

FROM A FILM WITH PINA TO...FOR PINA

Wim Wenders' *Pina* - Dance, dance or we are lost (2011) is far from a documentary, as it claims to be, or a cinematic portrait of Pina. Members of the ensemble who were dancing at the time of her sudden death in 2009 and those who belonged to it responded to what Pina meant to them to the running camera. Extracts from the productions *Rite of Spring* (1975), *Café Müller* (1978), *Kontakhof* (2000) and *Vollmond* (2006) punctuate the statements. At times the dancers are seen performing sequences from the extracts in open air: In parks and quarries under trees about to lose their leaves, in emblematic sites of Wuppertal and its cable railway, an abandoned industrial building converted to art space, an art gallery with glass walls opening to a melancholic garden in autumn. The vast and empty landscapes typical for Wim Wenders to provide the backdrop for Pina's choreography.

Pina is very much a Wim Wender's film following his own metaphors. Officially, it is a cinematic homage for Pina by dancers captured when they were going through a period of remembering Pina and reflecting on the loss of their mentor. But here, once again, it is the film director who is totally in control of images. The four pieces had been performed in October 2009 to an audience just four months after Pina passed away and Wim Wender's team captured movements with cameras positioned on stage. Many close ups were possible and special camera angles tried out for the planned pioneer of 3D

dance film filmed in a tight schedule. Unfortunately this 3D version was not screened, but a 2D version. This is readily available, even in the Indian subcontinent. Does this digitalisation of Wenders' *Pina* bring her work to the masses? The film did reach larger audiences not forgetting Wim Wenders' fans. Maybe his *Pina* is useful for someone who did not know the choreographer, like a picture postcard giving impressions of an unknown and exotic country.

The discussion that followed gave many entry points to the film and the life of the late director of Tanztheater Wuppertal. This panel included Meryl Tankard, a member of the ensemble in its troubled, formative years. Cornelia Albrecht, the former managing director of the company, recollected how she had to manage the administration of what Pina wished to create and created. Arnd Wesemann, dance critic, contextualised her work briefly in the evolution of contemporary dance and Jayachandran Palazhy, placed Pina's work in the flux of the Indian contemporary scene, from the dancer and choreographer's point of view.

Thankfully, the panel moderated by Sundar Sarukkai was able to go beyond celebrating the "Icon Pina" and lead the mind to some pertinent issues: What remains of the icon created after the aura of the icon has been replaced by a film?

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VENUE COURTESY



attakkalari
INDIA BIENNIAL
2013

Next issue
Sat Feb 2

Issue 2

Tuesday, January 29th 2013

100 FEET



What do you want from performance
as an audience member?
Something beautiful? Is that the point
of art - to create beauty?
So what is beauty? And what is
beauty in the context of performance?

BEAUTIFUL THINGS TOO?

Never ask a philosopher such questions. Sundar Sarukkai - Director of Manipal Centre for Philosophy and Humanities - responded with another question: "Can we apply the word 'beautiful' to performance?" His logic: something specific can be beautiful - a rose, a person, a particular moment... - but can a performance be beautiful?

Both classical Greek and Indian theories of aesthetics agree that pleasure is the primary response to something beautiful. And the structure of Indian classical dance takes this to the logical extreme, climaxing in a state of bliss - for example, the final piece of moksha in an Odissi recital. And in such traditions, form determines what is beautiful. Beauty here is something to aspire for and work towards. Therefore the years of training in classical dance forms whether Ballet or Bharatanatyam.

A figure from Wim Wenders' film *Pina* comes to mind: a dancer in ballet shoes moving in perfect pointe, but with her upper body hunched over in a most un-ballerina-like stoop. I found that 'beautiful'. But then I find

classical dance 'beautiful' too. Is there a friction between these responses to 'beauty'? And the 'ugly' too is attractive, and the grotesque is an aesthetic in itself. So where does that leave us when we try and articulate notions of beauty today?

With all these contradictory parallels in my head, I went to speak to Padmini Chettur about what beauty meant to her, and what "Beautiful" signified in the title of her piece. "Something that is true, something that is not a layer or a veneer," said Padmini, whose shift away from the very recognisable externals of Bharatnatyam is as much an aesthetic as a political choice.

She draws a clear distinction between how beauty is discussed and understood in Europe and in India. Europe has a clear anti-beauty movement in dance. That has not happened in India. And *Beautiful Thing 2* is a deliberate provoking of both sides of this question - what makes anything beautiful, and who calls it so?

