

## **When choreography marries digital projection**

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### **Abstract**

As a choreographer, I have always had a keen interest in fusing movement with other art forms and in being able to achieve this seamlessly. Each art form is as important as another; therefore making this a reality can be challenging. However, in my work I have discovered that the use of movement with digital projection is one that has a real connection. The two have a symmetry that is aesthetically pleasing, but my work to date had never had a real ‘marriage’ of the two forms. One always came before the other; never did the two coexist to arrive at the same point. During 2016, Illuminos (digital artists [www.illuminos.co.uk](http://www.illuminos.co.uk)) and I set about our biggest challenge to date: creating a full-length production that did not just fuse dance with digital, but dance with digital, music and storytelling. Our aim was to create a show based on the myth of Daedalus and Icarus. It would explore the story, highlighting the journey it takes from the ground to the sky and back again. Most importantly the piece was to demonstrate how projection can create the illusion of height and weightlessness, with imagery dictating the movement, and how the movement can dictate the imagery when the journey reverses. In simplest terms we wanted to find a cohesive process that allowed not just one aspect to dictate the other: a happy marriage between choreography and digital projection, all portrayed through our show, *Icarus*. This article will explore that journey.

### **Keywords**

choreography

digital projection

performance

multi-media

collaboration

Icarus

### **Finding the relationship and nurturing it**

Through previous collaborations, with my company Adaire to Dance and Illuminos we have become interested in the potential for exciting, enticing, live-art pieces that might be derived from the impact of movement on digital, and digital on movement. While we have worked in the past in ways where dance has supported digital content, the potential for each to influence the other in real time is fascinating.

During our initial Research and Development we explored a sustained development of dance and digital content in conversation, where the lines between which element leads the other become fractured, and the interplay between control and consequence forms the core ideas within the work. These underlying concepts began to form an accessible, family-friendly narrative (a core value in both our practices) by mirroring this push and pull of forces through the Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus and the journey that this story takes from the ground to the sky and back.

The relationship between movement and the digital has been explored since moving imagery was showcased. Artists such as Loie Fuller were the first to play with the idea of moving

imagery depicted by lighting. Her work was considered unique and mesmerizing because the two elements were so beautifully fused. Known as the 'Magician of light' (Current and Current 1997) she singlehandedly changed the course of choreography, allowing fusion of elements.

As technology-enhanced digital imagery became processed by computers, not just by light, choreographers such as Merce Cunningham were able to enhance their ideas with the accompaniment of projection. His work 'Biped' involved motion-captured imagery allowing for the dancers to come to life through their live bodies and in much larger, shadowy, projected forms (Copeland 2004: 200). To audiences it was astonishing as it had never been seen before; yet to Cunningham it made perfect sense. 'I thought for years that dance and technology, because technology is ninety percent visual, they are mated. Because you look at dancing and you look at technology' (2000).

Our practical research into our approach to this perfect relationship had allowed us to see how one can lead the other; the added intensity of portraying a story was intriguing, but taking this work back into the practical space and finalizing our ideas was daunting, and one fuelled by many questions.

How to make the work unique? How to push the 'marriage' of these art forms? How to even start? 'Start at the beginning and go forwards... It depends what kind of person you are and what kind of piece you're making... It's a choice: how do you want to work' (Burrows 2010: 3).

### **Method to the madness**

With four weeks, four dances, seven swinging gauzes, and endless numbers of projectors, we had the ingredients for the experiment of a lifetime. With funding from Arts Council England we were in the fortunate position of having resources that could help bring our ideas to life. But what method or process could best help us achieve a unity between choreography and digital projection? The answer is simple: a method that starts small, but aims big.

Throughout our whole process we knew that one element could not overpower the other. Therefore from the start we had the dancers in the space with the projection. With editing software at the fingertips of Illuminos we were able to edit imagery at the same time as edit the choreography. We started with the simplest approach – allowing the dancers to improvise in the space; the digital then reacted to their movements. Aware that every relationship had to be equal, we then swapped roles, allowing the digital to improvise and the dancers to react.

