

SOCIAL MEDIA IN MOTION

Beamish's @giselle reimagines a classic ballet for a more modern, contemporary audience

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Giselle is a masterwork of the classical ballet. Probably every company in the world has presented the tragedy of an innocent, beautiful young peasant girl named Giselle who falls hard for the calculated flirtations of a sleazy rich nobleman named Albrecht. After she dies of heartbreak, he must contend with supernatural consequences for his cruel actions.

Giselle first played in Paris in 1841, going on to become one of the most performed ballets in history. It's also one of the hardest roles to dance. Any updating of the production goes up against 178 years of proven, crowd-pleasing provided by high-flying ballerinas. In @giselle, Vancouver and New York-based choreographer Joshua Beamish gives the story a full overhaul. The work developed out of a 25-minute project he worked on at the Royal Ballet called Re-Imagining Giselle that was performed in 2016.

As the press materials proclaim, this is “a technology-infused reimagining of the iconic ballet masterwork that examines the ways social media has leveraged an unexpected change on the nature of modern love and relationships.” Forget the ectoplasmic ick, the ghost haunting us is in the machine in your hand.

“How could I challenge every element of the fantastical elements of the classical ballet narrative to be as pragmatic as possible,” says Beamish. “How could every narrative point, every fantastical element, be brought into the real world. I researched into what kind of heart conditions could afflict a young person, as Giselle often dies of a broken heart, and found a number of them that could cause someone to die suddenly.”

Ironically, the condition he discovered is known as SADS (sudden arrhythmic death syndrome). Triggered by emotional stress or physical overexertion, the condition is tragic. It fit into the new ballet.

“Giselle loves to dance, but her mother won't ever let her,” says Beamish. “So our concept is that Giselle has SADS and that is what kills her in her famous mad scene where she



Catherine Hurlin dances the lead in @giselle. ‘The technology is very much a part of modern daily life,’ says Hurlin. ‘As a classical dancer, this is more contemporary to me, but those lines are becoming increasingly blurred and I’m still in point shoes.’ — CRAIG FOSTER

becomes overwhelmed. Some versions have her killing herself, but I was more interested in how anxiety fuelled by our relationships which are fuelled by social media affects the emotional health and stability of young people.”

Giselle in @giselle is ghosted by her romantic liaison on social media and live streams her untimely end. In the aftermath of the tragedy, she returns to take on her male trolls and haunt their digital realities. To accomplish this, motion-capture technology and screen projections onto the bodies of live dancers were used. This is not your usual ballet and boasts an impressive international cast both onstage and behind the scenes.

American Ballet Theatre dancer Catherine Hurlin is in the title role. Ballet Edmon-

ton's Yoko Kanomata dances the role of Myrtha. The National Ballet of Canada principal dancer Harrison James dances Albrecht, Pennsylvania Ballet principal Sterling Baca plays Hilarion, while American Ballet Theatre's Betsy McBride performs Bathilde. Berthe is danced by Ballet B.C. instructor Beverley Bagg. Additional talent is drawn from Ballet Edmonton, the Alberta Ballet Trainee Program and graduates from Arts Umbrella, Richmond Academy, Pro Arte, Tri-City Dance and Simon Fraser University.

Brianna Amore handles the animation and projection design and Janie Taylor, of Benjamin Millepied's L.A. Dance Project, does the costume design and Mike Inwood designs the lighting. The original score is used.

“It's been fascinating to me watching how the motion-capture system picks up particular aspects of my choreography, joint motions or particular movements, yet has major problems with point shoes,” says Beamish. “The projected 3D animation via the motion-capture technology is the only actual technology incorporated into @giselle. But the overarching idea of the concept is technology fuelling the piece. For example, part one begins with all the characters interacting on a social media platform known as the Village.”

A 2019 Erik Bruhn Prize-winner, Hurlin has never danced the lead in Giselle. Getting to do it in this version is thrilling for the 23-year-old prodigy. She first encountered the project with Beamish in 2016.

“Joshua was just starting the very first ideas of @giselle and I was involved in the workshop process of making the Willis dance in Act 2, which is core to the ballet,” says Hurlin. “I think the way that he is incorporating realistic storytelling into the work is really interesting for 2019 and the technology is very much a part of modern daily life. As a classical dancer, this is more contemporary to me, but those lines are becoming increasingly blurred and I'm still in point shoes.”

Right after @giselle, Hurlin returns to New York to launch the fall season at the American Ballet Theatre and prepare for that never-ending seasonal favourite in The Nutcracker. The holiday-themed ballet is probably the one that tops Giselle in numbers of performances and is box

@GISELLE

When: Sept. 5-7, 7:30 p.m.
Where: Vancouver Playhouse, 600 Hamilton St.
Tickets and : From \$35 at eventbrite.com

office gold for companies. She won't need to put on the Velcro motion-capture suit for that performance.

“Doing the motion-capture in Vancouver was so strange,” she says. “To watch a skeleton move the same way that you are was incredibly weird and also really fun. I have newfound respect for what goes into making just a single extended scene in some big sci-fi movie now because we were in the studio for hours filming all of this stuff.”

Beamish notes that the end result of Hurlin and the other motion-capture performer's efforts is that the dancers are sharing their roles with a computer.

“The bulk of their interaction occurs physically in solo in the space as if they are relating to the other characters through projections on screens, that is very in line with our current existence,” says Beamish. “Not having the physical dancers appear in the second half in the same way that they do in the classical ballet supports the way that we live on in the internet, where your lives are catalogued and hitched to photos. So my idea was that Giselle lives on as particles and posts on the internet, whose life could be reinvigorated by anyone — including a computer — picking up where she left off.”

Besides bringing @giselle to life, Beamish has been keeping very busy in both cities in which he is based. MOVETHECOMPANY had two seasons last year in New York within eight months of each other and he worked on Vancouver Opera's production of The Merry Widow and is working with Simon Fraser University. He says it has been “crazy” and he plans on taking stock of where and what he wants to pursue after @giselle has its world premiere in Vancouver.

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