Dance can have no meaning in itself, she maintains, though one can read so much into it. And nor can beauty per se. *Beautiful Thing 2* by Padmini moves the body away from meaning that can be articulated, so that the body is not encumbered with expressing

something. The 'beautiful' could lie in time, in space, in a line, in a frozen moment...

And what is the situation of the person defining the 'beautiful'? What are the reference points? Post-war Germany, Japan and Poland were forced to re-imagine beauty and the relevance of beauty in their circumstances of devastation. Ballet could not be beautiful anymore, could not express their present condition. Forms like Butoh and practitioners like Tadeusz Kantor came out of this experience, creating performance languages that focussed on the torturously contorted body rather than the perfectly controlled one. The audience can smell and feel the blood, sweat and tears of the performers - it may not be pretty, but is it perhaps 'beautiful'?

The poet John Keats famously said:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty, -that is all.

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

But do we need to know more, or know less and sense more? Are we too engrossed in the search for meaning, to respond to something that is simply and purely 'beautiful'?

Vikram Iyengar

Padmini Chettur's *Beautiful Thing 2* will be performed at Ranga Shankara on Jan 29 at 7.30pm

SPARKLY, DARKLY

In the era of radium necklaces, headless orbs of light shuffled around in the dark. When *Glow* begins, the rectangular performance space emerging from darkness to throw up a single, crouched-over figure surrounded by lines of light, it is a moment that harks back to radium couture. A solo choreographic essay by the Chunky Move Dance Company, *Glow* is a collaboration between former artistic director Gideon Obarzanek and interactive software creator Frieder Weiss. At the Biennial, the piece was performed by Sara Black.

As Black undulates in a rectangular white space, keenly observed by a video tracking system placed overhead, her movements are mirrored and responded to in patterns made by light. In how the light casts itself around her body, the piece begins to reveal itself as an amalgam of distinct sections. In the first few minutes, thrusting limbs into space only to retract them, her body curls into itself as she drags herself along the floor, while the light forms a luminescent outline around her body.

In *Glow*, floor space must be shared by the dancer and the projected image. In an interview to a dance technology website,

Obarzanek said that video projection as a form of lighting privileged the image that was usually ignored if it only embellished the space behind the dancer, while freeing the dancer in time and space. This is evident in the many uses Black puts the stage to, beyond 'performing'. Sometimes, she tumbles off the lit white space into dark nothingness; at other moments, between sections of high-energy movement, she stretches out under the glare of strong lights and breathes heavily - her body no longer an amorphous shape.

Black's movement is suffused by an elastic tension - a limber quality that makes the choreography play out as a series of controlled gestures of release and contraction. Through the piece, this quality resonates most powerfully in the movements performed close to the floor. Then the short segments where Black stands up to move are easily forgotten, except in the last section of the piece.

Throughout *Glow*, one is being led on a journey of perceptions about the dancing body. Surrounded by light, it is no more than a shape that is capable of movement and metamorphosis. When the body is finally

revealed, it begins to look 'human' and then has things done to it by light. By the final section, the dancer has breathed form into sinister shapes that creep across the floor and cloak her in darkness. The music suddenly acquires harsh overtones, and Black screams and mutters unintelligibly as she careens across the floor rather violently.

For Obarzanek, the voice of the dancer constitutes a break from the idea that she is just a shape. He remarks that his manner of engaging with dance stems from the body and the need to light it. The dancer in *Glow* is not an instrumentalist, he insists, for she cannot see or direct the part she plays in a perfectly matched symphony of movement and motion capture. Yet, the tracking system is almost manipulative as the light from it frames her, whizzes past her or even subsumes her. Rather like drones that home in on their targets, completely oblivious of the projected image, the dancer cannot react to it. The relationship between the body and technology is then uncertain and fractious.

Ranjana Dave

A MOVEMENT MEDITATION



Jade Dewi Tyas Tunggal, one of the FACETS choreographers, considers herself a storyteller, sharing her experiences of living in an Indian city, whilst grappling with larger questions of existence and the purpose of life.

“It’s about being a noble person in the world, having a sense of celebration for life and my body and my relationships and the basic goodness of being alive, feeling the sun shining, the blue sky and the birds whistling,” describes Jade, who is all set to perform *Avantika* on Jan 31 at the Alliance Francaise.

