Scene and Lighting Design in 6 contemporary dance performances
by Katinka Marac

The Springdance Festival opened in Utrecht from April 18th – 28th, 2007, a bi-annual presentation of various hybrid performances combining dance, theatre, mime, performance and visual arts. Lighting designers Katinka Marac and Niko van der Klugt went to watch how contemporary makers addressed stage and lighting design.

In general the Springdance makers opted for personal-oriented productions, in which they utilized all potential media to show how they experienced the world around them. Performances were first and foremost conceptual rather than narrative, and in design terms, frequently more natural or abstract than theatrical or symbolic.

In many performances imagery was subordinated to the total experience, and the separation between outside world and theatrical reality, between audience and player, minimized if not totally abandoned. Quite a few performances played in the here-and-now of the actual theatre place. Scenery and lighting didn’t transform the halls into “other spaces”, but we found ourselves instead in the same expanse and time as the performers. Forget about 4th Wall. During the performances we looked at the players, but they were also looking at and directly addressing us.
Often the public sphere was incorporated into the lighting design, which frequently consisted of ‘generals’ constituted from uncoloured light or converted into daylight colour temperatures. The lighting images were created by variations achieved through changes in intensity or angles of descent. The imagery offered a great freedom in their presentation: the spectator himself could often choose where to focus on stage and for how long.

Alongside many performances that dealt with the experience and the connection of theatre and reality there were also different performances in which the image stood solidly in the forefront and that revealed the performances as constructions, sometimes in a very sober fashion, other times spectacularly, with every conceivable theatrical medium. Let’s take a look at a few.
During the performance ‘The Dessert is Growing’ by choreographer Hooman Sharifi en Jean Luc Ducourt we witness the process of negotiation and setting of agreements between the two makers. In the temporarily bare Academy Theatre six extremely narrow focussed HMI spots are directed from different angles at a point of the wooden work floor, filling the space with an intense white indirect light. During the performance the spotlights blink mechanically on and off in a repetitive pattern. The light images arouse little in the way of imagery and meaning but serves to soften the separation between stage and public space.

At the end they address themselves directly to their audience. They end the piece by asking us to leave the hall and re-enter. This time we may choose for ourselves what position to take. Together with most of the other guests we sit on the lit stage. Not much action happens and for a short time we listen to some wonderful music, while sometimes we catch a glimpse of the other faces, performers and spectators together.

Sitting like this is very relaxing. Something in the setting touches a chord... maybe it has to do with the choice of positioning in relation to the space and the other persons. The resulting process lays bare what lies hidden beneath many choices: on the one hand the desire to be part of a group; on the other the wish to form one’s own individuality. Even though there is no “decor” per se, in fact a space is created. There are no images that you look upon and analyze from outside. But you take a place in the space and experience the meaning from within in a physical sense.
At the opening of the location performance “Sacre” by David Weber-Krebs three young women enter the middle nave of the Nicholas Church accompanied by the dramatic organ music of ‘The Rites of Spring’. The white plastered walls bordering the black marble floor resounds with unrelenting seriousness. The women make for an immediate and profound contrast. Dressed in ordinary clothes they pose coaxingly and provocatively against the brick pillars, dance a tango, slithering on their stomachs across the chilly marble floor.

There is no stage lighting added to the location; the concept slowly plays out in the diminishing daylight and the illumination from the gilded chandeliers that spread their beams out in all directions. I experience therefore no separation between the performers and the public world, where it seems as if I’m studying the rituals of three people from our own community and in which at any moment we too could take part.

During the performance the three women dare themselves deeper into the church until finally they mount the altar. Languorously they stretch themselves there over the floor, time after time elongating their bellies, finally rolling on their sides into a sitting position from which they rise, their legs forming a sexually tinted pose. This movement scene repeats itself for a long while, arousing still more images in my head: adoration, surrender, fertility, death, and rebirth. The concreteness of the soft flesh of their bodies contacting the hard stone surface forms a beautiful unity with the intangible images in my brain. The performers make visible and almost sensually clear how, behind the material world hide other realities.
‘Enter Ghost’ van Nicole Beutler

In the poetic performance ‘Enter Ghost’ design and lighting are used with sophistication to express the performance concept. Nicole Beutler was inspired by the direction of ‘Enter Ghost’ from Shakespeare’s Hamlet and elaborates how one can visualize on stage all sorts of invisible and vague powers, beings whose form are without contour and unpredictable. Scene and Lighting Designer Minna Tiikkainnen plays constantly with our perceptions. One asks oneself repeatedly if what one sees is really true or if one’s eyes are playing tricks.

The scarcely lit stage divides into 2 spaces through a portal of black theatre curtains. Blue back lighting fills the threshold where 3 female characters loom. Dressed in old–fashioned swirling skirts and soft wool sweaters, they wear stockings over their shoes that dampen their footsteps. As they approach closer out of the backlighting, their faces become less illuminated. They take on contours, and like witches, stand on the front edge of the stage forming almost black holes in the space. Consequently they change again, almost into negative images of themselves.

