

When Civilization Shines a Spotlight on the Body – **FAR** by Wayne McGregor

By Tung Ning Hsieh (Taiwan Theater Critic)

Ever since Isadora Duncan (1877 – 1927), the mother of modern dance, rebelled against ballet, forsaking conventional ballet shoes and dancing bare feet revealing the natural movement of the torso, the history of dance has witnessed the emergence of all kinds of modern and contemporary dance schools. Although today various forms of dance are thriving and competing with each other, that doesn't mean that ballet, a type of performance dance initiated in the Italian Renaissance courts of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, has become obsolete, being as antique showcased only in museums. Quite the contrary, many influential theatres around the world are making an effort to maintain the classical ballet system that combines dance school, company and theatre into an organisation, and preserve the classical ballet repertoire while also striving to “modernise” it.

Wayne McGregor, a middle-aged British choreographer, is a rising star on the contemporary ballet stage. Considered rather young for his position, McGregor has been a resident choreographer of the Royal Ballet since 2006. On top of that, he also serves as guest choreographer for worldwide famous ballet companies, such as La Scala Theatre Ballet of Milan, Paris Opera Ballet, Nederlands Dans Theatre of La Hague, San Francisco Ballet, Stuttgart Ballet, New York City Ballet, the Australian Ballet of Melbourne, and English National Ballet of London, just to name a few. Not only has McGregor made a name for himself among ballet choreographers, he has also, thanks to his versatility, managed to branch out into film and pop music fields over the past few years. To quote a few examples: he was involved in action choreographies on ***Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire***, and choreographed for Radiohead's music video of the single ***Lotus Flower***. All these achievements prove that McGregor is indeed a well-rounded choreographic talent.

Wayne McGregor will bring his new piece to Macao's audience. The piece is entitled **FAR** and it will be staged by Random Dance, a modern dance company founded by McGregor in 1992. It is a performance that illustrates the choreographer's signature style, characterized by a tactical blend of dance, film, and visual art. Furthermore, McGregor has also incorporated interdisciplinary concepts of computer technologies and biology into his creations.

For instance, his recent works focus on the relationships between the human brain and choreography, combining computer-generated images projected onto the stage with technology-starred sound, while using, as choreographic elements, electronic signals, brainwave reactions, as well as dancers' body movements stimulated by these elements. With a solid, ballet-based technique, the dancers sliced through the air super-flexibly extending their shapely, slender and robust bodies, stretching their spines and twisting their limbs to deliver intricate rhythms and athletic choreography that features an incredibly delicate choreographic composition. This

characteristic trait is especially noted in his choreographies of duet dance that fully demonstrate the dancers' intricate, extraordinary skills in manipulating the bodies. In short, through his marvellous work, McGregor has taken modern ballet to a whole new level, thus safely challenging comparison with William Forsythe, the Germany dancing king. What's more, the choreographer focuses on exploring the infinite possibilities of the human body and searches for impromptu combinations of individuals and the group, which is strongly reminiscent of the dance master Merce Cunningham, who has recently passed away.

**FAR** mainly takes its inspirational cue from *Flesh in the Age of Reason* by Roy Porter, the late British historian known for his prolific work on the history of medicine. Combining history and scientific research, this book traces the course of man's philosophical journey from the superstitious, spiritually obsessed Dark Ages to our modern perspective, based on reason and grounded in the body. The fact that the choreographer takes inspiration from that book implicitly shows his reflection on dualism, a way of describing how the mind and body co-exist and interact – a philosophy pondered by philosopher René Descartes and many others. We're living in a world of advanced technology, where a large amount of ubiquitous, electronic signals transmitted over the cyberspace are overwhelming the people's abstract reasoning capabilities, a phenomenon that arguably deepens the sense of our biological bodies and their movements, which in turn reinforces the idea of "therefore I am."

As the curtain rises, we see four dancers holding flaming torches, standing at the four corners of the stage. The scene mimics an ambience of ancient times. Then, the female dancer on the stage starts to dance with the male newcomer in a lyrical duet amid *Sposa son disprezzata of Vivaldi*. When the dance ends, the light wall at the backdrop, consisting of over 3,200 LED bulbs, gradually lights up, as if it was a primal creature of some sort. To our amazement, with the complemented projections, this wall quickly transports us into the contemporary time/space by displaying mathematical equations with ever-changing patterns, complicated and dazzling, creating an industrial, dynamic and futuristic atmosphere, while the dancers, attractively framed by the electronic lights, start to perform in this mesmerizing environment, employing all kinds of body combinations and movements to dance with, or fight against, the lights.

This dance is reminiscent of Prometheus, the hero in Greek mythology who is credited with the theft of the fire from the Olympian gods for human use, an act that enabled the civilization of humanity. With the light produced from the light wall symbolizing that original fire, the dancers, in front of it, freely express passions, lust, feelings, and stories through their bodies. It may make us wonder: what does the highly development of human civilization as a whole mean to the living human body (from civilization to technology to human body)? The choreographer raises the question, yet he has no intention to answer it. As such, at the end of this show, the female dancer surrounded by the torches, the same way she was at the outset, is the

only one that remains on stage, lying all alone on the ground while the other performers disappear, as the lights of the LED light wall gradually die out...

Combining human body and thoughts, McGregor's contemporary ballet productions have garnered, over the years, numerous major awards in the international dance world. His new piece, **FAR** by Random Dance, comes all the way from afar, and it will surely enable Macao audience to experience, at very close range, the trendy charms of contemporary dance at the magic hands of one of the greatest choreographers of our time.