Starting in this small way quickly taught us that this push and pull between the two art forms was needed, but that simplicity was essential. Simplicity allows for the work to be presented in an accessible fashion (Blom and Chaplin 1982: 13) and the most mesmerizing illusions are ones that follow this rule.

Our simplest method of marrying digital and choreography was during the section of the story when Icarus and Daedalus are escaping the maze. We knew it had to be clear, we knew it had to be mesmerizing, we knew it had to be unique, yet simple.

We placed one dancer in the space, crouched down. A maze was then projected from above onto the surrounding floor space. The projection then independently rotated and glided across the floor, creating the illusion that the dancer was moving through the labyrinth. With simple swipes, pushes into and round the floor by the dancer, we were able to give the illusion of control. The end result was to make it look like the dancer was controlling the projection and ultimately escaping the maze. ‘When I saw Daedalus escaping the maze I could not breath –

it was so captivating. Every swipe moved the maze and Daedalus slowly out of the maze. I could not tell who was in control, was it motion captured?’ (*Icarus* audience member, Kim Peddie, 2016).

No it was not motion captured; it was a simple trick of learning the movement of the projection and pre-empting its movements. This to me, during our process, was not a direct marriage between digital and choreography; the digital was leading the choreography. But the end product was complete unity as the audience could not tell who was leading whom.

This realization during the creation period was both frustrating and rewarding. We were learning that the perfect marriage of these art forms was not unity in creation; it was unity in the final product. The magic was the audience believing neither one is leading the other.

Being able to grasp this, we were then able to stop being small and simple and aim big. We had to break the rules, and breaking the rules when creating work is not frowned upon; it is essential (Burrows 2010: 41).

Our method became one of push and pull. We would let the digital dictate certain areas and the movement dictate others. One day choreography would be made first, the next the digital would be presented as a starting point. Throughout this process, the element that kept the seamless unity was the music. Every phrase, every moment of storytelling was perfectly timed to the music so that the digital and choreography were always acting together – giving the audience the look of complete unity between the forms. Every working relationship has a mediator and the music became this for the marriage between our digital projection and movement.

### **Seeing Icarus fly**

Our result of four weeks in finding harmony between two huge art forms was realized in the creation of a 40-minute production, *Icarus*. As with any show the journey of creating the material is just as magical as the end product. But for us as a creative team the realization that we had achieved harmony between choreography and digital projection only occurred when we showcased the work.

Two different performances, two different audiences, but both were left wanting more. This reaction is key to any live work; if the audience wants to experience more of the same then surely the piece has engaged them? As our aim was to engage through mixed media we had clearly taken one step closer to achieving this goal. 'The digital imagery was like a fifth performer. I felt its connection with the dancers. Not once did I stop and think that it was simply a projection, it was a being, another soul' (audience member, Megan Smith, 2016). This is why I feel our results had escalated further than we could have anticipated. We had cast the projection in the story of the Greek myth being told. It was a key player, the manipulator, but most importantly it had been choreographed into the work.

The use of storytelling and music to tie the two elements together was our saving grace, but this is not a popular approach. Many choreographers believe that without the distraction of a narrative during a dance piece, an audience's focus can easily float between the live stage and the screen and can more easily negotiate the relationship (Hostetter et al. 2014: 65). With the use of not just one screen but seven hanging gauzes on the stage, we were wrapping the projection in and around the live movement. The audience's focus was not split between projection and stage, as the two were one and the same, resulting in people feeling as though the digital imagery was one of the characters. While the placement of the gauzes was a starting point in ensuring the audience viewed both equally, the actual imagery used was the resounding factor in achieving cohesiveness.

Illuminos never wanted to project images that were realistic. Their aim was to create an abstract world in which the myth was based. Using the linear drawing of a maze as their starting point, the whole world was built in this way. The lines and pathways would merge to create a form that showed the walls of the maze. The next minute it was whisking us round and round in a zoetrope of imagery, finally landing us on an island that carefully introduced the first sight of colour. The island had trees but these were formed of pathways taken from the maze. As the story progresses, wings are made and this is where the digital imagery took true form. Speeding in from all angles the maze forms began to turn into Leonardo da Vinci drawings, the calculations of flight, the meaning of being air-borne. As the dancers interacted with this imagery the forms merged to produce two enormous wings. Yet again Illuminos did not use actual photos; these wings were made up of maze parts, bits of island and da Vinci drawings. Keeping realism out of the equation helped the choreography and digital marry as both were approaching the story from an abstract starting point.

