

# NightDriving: Videodance in Performance

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## 1 Introduction

This presentation describes the process of creating *NightDriving*, a hybrid media work that combines live performance of contemporary dance with imagistic digital video animations derived from the movement of the dancers. The presentation is accompanied by excerpts from the performance and video footage illustrating how the piece was made.

## 2 A Shared Visual Space

*NightDriving* is “videodance in performance”, connecting choreography for stage with choreography for camera, interweaving live dance with projected animations.

We created a performance environment to expand the perceptual experience of dancers and audience, making connections between dance and technology across various dimensions of space and time. The development process for this piece was especially exciting because it involved exploring the expressive potential of dancers with video animation and projection, developing practices for embodied technology in performance. The technical aspects of the work were developed with careful consideration of how they could support the dance performance.

In *NightDriving* we worked with ideas of illusion, inherent in the nature of theatrical performance, informing who performers are, what they do, how they relate. We wanted to challenge perceptions of theatrical space through dimension, scale and juxtaposition of visual elements.

The use of a silver sharkstooth scrim covering the entire width and height of the stage enabled us to bring both real and virtual dancers into the same space. The projections on the scrim incorporate two kinds of representation: a “here and now” view from live surveillance cameras, and pre-processed abstract dance imagery played from DVD, introducing virtual figures in counterpoint to the live dancers.

The four surveillance cameras, pointed down, overlap to capture the upstage platform. This view from above contributes a unique perspective to the first and last sections of the piece. Choreographed for the overhead camera zones, the dancers respond to the cameras’ presence, supporting the theme of the messenger becoming the message.

The transparent downstage scrim enables the establishment of a shared visual space, with the combined view of real and projected dancers contributing to a sense of immersion, creating an integrated performance environment. The projections alter the size and apparent position of the virtual dancers in relation to the live dancers. At the beginning of the piece, the virtual and live dancers are exactly the same size, and the virtual images appear almost lifelike. By the end of the piece, the virtual dancers become very large, fragmented, obviously “unreal”, but still clearly connected to the live dance.

## 3 Synopsis of the Work

*NightDriving* is based on *The Night Driver*, a story by Italo Calvino, in which a man and a woman make continual attempts to communicate with one another, but never actually connect.

The piece opens in darkness, lit only by the projected glow of surveillance images of the dancers on upstage platforms. As the stage brightens, the principal male and female dancers have brief solos on downstage platforms, intercepted by animated beams, like headlights, flashing across the scrim. This introduces the fundamental visual landscape, highlighting the notion of energy being exchanged back and forth across a distance.

The next section begins with two duets featuring the principal dancers. In each duet the virtual self of one dancer, in the form of an animated video projection, is paired with the live self of the other. These video animations were created from dance that was choreographed for the camera and digitally processed to create imagistic representations of movement.

The duets develop into a quartet for all four selves. The projected video selves start out the same size as the live selves. Gradually the video selves grow and fill more of the scrim, drawing the audience into a shared environment bridging “real” dance and “virtual” dance. In juxtaposing these multiple representations, we raise questions of identity, illusion and authenticity, challenging perceptions, inviting the audience to consider whether what they are seeing is a real person or a projected simulation.

In the third section we remove the video projections to focus attention on the dance, with the visual space defined by pools of light. This part of the piece simultaneously inhabits multiple sites on stage: two dancers are on each of the downstage platforms and four dancers are on the upstage platform.

In the fourth and fifth sections, the projections return to the scrim, and the virtual video selves get larger and more colorful, growing until they appear to fill the entire stage. The live dancers on stage become still, silhouetted on a glowing background. Gradually, the projected videodance devolves into abstract, super-slow fragments of the choreography, inviting attention to nuance and subtle energies inside the movement, revealed through the animations. The abstract videodance animation sequences continue through section five, joined by complex group choreography onstage.

*NightDriving* explores notions of representation: in particular the issue of how we perceive “real” dance versus “virtual” dance. Dancers often ask when performing, “Am I someone else or am I me?” and the question of authenticity is of great interest to us. Even though we are working in a complex technical environment, our emphasis is on the development of an integrated performance that supports the choreographic intent and brings out the unique characteristics of each dancer.

For performance images and additional details about this project, refer to <http://media.electricfx.com/nightdriving>.