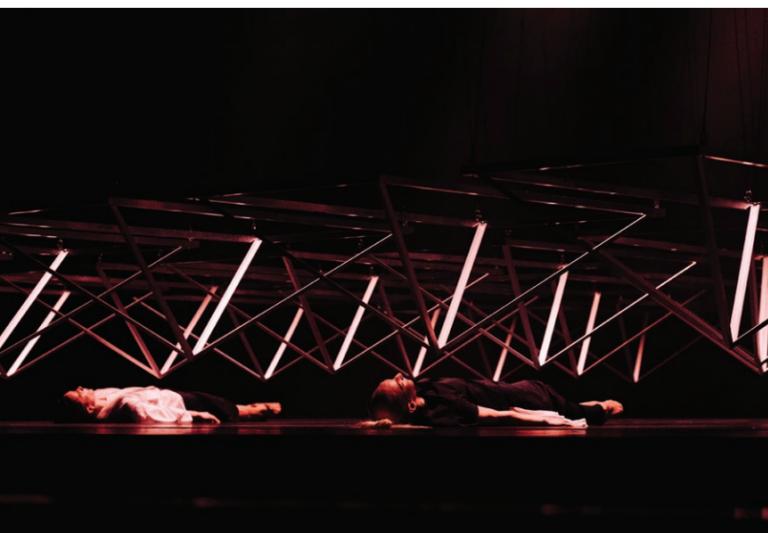


A WILDER EMPIRICISM

Drawing from the sequencing of his own genome, the award-winning choreographer Wayne McGregor has collaborated with music producer Jlin, among others, to stage an algorithmic dance that never repeats in a gesture against the linear sense of narrative. The highly acclaimed performance *Autobiography* was performed at NYUAD Arts Center's Red Theater, and it is a compelling meditation on the body as archive.

Words by Isaac Sullivan



Photography by Waleed Shah for The Arts Center at NYUAD

Perhaps ironically, given the literary genre from which it takes its name, *Autobiography* hedges away from the anthropocentric writing of a life. Building upon chance-generated works by Merce Cunningham and John Cage, its aleatoric indeterminacy stems from an algorithm Wayne McGregor made in collaboration with software architect Nick Rothwell. The algorithm, which was created from McGregor's DNA, determines the performance order of the piece's 23 choreographic sections uniquely in each of its iterations.

The non-human world, *Autobiography* implies, knows of no such thing as a story. At the same time, it is hot-blooded. Bathed in geometric LED lights, in movements alternately balletic, gymnastic and pedestrian, beneath a metallic grid that occasionally descended like a cage, McGregor's dancers leapt, paced, rolled and observed each other passively as various intrigues unfolded across the stage. With aggressive nonchalance and contagious vigour – thrown, caught,

pushed and carried along a bleeding edge of stillness within motion – their movements subverted typically gendered exchanges of power and intimacy, and likewise the standard binarism of submission and dominance, while colliding in configurations difficult to chart, owing to their profusion.

What McGregor does with movement, composer and producer Jlin does with sound in her score for *Autobiography*. "I write from vulnerability; that is my medium," she explains. "Wayne sent me words like *sad, doubt, earth* – to create from those spaces." As in McGregor's kinetic duets of conflict, kinship and cooperation in which sexuality is implicit as a physiological surface of Eros – her score sweeps aside trite humanist stories, while acknowledging that things happen, we care, and the ghost of narrative is inescapable. She achieves this by creating a temporal vertigo in which minutely short increments of time accrete to insinuate patterns that evade our ability to identify

them, thereby problematizing story. Collapsing the distinction between human, animal and machine by combining rapid snare rolls and sawtooth basslines with flowing water, clocks, avian jungle noises and the notes implicit in wind, Jlin's score marries fleet time signatures with ambient minimalism in tracks often exceeding 600 sequences. "I haven't mastered anything at all," she asserts nevertheless. "You haven't mastered anything until you've died."

Since writing one's life is inevitably a display of not knowing the full extent of it, perhaps it is not surprising that the partially seen is both visually and compositionally a salient feature of McGregor's choreography here – which, as dramaturg Uzma Hameed clarifies in the accompanying text, was inspired by "old writings, memories... a school photo, a poem about Icarus, a family history of twins." *Autobiography* is personal, then, yet palimpsestically so; these influences are embedded within the production, but are not overtly legible on stage.

If you were to read a litany of all the truths of your life of which you had been unaware, your entire lifetime would pass, because such a narrative would spiral into an account of all of existence unknown to you. From my old apartment in Dubai, 51 floors above Logo Island – as the faces of pedestrians vanish, the image of Palm Jumeirah begins to resolve. There I often thought of the contemporary difficulty in seeking a coherent sense of story from within our proliferation of micronarratives; of the way such complexities corrode the Heraclitean notion that one's character determines one's fate; and of the contradictions and challenges inherent in political organizing, in light of these realities. We acknowledge the existence of more than 150 people in the world, but – as anthropologist Robin Dunbar has it – we cannot know many more, very well. People are cooperative; people are animals; people are crazy. Through McGregor's choreography and Jlin's percussive experiments with the sonic palette of club music, *Autobiography* pulls apart and reconfigures our sense of event, reminding us of this.