The basic construct of her choreography, she describes, is a movement meditation revolving around the four dignities facing the four cardinal directions in the forms of the Buddhist mandala and the windhorse prayer flags.

“These are— the gentle and modest wind tiger which faces the west, the perky snow lion or the earth lion, the playful water dragon and the fire garuda that is outrageous and free.”

The fire garuda represents youth, the water dragon represents birth, the wind tiger represents old age and the earth lion represents the time after death, before re-birth.

“It has many layers, so it’s hard to express verbally,” acknowledges Jade, who has been working on the piece for over two months in the FACETS choreography residency.

Avantika, she articulates in her written introduction, strings many seemingly different spiritual threads from the manifestation of brilliance, to the idea of a peaceful warrior, re-birth, Hindu temple architecture, solar worship informing body mandalas, martial arts and the five elements.

“These are meditative ideas of different characteristics we can develop in our lives for harmony, to lead a dignified life where we can not only be powerful and strong but also embracing of each other.”

How does she convey these layers through her performance?

“Firstly I looked at the qualities and character-

istics of each of the four auspicious characters. How does a tiger move, how is that movement different from that of a lion? The dragon may be flying reptile, but how is it different from garuda which is a giant mythical bird. I began with imitating real animals as a way of inspiring an embodiment of these creatures, and then in the next level of movement making I matched each personality with states of natural elements and a particular bodily sense perception.”

This means using dance to express sensations — the flowing nature of water pouring through the body in the dragon, using breathing patterns in movement to express air flowing and the element of wind in the tiger, grounded movements connecting the pelvis with the scapula to express the element of earth in the lion and listening to muscle twitches and heat rising in the body whilst dancing the garuda.

This is one of the reasons why Jade has incorporated swords in her choreography, which is a mix of influences not only from her training in forms like ballet, modern dance, capoeira, Japanese martial arts and Indonesian dance, but also her exposure through the FACETS programme to Indian classical dance forms like bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, kathak and Odissi , the Manipuri martial art tang-ta and kalaripayattu.

Here, she also tries to find balance, between the aesthetics and what is essential to convey her core ideas.

“I realised that these complex opposed forces need to balance each other, this became apparent in the creative process, where there is both making and constant editing or slicing away what is unnecessary.”

Harshini Vakkalanka

WHO MADE THIS UP?

Surjit Nongmeikapam in conversation with **Swar Thounaojam**

How did dance happen?

This dance or everything before this?

Sorry, when did you begin to dance?

Oh. I was very old when I started dancing.

How old...

I was 24.

What were you doing before that?

Hotel Management.

Hotel Management?

Yes, I got bored of studying. So went to do Hotel Management in Dehradun. I danced at a party there. Friends said I was a good dancer and should become one. I was always interested in the arts. But in Manipur, while growing up, I never got to see a live performance. I might have seen some ritualistic performances at a few Lai Harouba. But no, I didn't know what dance was, I didn't know dancers. The only dance I knew was Bollywood. After my hotel management course, I decided to learn dance. I came to Bangalore to do BA Choreography at Natya

Institute of Kathak and Choreography.

Why this particular course and institute?

My parents decided that. They said that if you have to dance, learn it from a place that gives you a certificate so that you can get a job in Manipur. Like all parents, they were worried about my livelihood. I didn't have a choice. I wanted to learn dance. They agreed but with a condition. I never thought I would be learning classical dance. I did that and discovered my passion was more for world dance...for contemporary dance...that allows me to create a lot, perform and act.

So did you again enrol for a course in contemporary dance?

I self-learned it from the internet. I watched tons of YouTube videos of world dance and learnt from them. I wanted to do an MA in choreography but that is not available here and it is very expensive abroad.

There are scholarships available ...

Yes, but I think I need to train myself more. It's been just seven years so I am not very sure I can compete for scholarships etc. It's been a journey of self-learning. So I feel I need to do more, work more...I've trained myself in different forms of dance now. I try different techniques.

Where do you work out of now?