Theatre often tells this ancient story, but with the use of speech it can be more efficient in portraying this to the audience. We had to rely on our mixed media to do this for us, and with both being abstract they created a harmonious, abstract world that the audience could get lost in.

## **The Fall**

The moral of *Icarus* is not to let ambition blind you to the point of destruction, and this was where this project could have failed. By wanting to explore the synergy between choreography and digital imagery we were being ambitious, as we wanted the end product to look as though neither one was leading the other. We could easily have aimed too high and

ironically found ourselves flying too close to the sun. In order to ensure this did not happen we had to make compromises that restricted our artistic vision.

Choreography can be a very linear and self-centred process and I had to make sure I did not let the movement become the full focus. Any one aspect does not exist independently of another; you cannot deal with time in movement without involving space and energy as well (Blom and Chaplin 1982: 4), and the same is to be said of movement with digital imagery; they need to coexist. In order to do this I had to abandon ideas that would have overshadowed the digital projection. Equally *Illuminos* had to make sure the images projected were simple enough to not over-embellish the performance space and drown the choreography.

This was limiting to our artistic visions, and no outcome is ever perfect. There were moments in the show where it became about the choreography; then there were moments where it was a full-stage embodiment of the projection. In this respect we failed to keep the split between the two forms exactly equal; however, it transpired that this adjustment was necessary to tell the story and engage the audience.

Sacrifices were made along the way but this is the foundation of every successful relationship. Relationships are the same whether it be between humans or art forms. Each relationship will work effectively if you have trust in the situation, can sacrifice, and are prepared to compromise. By embarking on the marriage of choreography and digital projection we were taking a risk, but a risk that pushed us closer to making perfect harmony. 'I wish I didn't have to risk everything every time. But then again, I console myself with the thought that if I didn't wish that, then I would have nothing to risk' (Burrows 2010: 29).

To see the full show of *Icarus* [click here](#).

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## **Contributor details**

As a performer, choreographer and academic of Dance, Alice Vale is known in the region for her devise work in her subject area of dance.

Her early professional training in ballet and contemporary dance, through the NATD, led to her graduating from Winchester University and subsequently performing across the country and world with various companies and choreographers, including Paul Bloom, Cathy Seago, Katie Green, Company Chameleon, Pure Dance Ltd., and film company Illuminos.

When not performing she taught dance to all ages in the community from three years to 70 years. She led Déda's gifted and talented Youth Companies, assisted Derbyshire District Council in facilitating dance for the elderly, provided dance INSETS for Primary Teachers, and delivered professional development talks for Creative Derbyshire.

Alice then began to work on her choreography, forming dance company Adaire to Dance in 2010. This regularly Arts Council-funded company is based at Deda – the East Midlands dedicated Dance House, and tours work across the county. Her work with her own company, as both choreographer and performer, concentrates on accessible dance and combining other art forms with the movement created ([www.adairetodance.com](http://www.adairetodance.com)).

As an academic Alice has worked for universities with strong dance backgrounds since graduating, starting out as a visiting lecturer and then as an associate lecturer. This knowledge gained from a variety of institutions is what helped build the degree at the University of Derby. Alice was among the team that wrote the degree and is now Programme Leader for the course.

As a lecturer she has a keen interest in the development and upholding of the work of dance artists, which led her to taking on the position of Derbyshire Dance Artists' Network Co-ordinator, set up by the districts council. Her mission as the Network Co-ordinator is to

provide a strong connection between all Dance Network members, provide unique opportunities, and create an efficient and established Network exclusively for Derbyshire.

Alice was awarded Derbyshire's Inspirational Woman of the Year Award in the Arts (IWA) in 2015.

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**Figure 1:** *Icarus* production photos. Photo credits: Grace Elkins.