No dramatic lighting changes take place, but subtle, almost imperceptible changes in the intensity and angle insures that other images and meanings repeatedly develop. Many images originate due to the retarded passage of time. Therefore your eyes adapt to the changing light and subsequently generate images themselves, like the previously described after–images. Meanwhile the characters fluctuate continuously between the realistic and imaginative, while the space, in form and content, is as changeable a place as the colourful group of ghosts wandering within.
‘While We Were Holding It Together’ by Ivana Muller

The small hall of the Academy Theater has that kind of obscure atmosphere that makes the performance floor seem totally invisible. Suddenly the lights blink on and we see five people standing before us in a tableau vivant. Their statuary poses make it seem as if they’ve been standing there for years. The motionless performers who are wireless amplified tell us in fast tempo who they imagine themselves to be, where they think they’re going and what they’re going to do.

The lighting design by Martin Eberlein consists of the same neutral light image, a general with specials on the performances, which repeats over and over. Innumerable blackouts and fade-ins punctuate the performance into discreet scenes. The structural properties of the lights rather than their plastic expression create consequence. The texts of the players create an audio setting in which we visualize for ourselves the imagery.

“While We Were Holding It Together” plays with the disconnection between sound and image in such a way that makes clear that theatre performances are constructions. As it advances towards a climax, the players have more and more trouble holding their poses and begin to vibrate. During blackouts they change positions, take on each others’ poses and seem to exchange voices. With these developments come hilarious possibilities, to the point where players as well as spectators have to question the nature of these characters. In fact the performance goes totally off the rails finally, deconstructing the personalities until they fall apart before our eyes.
‘BIG 3rd episode (happy/end)’ by the Superama’s

Besides performances that use minimal means to stimulate our imagination Springdance also offers productions in which the complete arsenal of theatrical tricks is pulled from the hat. ‘Big 3rd episode (happy/end) takes places in a large recording studio in which diverse settings stand in juxtaposition: a concert podium, a disco floor chiselled out in gaudy colours, the changing room of a trendy fitness centre.

During the performance players jump from one set to another, from live concert to soap opera to documentary film. The lighting design is used strongly to structure the performance; scenes appear in a fast moving montage, whereby the illumination carves out actions in the diverse settings. Although settings and actions displayed in BIG 3rd episode look hyper realistic, by repeating the scenes while small changes in action or dialogue take place their meaning shifts and it becomes clear that we look at a constructed and manipulated version of reality.

‘Big 3rd episode’ portrays only attractive successful people. The women dress provocatively, their lips red and glistening. Cynical macho males utilize flashy one-liners apparently in intimate conversations. In this hot competitive world everyone strives for perfection and ultimate happiness. An automobile accident in which the leading characters die abruptly puts an end to all these lies. Modelled on David Lynch’s ‘Mulholland Drive’, the lighting evokes death in a beautiful way. All the light sources pulsate in different rhythms, finally flickering out with the suggestion of a great organism signalling its last movements before extinguishing.
Scenery and lighting function equally as strong conveyors of the message. The settings, which incorporate such an abundance of LED lights that all the colours of the rainbow come into play, and the extremely saturated, hard pink colour that seems to hit you in the face, create a glamorous kitsch style. These super sweet, hyper realistic images are in fact much too beautiful to be real. The Superama’s use the artificial glamour styles of this imagery as a weapon, beautifully showing the empty, artificial character of contemporary popular culture.

photo: Anna van Kooij

‘Scrooge’ van Marc Bamuthi Joseph

The African–American poetry slam performer Marc Bamuthi Joseph also creates theatrical images but in this case the design stands in the way of the message, undermining its credibility. In the autobiographical “Scrooge” – a mix of spoken word, dance, hip-hop, live music and video – Joseph goes looking for his roots. These lie in Haiti, once the first independent black state, now the poorest country in the western hemisphere.

The pre-set stage is enveloped in a dusky blue light. The light reflects among the waiting musical instruments, creating a mysterious atmosphere. A black gauze net hangs in front an orange illuminated horizontal cloth; onstage waits a slew of unrecognizable objects. Everything screams with expectation; a story obviously awaits us.
The production begins and we are immediately inundated with an overwhelming, inescapable amount of imagery, text, sound and music. The extremely forceful, conventionally Broadway style lighting design has the function to lead us through this profusion. To the rhythm of the music, light images follow each other at high tempo. Settings full of colourful contrasts alternate with obscure settings in which specials zoom in on those parts of the stage where the actors can be found. The low side lighting from the towers on the side stage practically dominates all these images and causes great detachment. This in turn creates an illusionary space in which the performers are mainly silhouetted and we experience them as objects.

As in many conventional dance performances front lighting is hardly used. We can barely see details or expressions on the faces and have as well difficulty discerning the text. The artificiality and detachment also increases since the performers have no connection with the space in which they find themselves.

The elusive stage imagery and lighting are not intended for them but for the spectator; meanwhile the performers do their utmost to be part of the illusion and at the same time experience it as real. The players in "Scrooge", however, fail to become people with whom we can identify and connect, doomed to remain simply actors.

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