

## In Search of a Phantom

Commissioned by Animated magazine

Technology can facilitate connections between the many geographical hinterlands that dancers characteristically inhabit and can pit them against older orthodoxies of cultural authenticity.

Winter 2002

Most danceworks, in my experience, seem to emerge from unanswered questions from the previous one and so it was with *Web*, the short piece that I made last year to be toured exclusively to schools and colleges and which was to act as a period of research for myself and the company.

In 1999, I made a dancework, which I called *Surface Tension*. In the post reformation mindset where we are always encouraged to look beyond the surface for the 'real' meaning of things and not to be fooled or distracted by mere appearances, *Surface Tension* was to be a celebration of an artform where style and content were indivisible and one which offers only the surface for intelligent perusal and delectation. In dance, classical or contemporary modes are decisions about meaning just as much about style. During the making of *Web* I felt that any exploration of the dancing surface would be incomplete without the inclusion of a film since how we see the dancing body has been so radically influenced by the intimate gaze of the camera and the grammar of the edit suite. Duly, I collaborated with director Richard Coldman to make two short films. The idea was simple enough. The dancers performed phrases that were

drawn from the stage choreography and then the camera and the edit suite were allowed to influence it judiciously, allowing the body to be presented and the movement performed in ways that human biology does not allow. Two things struck me when I viewed the finished piece on stage, which now included the two films.

In the second of the films where the movement was manipulated in a more extreme yet subtle way so that it was impossible to tell which was organic and which not, the on screen dancers seemed to have acquired an independent presence which made them more than mere replicas of the stage dancers. Mechanical reproduction (the hallmark of technology) was the least noteworthy thing about them. Mechanical manipulation, on the other hand, in the context of live theatre seemed to make them more like Ridley Scott's *Bladerunner* replicants investing them with an intriguing autonomy of embodiment that was certainly artificial but artistically credible for that very reason (1). Artifice, after all, has been the hallmark of theatre ever since it took leave of ritual.

The second thing that interested me was that the connection between the onscreen beings and my dancers did not lie in the obvious fact they were both performing the same material and were members of the same dance company or that one was real and the other synthesised. The truth was that they were both synthesised. On a mundane level they were both defined by the limits of their machinery whether it be that of flesh and blood, technique or technology endowed skills or the machinery of stagecraft.

They, also had something far deeper in common. They were both hybrids. The onscreen dancer was a hybrid of embodiment, a mixture of received and invented movement - a manufactured creature whose conditions of existence is

often tested against the orthodoxy, of an 'authentic' human who is deemed more potent or 'real'. However my "real" dancers were not very different to their filmed selves.

Their chequered postcolonial re-orientation had made them cultural hybrids too with all equally new and mediated history. It is technology that facilitates the connections between the many geographical hinterlands that they characteristically inhabit. Their newness also frequently pits them against older orthodoxies of cultural authenticity which find them wanting. The postcolonial being as android? Yes I could buy that!

Given these connections it was as all the more frustrating to realise that any choreographic interaction between the two were rendered impossible by the fact that the projected dancers came complete and fully choreographed. The editing had set a complex rhythm for their movement, which could not be unpicked or played with. They needed nothing less than an empty stage and that was what they had. The resulting sense of separation and remoteness was something that I had to reluctantly live with.

So, I came to *Web* with certain queries. How can I make the projected dancer part of the same metaphor for hybridity that the stage dancers were and what would be the process that allowed me greater flexibility to weave both of them into a choreographic whole. In *Surface Tension* the integrity of movement determined the shaping of the screen dancer and although Richard Coldman the director and I were interested in allowing the choreography to be guided by what was possible in an edit suite, the template for the dancer had already been set in the studio where the movement had come from. The result was a being that we could display but

not partner as the choreography progressed in the studio and on stage.

In contrast, for *Web* the starting point was an attempt at realising the onscreen dancer as a separate entity. To enhance both the separateness of movement while at the same time enhancing the cultural and political connections. I needed a more extreme form of manipulation and a process that would give me more options in the studio where the dance was being made. The judiciousness of both the connection and the separation between the stage dancer and the projection, I felt, would be a crucial factor. I knew I did not want an abstraction of the stage dancer (where the projection took on a less human form) nor did I want a reproduction. As a theatre choreographer I cherished the heightened physical vibrancy of real time embodiment. Abstracted forms, however amazing the technology that facilitated them, did not have the same pull for me. My dancers' own many layered and contradictory histories bordered on the surreal. Whatever being was to partner them on stage had to be equally supercharged.

I had met Ghislaine Boddington as a colleague at Middlesex University where we were both research associates at Rescen - Centre for Research into Creation in the Performing Arts, looking into the process of creation. Her organisation, Shinkansen, was invited to be concept facilitators for *Web* and to advise on the technical side. Jo Hyde, who had a long-standing association with Shinkansen was to be the digital artist that I would work with. Feeling a bit like the scientist laying the plans for a Frankenstein I decided that Bharatha Natyam was to be the connective tissue for the manufactured dancer. That way, there would be a subliminal link with my stage dancers with the additional reference to memory and the past. However, since the movement on

stage did not draw solely from the classical vocabulary I would avoid literal duplication. I also envisaged being able to choreograph the virtual dancer in a more dynamic way than had been possible in *Surface Tension*.

There were many things that made much of this scheme impossible to realise, though I think it is always good to hang on to impossibilities as long as one can! Since *Web* was conceived of as a research project to be toured to schools with minimum get in time there was no room for complex projections. Sometimes we were lucky just to get a blackout. Whatever we had to show had to be seen in the most predictable place - behind the dancers on a white screen. This meant that the dynamics of the projected dancer within the space was going to be limited and one-dimensional.

Deciding on the material that the projected Bharatha Natyam dancer would be filmed doing, was another problem.

Logistics required that the process be started quite early on in the rehearsal period so that Jo could start work. However, the piece itself needed to be some way down the line before it became clear how the projected dancer was going to be partnered and what ideally she would be doing. We filmed some footage of the classical dancer in her traditional clothes and then as an afterthought also filmed the dancer in her rehearsal clothes doing some of the sequences that had been developed in the studio the day before. They were meant to be possible footnotes if needed. However I hit my first big hurdle when I realised that Jo had found these more inspiring than the classical ones! It was like placing an order for a cyber Desdemona and receiving Lara Croft instead! What he had produced though was so luminous and dramatic that I had to use it even though it was not the dancer I had had in mind. The connections to the dancer on stage were just what I had ideally hoped they would be - not literal, not abstracted,

separate yet related. She radiated rather than moved so that it was possible to put a stage dancer with her and not have contradictory dynamics.

But I still wanted to pursue my classical dancer. We decided that the first shoot just had not produced the right footage for Jo to work with. We had concentrated mostly on close ups in order to get an emotional and icon like directness but in practice it was difficult to find an entry point for a floating head!

Luckily one of the first decisions I had made about *Web* was that there was not going to be a premiere. This was only possible, I hasten to add, with the goodwill and generosity of all involved in the project. The whole tour right down to the very last show was going to be open to change. So arranging for a second shoot in mid tour and to start from scratch did not seem so daunting. And the Bharatha Natyam dancer subsequently appeared but in a more literal fashion, as herself. Perhaps because the image of the extremely stylised classical Indian dancer is already, in a sense, supercharged it was impossible to heighten her presence further. More importantly, I realized too that even the purely mechanical manipulation of the Bharata Natyam dancer needed a more instinctive understanding of her cultural resonance's and the facility to unpick and bring them into play. But her appearance did change the geography, of the stage and Jo was able to set her in motion and weave her seamlessly into the action.

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