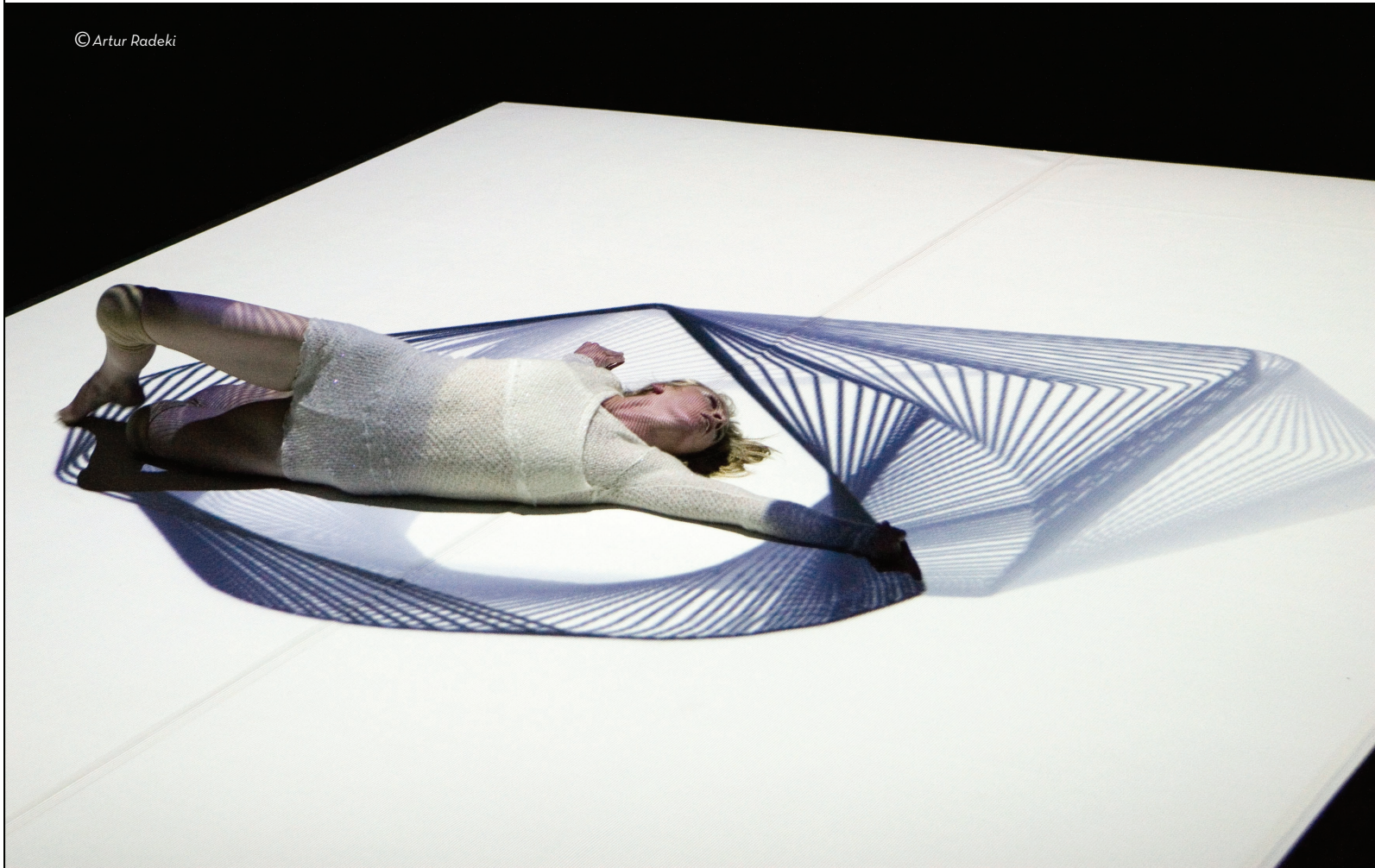
Manipur mainly. I want to settle there. Much of our dance there emphasises the mythological, the ceremonial, the rituals - it has its own place. What I want to do is create a place for the contemporary in Manipur and engage with the youth. I would also like the Manipur Government to make it compulsory for school students to watch live performances.

What's the kind of work you find yourself doing as a dancer?

I don't know what kind of dance I do. It is difficult to call myself a dancer. I am a mover. Right now, I think my work is geared more towards nature...landscape...connecting with the environment. *U Define*, the work I have created for FACETS here, is like an untitled piece I will be performing in a garden. I am not using the stage. But I struggled to find a rehearsal space...I couldn't find a garden to rehearse in till late into the residency... Having said that, I don't want to be pigeonholed as one particular mover. For my next project, I am planning to move with magnets.

