

**Le Monde, 20/05/21, « Gilles Jobin transforms his dancers into avatars »**



**In *Cosmogony*, a half-virtual, half-real experience, the Swiss troupe performs live and remote.**

Caption: *Close to a video game in its images, Cosmogony (2021) is also a human adventure with performers.*

While theatres are gradually reopening all over the world, Gilles Jobin is juggling time zones without leaving his Geneva lair. It is midday on Friday 14 May. The kitchen smells of warm croissants after a long breakfast. In the rehearsal studio, surrounded by screens, the choreographer and his team are quietly getting into their starting blocks. Three dancers are warming up: their black leotards are lined with white markers like ping-pong balls that allow their movements to be captured by 26 infrared cameras.

In 30 minutes *Cosmogony*, a digital production produced and projected live, will premiere at the Esplanade Theatre in Singapore from 14 to 16 May. “We were supposed to project it on the façade of a building, but the operation was cancelled for health reasons,” Jobin explains. “We are therefore scheduled to perform in a 2,000-seat theatre, with a capacity limited to 100 people. We are 10,000 kilometres from Singapore. According to experts, such a network connection for a live show has never been done before.”

*Cosmogony* is an amazing experience. High-tech, with its motion capture system and its dizzying video game-like images, it is also a human adventure, with flesh-and-blood performers transformed before our eyes into fabulous avatars. “Their movements are sent over a network to be reconstructed, in real time, in the host venue,” explains Jobin. Standing at the intersection of this production in the making gives rise to surprising sensations. We are in Geneva watching the dancers and, at the same time, we are watching the digital fiction that is also visible in Singapore. “Get ready, the audience is coming in,” warns Hugo Cahn, technical director. Silence in the studio. It is 6.30 pm in Singapore. Let’s get started!

Guitar chords, the band Tar Pond sings *Welcome the Spirit*. The dancers vibrate gently, play tightrope walkers on an imaginary wire, suddenly crouch down. On the big screen behind them, their avatars in summer clothes wander around an island shining like an emerald in the sea before coming into focus in close-up against a cloudy sky. The erratic appearance of their movements takes on meaning and form in the digital story that emerges in a landscape of oversized buildings. The Earth evaporates. End of *Cosmogony*. Applause breaks out in Singapore. A feeling of ubiquity seizes us as Gilles Jobin and his partners rush to salute in front of a camera and thank the Singaporean audience. “It went smoothly,” says Hugo Cahn. “Congratulations!”

**A high-tech core**

Back in the kitchen. Before a second performance at 2 p.m., everyone sits for a bit of potato salad. Gilles Jobin, happy with this “premiere”, is also having a bite. Since the beginning of the pandemic, on the strength of the enormous success of *VR\_I* (2017), a staggering immersion in virtual reality selected at the Sundance Film Festival in 2018, the man who created his own contemporary dance company in 1997 has gone 100% digital. “I was rehearsing a duo, *Real Time*, when the health crisis forced us to stop everything,” he says. “We had to move on, I couldn’t imagine waiting for theatres to reopen, which I knew was not going to happen any time soon.”

*“Virtual reality will not replace the stage. But it does make new performing spaces available.”*

Gilles Jobin

Choreographer

He quickly started to equip himself and multiplied his projects. A new era, a new way of working? His team has tightened around a high-tech core led by Camilo De Martino, creative director and technologist. In an office, 3D artist Tristan Siodlak is working on finishing the modelling of the *Comédie virtuelle – live show*, a major virtual reality production that was shown at the Venice International Film Festival in 2020. In front of him is a mood board, a table of sources of inspiration with photos and drawings of sets and characters. “With Gilles, we imagine a world, situations and places, which we then test with the dancers,” he says. “There is a lot of back-and-forth to move a project forward.” “It’s very collaborative,” adds Jobin. “You have to create a dialogue between people from different backgrounds. Tristan comes from video games, and I come from contemporary art. We create a sandbox and tools to play in it all together.”

In the box, the “augmented” dancers develop some new know-how. “When we create choreography, we have to make sure that the sensors remain visible, so that the infrared cameras can capture the gestures,” explains Susana Panadès Diaz, the company’s main dancer since 2005. So we can’t touch, carry each other or lie down...” Within these confines she carries out thorough research on her avatars. “Are they giant or tiny? Are they made of concrete or foam?” she explains. “We have to project ourselves inside these digital bodies that move in immense and ever-changing spaces, whereas we are actually confined to a very small surface.”

In *Cosmogony*, we watch Susana Panadès Diaz slide from one digital skin to another. Here she is wiggling like the fat cat in “Totoro” or expanding like the indolent giant she has just embodied. “I sometimes dream at night about my avatars,” she says with amusement. “I’m amazed at how it opens up the imagination and offers possibilities for dance, despite the constraints. I become another being and I have really renewed my work as a performer through these experiences.”

It is 2.30 pm. Gilles Jobin sits down. “Virtual reality will not replace the stage,” he says. “But it does make new performing spaces available. We can’t leave all this creative space to online video games, which have made a lot of progress with regard to remote access. We too must develop alternative niches in this universe.” The dancers leave the studio. “It’s really strange to think that the show is behind us and we’re going home while Singaporeans are going to bed,” he says. That’s what I call ‘touring without travelling’. When you dance at 1am in Geneva for a real audience in Buenos Aires where it’s 8pm, it’s weird. It’s the new jet-lag!”

Rosita Boisseau

*La Comédie virtuelle – live show*, at Comédie de Genève and at Espronceda – Institute of Art & Culture, Barcelona, on 12-13 June and 19-20 June, and online for those equipped with a virtual reality headset.