

Wayne McGregor on *A Body for Harnasie*

'This scenario is a very general outline, within which the director and ballet-master may change many details and enrich the content with new episodes and ideas. In repudiating a too rigorous use of folk customs and dances, the author wishes to avoid confining the director's imagination in this respect, for he knows well that neither the composer nor the author of the scenario can foresee all the possibilities that may arise in the imagination of a talented director. This is especially true of such a ballet as *Harnasie*, which does not claim any preconceived ideas but is an unassuming picture drawn from the life of country-folk; facts do not play an essential role in it and should rather be adjusted to the possibilities offered by the stage than vice versa: the staging should not be subordinated to facts rigorously imposed by the author.'

– Karol Szymanowski

Szymanowski was a composer and an artist who understood and valued transformations. Indeed, instead of writing a libretto for *Harnasie* that was fixed in aspic, Szymanowski wanted new interpretations of the work to be in constant evolution, morphed and moulded in the times that they were newly conceived. Szymanowski knew for his art to live for future generations, one had to be open to new forms of expression and collaboration – forms not yet invented when his musical work originated. Liveness is a present tense form.



In approaching the choreographic potential for *Harnasie* we have explored several creative avenues which parse the score into atoms of physical experience, emotion and process. Explicitly, we are experimenting with the very fundamentals of dance: Body–Time–Space, to re-articulate them in a fresh re-combinatory form. Live dance, new photographic and film material of the Tatra mountains, and an emergent AI trained on hours of mountain footage, mixed with motion data from the newly created dances, innovative our visual language and develop unique movement themes which are assembled into original multi-narratives for the work. The music is played live – *A Body For Harnasie* responds in colour, light, motion, image, and fluid sculpture.

New forms of 'dance' are core to this work, but the process of making the live dance for film and motion capture is in some ways the most conventional. Every element of the work has originated from this analogue live dance – a trio for two males and a female mirroring, or at least referencing, the original cast of Szymanowski protagonists. The studio process is a combination of body-to-body transmission, teaching dance phrases, working with the dancers as architectural entities to think with and a series of improvisatory tasks where the dancers have the freedom to generate language within outlined constraints. This dance language is then edited, refined, and composed in an order that corresponds with specific sections of the score. This danced trio is filmed, multi-cam and in progressive close-ups, and the motion data is also captured. During this process dancers are also filmed performing their parts individually, and instructed with new dance vocabulary in the moment. By the end of filming, we have a bank of movement material, a fully composed trio, and a series of physical fragments – all the movement data for each of these choreographic objects is motion captured.

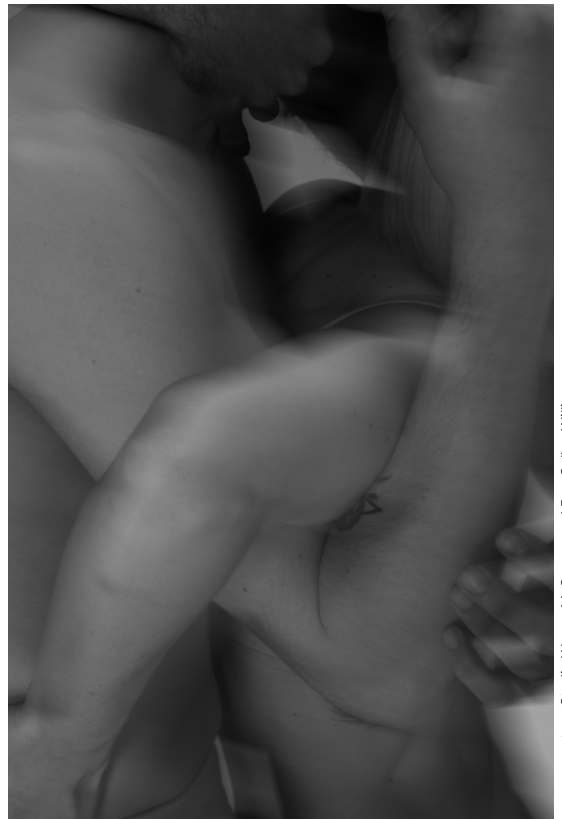
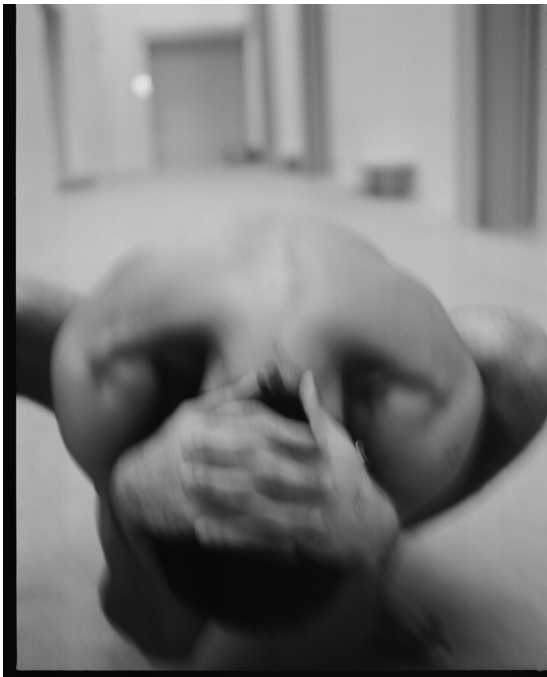
When training the AI on the live dance fragments and coherent phrases, new original dance moves and kinetic phrases are produced – the AI and the human in the mutual mix of creative action. Motion data from the dance is grafted onto the still drone images of the mountains, prompting a kind of weird motion. The drone footage of the mountains is injected into the dance and perturbs its flow to make unusual patterns, and the ‘values’ of the motion capture data are transplanted onto spatial images to create unexpected variations. The ‘danced vocabulary’ is also re-formed as a result and provides cues for the next phrase of movement to be produced.

The traditional conventions of what is dance and what is space collapses as a new continuum of time emerges. Dance, landscape and AI blend seamlessly – a choreographic blur. The final phase of the project takes the various kinetic language streams and works them into (and in between) the score – this compositional task is directed by analysis of the score and informs the unconventional playback of themes and images onto the kinetic sculpture. Testing and

articulating the motion of the kinetic sculpture adds the final motion element to the work to realise *A Body for Harnasie*.

There is no doubt that *Harnasie* was influenced in part by Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*. *Harnasie* shares many similarities to that iconic score, not least in the propulsive rhythms, the folkloric attitudes and the incredible orchestral range. It was also written and conceived as a ballet score – dance-ready and in the spirit of the great Diaghilev collaborations meant to be a ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’. *A Body For Harnasie* attempts to re-frame this epic musical work for our times, to create a choreographic instrument that invites a new kind of sculptural dance between artist and orchestra, motion and AI – all in constant transformation. We hope Szymanowski would have been thrilled and somewhat surprised. Diaghilev too!

Wayne McGregor, 2024



Images courtesy Studio Wayne McGregor and Ben Cullen Williams