Surjit Nongmeikapam performs U Define on Thursday, Jan 31, at Alliance Francaise de Bangalore.

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PHOTOKINESIS



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1.



2.



5.



6.

1. A singer from *The Manganiyar Seduction*, Jan 25

2. Deu Khan conducts *The Manganiyar Seduction*, Jan 25

3. Leandro Kees' solo *Let me in*, Jan 26

4. Isak Immanuel's *Aniconic - a quiet landscape*, Jan 26

5. Compagnie Revolution's *Urban Ballet*, Jan 27

6. DIN A 13 tanzcompany's *changeABLE Cohesion*, Jan 28



4.

Photographs by **Darshan Manakkal**

PAGES APART

Underwear models and gay porn. What else could we have thought of when four white men in black boxer briefs entered the Chowdaiah Memorial Hall stage in the second scene of Compagnie Révolution's Urban Ballet performed on the 27th. All similarly muscular, hair cut very close to the scalp and none visible on faces or chests. The woman occupying center stage could well be the dominatrix. Retroactively even the single male performer on stage from the opening scene, with his soul patch and swirling ochre skirt joined the rest in this film in my head. Are choreographers conscious of the meanings audiences bring to body shapes under regimes of global body fashioning. Do they notice and account for these slips or do they decide to ignore it? Of course both performers and audiences can always skirt around these questions with glib ideas of 'layering' and 'fragmentation' as response.

Into the first minute of the second scene, the centralized formation of the five dancers and the large white canvas placed centrally in the background, reminds one that a simple symmetry in relation to stage design is quite rare in contemporary dance performances involving more than one performer. After almost five minutes of movement, in fixed spaces of the symmetric formation, set to the repetitive musicality of Ravel's Bolero - just when most audiences were whispering 'Yoga class' to each other - the dancers change the formation to form a line facing the audience. Here suddenly they break from symmetry and each dancer performs individualized hip-hop movements, which they stop just as abruptly as they began, and return to the earlier symmetry to continue unabated for another five minutes. The dominatrix in that brief moment of the line formation is clutching at her head as if in response to the boys striking out with their own unique movements. This scene leaves us with the sense of an incomplete street dance delivery, as the program note suggests, but also foregrounds the contemplation of symmetry. The third scene furthers this contemplation when a trio of dancers occupy center stage and form a hydra like creature that slowly seems to

simultaneously express the desire to form a unitary symmetrical body and the desire to break out of it.

The movement away from simple symmetry is influenced by many ideas in art history. Realist art practices saw symmetry as not reflecting the true nature of objects in our vision, certain Eastern ideas saw a natural balance in the asymmetric, modern art practices sought to distance themselves from mathematical symmetry because they associated it with a sterile rigidity, and certain critical art practices saw centralizing as a metaphor for the privileged position. Seated right at the center, having displaced the person next to me by a seat I began to feel both guilty and fortunate to occupy this visual place. Though I know from experience that symmetry is something that we have the potential of registering from any location.

So was the choreography a bold choice by choreographer Anthony Egea to get audiences to contemplate the formal idea of symmetry? Or was it simply something that was incidental to the autobiographical references in the choreographer's work. References that the program notes and even an introduction prior to the show asked us to look out for. Unfortunately the last part of the performance, with distinctly individualized hip-hop movements (despite the note's claim of hybridity) suggests the latter. The last sequence, with it's glaring symbolism of a dancer moving weakly towards the light as his peers watch from a distance and ending in a facile image of heterosexual coupling, took away from any contemplation of the formal aspects of symmetry.

It was as if the program notes were being flung back at me to say 'here! see the autobiographical now and forget symmetry'. I felt cheated much like those cranky aesthetes of Indian classical performances who leave mid-performance because they happened to notice a rip in the performer's costume and couldn't get themselves to ignore it. Just like them I didn't know if the problem was with me being distracted from what I had set out to contemplate with the performance or did it lie in the materiality of a rip or a few lines on page.

Nithin Manayath



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SCORING MOVEMENTS

What's different about the role of music in contemporary dance is that music takes up the role of the set that sets a context for the dance to take place in. Sometimes it quite literally becomes the set, playing to the digital installations that are increasingly becoming a part of the dance itself.

But the world of contemporary dance is big, where space can be devoted even to very old music, like Inbal Oshman's recent FACETS performance *M** that revolved around Giovanni BatTista Pergolesi's "Stabat Mater" or "The Mournful Mother", a 13th century Catholic hymn that he composed in the 18th century.

