who stand for a moment in a line that bisects the round performance area. (In theory, the audience can walk around the perimeter for changing perspectives on the dance; in practice, everyone stands stock still, making it difficult to see if you’re not at the front or very tall.)

The human and the technologically-driven sphere. Ravi Deepres/Alicia Clarke

The dancers are dressed in black briefs (and bras for the women) and black sneakers, their chests or stomachs adorned with plus and minus signs. As Warp Records’s low electronic music begins, they disperse around the space, leaving a lone female dancer to begin a sinuous, winding solo. Soon they are back, forming fragmented trios and duos, initially appearing as impersonal and abstract as the white globes that glide and flock above them.

But the interesting aspect of “+/- Human” is not really the interaction between the dancers and the orbs, which are programmed to react to the moving bodies, effectively making decisions about how and when to follow them. Although that’s fascinating in theory, it is the proximity and physicality of the dancers that compels immediate attention. While there are human dancers below, the spheres seem more like an accompaniment, though a poetic, visual one, much like Andy Warhol’s silver helium-filled pillows in Merce Cunningham’s “[Rainforest](#)” (1968).

Mr. McGregor’s choreography, distinguished by its fluidity, speed and extreme extensions, is always inventive, but often so hyperkinetic that it’s hard to know where to look. But here, as in other [recent](#) work, he has pared down his dance language, and it is thrilling to watch at close-range as the dancers’ limbs extend in space while their torsos curve and buckle with improbable fluency. (Fukiko Takase, in an opening solo; Mr. Watson; and Travis Clausen-Knight were standouts among a superb ensemble.)

Mr. McGregor keeps the dancers moving smoothly among solos, duos and larger ensemble groupings in which individuals sometimes gesture enigmatically toward the spheres above. The music, sometimes rhythmic, sometimes humming, sometimes vocal, is oddly inconsequential; the most atmospheric moments are when it dies away, and you hear the soft whirring sound of the tiny fans on each side of the orbs, drawing attention to their own choreography in the air.

What you see depends on where you are positioned around the performance area. It's hard to grasp the work as a whole, and perhaps that's intentional. After 40 minutes, both humans and orbs exit, but the orbs float back in and the audience is encouraged to move into the space see how their [own movement](#) engenders an aerial dance. It's fun, thought-provoking — and very plus-minus human.

