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DANCE REVIEW

Elastic Experimentalists With a Sense of Rhythm



Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Random Dance, featuring members Benjamin Ord and Fukiko Takase, in Wayne McGregor's "FAR" at Montclair State University in New Jersey.

By BRIAN SEIBERT

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MONTCLAIR, N.J. — During the making of "FAR," the choreographer Wayne McGregor was surrounded by eight cameras and multiple cognitive scientists. As with previous works, Mr. McGregor invited scientists into his process and let them analyze his copious notebooks.

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It's no wonder that they were interested. Mr. McGregor's hyperactive, ever-probing mind must be a fascinating subject to study. "FAR," performed on Thursday as part of the Peak Performances series at Montclair State University, is typically impressive. But I might have enjoyed it more if I were a scientist rather than a dance critic.

"FAR" is an acronym for "Flesh in the Age of Reason," a book by the medical historian Roy Porter about changing concepts of body and soul as a result of autopsies and scientific scrutiny during the Enlightenment. There is much to marvel at, starting with a computerized pin board of 3,200 LED lights by rAnom International that hangs at the back of the stage. The shadows cast by its [Plinko-like](#) pegs give the board the wrinkled texture of the ocean. Later, the lights start flashing numbers, counting up to six digits. The dancers continually emerge from under this light and recede into the darkness around it.

Mr. McGregor's choreography in "FAR" has less noodling than the previous work I've seen by him, which is to say, less doodling. The energy of experiment, of testing out all the ways the body might conceivably move, invites and rewards close attention.

The international roster of Mr. McGregor's company, Random Dance, handles impossible demands with ease. They're elastic performers with elastic senses of rhythm. Though the strict avoidance of repetition makes the syntax unpredictable, the succession of solos, duets and teases of unison retains a signature look. The animals it suggests are elongated creatures: ostriches, giraffes.

And yet the hourlong "FAR" feels like one of Mr. McGregor's notebooks, containing enough material for 3,200 dances. It opens with a tender duet, lighted by torches and set to Vivaldi. These he quickly replaces with the flashing lights and Ben Frost's score of wailing guitars and squealing pigs. The pressing menace of that score's ostinatos works against Mr. McGregor's restlessness, the way he's always pulling the plug on momentum. (The score's pseudo-Bjork vocals match the portentous stage fog all too well.)

Out of nowhere, naturalism intrudes, but only once, when a couple begin to bicker. The ending is the only unambiguous moment of narrative: a woman appears to die and her soul, in the form of the light board, ascends.

In the Q. and A. that followed the show on Thursday, Mr. McGregor, an unpretentious educator, described those less abstract moments as "anchors," hooks for attention. But like the shards of real poetry and invention embedded in the abstraction of "FAR," they just slip by. The escalating numbers on the dazzling surface of the light board could be counting them, a tally of Mr. McGregor's endless supply of ideas.

"FAR" continues through Sunday at the Alexander Kasser Theater, Montclair State University, 1 Normal Avenue, Montclair, N.J.; (973) 655-5112, peakperfs.org.

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