"This music is sacred and the reason that I chose this is to create (I'm going to use an Indian term here) rasa. I felt it could help me produce this feeling both in the studio and the performance, it has a strong pull that makes one want to dance to it," explains Inbal.

Another FACETS choreographer Leandro Kees, who worked with composers Joseph Hyde and Jun Miyake on his performance *Let Me in*, has a different perspective.

"My performance was part of research that I'm doing based on motivation for movement. This time, I choose the music for its rhythmological aspect, as opposed to choosing for its dramatological character," says Leandro. "The music I use in each piece is different."

Also silence plays an important role in Inbal Oshman's work, there are moments when the dancers pause, or dance to pauses in between music, as is the case with many contemporary choreographers and the framework of dance allows for movements that are performed in silence. "Music is all about breaking silence and using that silence to create sound. When music stops there is silence, but this silence is not the same. The relationship between music and silence has been a big influence, I try to look at the silence in movements," adds Inbal.

The kind of music a dancer dances to depends entirely upon his discretion.

"For me it depends on the collaborators (since many contemporary dance productions involve collaborations), the theme of the performance, the context of the performance in space and time and my own ideas at that time," says Leandro.

Leandro kicked off his performance by dancing first to sounds, then silence. The music only began at his command, in the middle of the dance, when he stops and nods.

Musicians, including Joseph Hyde, are now toying with the idea of dancers interacting with the music, rather than working their choreography to keep in time with the music, exploring their gap between dance and music.

Harshini Yakkalanka

THE AUDIENCE SPEAKS...



Do we need to understand a creative work at an intellectual level in order to appreciate it? Can we use our other senses, observations and impressions evoked by a work to respond to it on other levels?

Following the performance *Glow* by Chunky Move on Saturday 26 January at Ranga Shankara, we asked audience members to share the thoughts, impressions and gut feelings that came to them while experiencing this production.

"I did feel the relationship between the body or the person and the technology. Especially when the demons came out and then you kind of relate to it because somehow it visualised in a very accurate way how you can feel when you feel existential loneliness. It comes back together and then you hold it back. For me it really resonated."

- Sinta

"I was fascinated more with the technology part of it. It was distracting me from what the dancer was doing. That's probably because of my own background in computer graphics. I was watching the shapes forming. But then it switched when the dancer started leaving traces and the shadows started to creep into her and that's when the human aspect came to the fore and I stopped thinking about technology. That's when my attention came back to the dancer."

- Amrita



"It was a very interesting feeling. I love the movement of the body. And I thought the video tracking technology they used emphasised the movement. So I really had the feeling that the combination of the video and the movement made me almost move with them. And in terms of feelings? Obviously beauty, obviously aesthetics, obviously coordination, maybe love, maybe some questioning about what it is to be human..."

- Franck

"It was a new visual experience to see a performance integrating visuals. This is unusual. We never get to see a performance like this. I come from a studio background: I'm an animator and I'm working on a video mapping project, so it was interesting and encouraging to see a performance like this in Bangalore."

- Chetan

"This was a very unique experience for me, especially watching the artist's movements, which were very flexible. The use of interactive technology was a visual experience for me - to have that kind of technology actually responding very creatively with the artist. It took us to some other world. The interactive technology was what I admired the performance for. It was not separated from the artist, the technology was also performing."

- Jayan



"You felt like there was some kind of an aura that travelled with the dancer. It was very interesting. I saw a lot of form definitely, but I was interested in how he changed light situations. It was like a switch - so at a point, light would disappear and it was based on darkness. And when the body moved on the white background there was like a smoke that covered the radius of the movement, which was amazing. It was a very direct piece. It would have been much more interesting if the movement had been played with or if the projection had been played with. Rather than just projection being there to emphasise. It was an awesome show."

- Satya

"My attention was caught by the real-time effects that were happening. Throughout the performance I was more impressed by the visual experience, but it didn't trigger any emotion. Depending on the effects I was very impressed but not necessarily moved. I was not moved except at the very end. The emotion was more being surprised and sometimes mesmerised by the patterns that were produced. I was moved at the end because there was a crescendo... something was increasing in intensity and reaching a climax. It was kind of emotional and also it was triggered by the sound."

- Samy

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Photographs by **Darshan Manakkal**