

'Computer Nerds Meet Tutus: A Pas de Deux for Dancers and Technology' *New York Times*.

By Jennifer Dunning

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The Audio Ballerina's tutu got lost in transit from Germany. The Audio Geisha's kimono emitted sudden, terrifying sounds of an opening coffin when a press photographer's flash went off. There was some worry about what might happen if a dancer perspired with 220 volts of electricity strapped to his body.

But the International Dance and Technology 99 conference went off without a hitch, with four days of nonstop, intense exploration of the meeting points of "human modes and digital codes," as one conference essay put it.

More than 300 participants from 18 nations descended on this sunny, palm-dotted town, the home of Arizona State University, this year's conference host. ("Just schedule it in Arizona in February and everyone will come," an administrator reassured a worried planner early on.)

The biennial Dance and Technology conference began in 1991 at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, but this was the first to aggressively seek international participation.

By Sunday, when the conference ended, some 70 events had sped by. Plugged-in performers were everywhere, demonstrating everything from electronic sneakers to the uses of electrodes in dance.

Off-the-shelf technology and software were the tools in most sessions, which ranged from a talk on "Cunningham, Collage and the Computer" and one by the veteran choreographer Daniel Nagrin exploring the "uncomfortable fit" of the competing visual forms of dance and camera to such esoteric topics as "Escape Velocity" and "The Desire of the Verb: Inverting Cartesian Space."

Participants also learned how to design on-line Internet courses and studied CD-ROMs on teaching ballet, on music for dancers and on codifying Bharata Natyam dance.

One popular spot was the on-campus Web Cafe, furnished with comfortable chairs, tables, computer work stations and a dance floor. On the floor, a video camera, sensing moving bodies, fed information into a computer program that triggered the projection onto a screen of Web pages with material pertinent to dance, technology and the conference.

Even lunch time was not sacrosanct, accompanied as it was by keynote speeches by Bob Bejan, a former dancer who is the director of sales and operations on-line at the Microsoft Corporation, and by Lowry Burgess, a professor of art and former dean of the College of Fine Arts at Carnegie Mellon University. (The conference Web site is [http:// isa.fa.asu.edu/IDAT99](http://isa.fa.asu.edu/IDAT99).)

While the technology seemed at least as dysfunctional as the most difficult ballet star or accident-prone modern dancer, much of what was on view suggested that the opportunity for play in the field of dance technology is enormous, for the viewer and the creator.

"I got a little laughter on my right toe," Robert Wechsler said impishly but with undisguised delight in a demonstration of the Touchlines program developed by his Palindrome Performance Systems, based in Nuremberg, Germany. The movement of his toe, caught by the camera and transmitted to a computer, had triggered a portion of a musical score that included children's laughter.

In interactive installations by Sarah Rubidge and Gretchen Schiller, for example, the audience became the creator in a limited way. Seductive dances of video imagery were "choreographed" by viewers walking and shifting on surfaces embedded with pressure pads that triggered reactions in the electronic systems controlling the images.

"Falling to Earth," an electronically mediated, collaborative multimedia piece by Ellen Bromberg, John D. Mitchell and Douglas Rosenberg, and Seth Riskin's "Light Dance" created the sense not so much of new ways of performing or looking at movement, but of a plunge into a theatrical experience and even a physical space unbounded by the normal parameters of live performing.

Valerie Alpert's "Wearing Me Out" incorporated technology that included morphing to drop the viewer into the mind of a woman comically dissatisfied with her appearance.

And the delicacy of Jools Gilson-Ellis's performance in "The Secret Project," created with Richard Povall, suggested that motion-sensor technology could sometimes create effects as subtle as live dancing.

One popular topic was the ideal degree of connection between artist and machine. It was easy, Mr. Wechsler said, to lose "the fine line between honest artistic goals and tricks."

On the other hand, the techno-choreographer Isabelle Choiniere suggested, a more refined and sophisticated approach to the use of technology in dance requires that artists become familiar enough with the technology to develop a relationship as intimate as that between dance partners.

There were heated discussions about the redefining of the roles of dancer, choreographer and audience -- and of the nature of performance -- inherent in much of the technological work. Most of the participants stressed that the field was new. The biggest audience hit of the conference's two formal proscenium-stage programs was a low-tech work by Sean Curran, who confessed in a panel discussion that he didn't even own a computer.

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