

Muscle, Skin, and Circuit Boards

By Rachel Meade Smith

ALONZO KING'S *CONSTELLATION*, PERFORMED BY HIS LINES BALLET COMPANY, IS BILLED AS A COLLABORATION BETWEEN KING, THE ESTEEMED CHOREOGRAPHER, AND JIM CAMPBELL, AN INTERACTIVE MEDIA ARTIST AND GRADUATE FROM MIT'S SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING.

First performed in 2012, the production offers the stage as a platform for questioning the role of the human body in the age of digital excess and an unknown technological future. The work is not King's first foray into high-impact, architecturally brazen stage design; his 2011 *Triangle of the Squinches*, a collaboration with architect Christopher Haas, was choreographed around large structures of elastic cording and cardboard that dominated the stage. But *Constellation's* pairing of the viscerally human and the patently artificial has more uncanny effects than his non-technified explorations of stagecraft. The program describes the performance's intent as "exploring the orientation of our bodies to

light," but it reads potently as a commentary on the congeniality of our mediated interactions.

King's dancers are outfitted sparingly. Muscle and skin are on full display; the effect, when paired with the dancers' audible exhalations and the intermittent spray of sweat across the stage, is an underscoring of the mess of human fleshiness. Campbell's signature LED-bulb installations, with their inelegant low-tech aesthetic, confront this majesty of the human body. The bulb trope is presented throughout the performance on varying scales: a stranded curtain hangs across the entire rear of the stage; a square matrix drops from the upper limits and is played upon like a cargo net; a single strand is towed between two dancers; free-floating globes are tossed hacky sack-like amidst lithe limbs. The installations possess the capability to act independently of the dancers, as well: brightness, hue and cadence of illumination react to



Images courtesy of Alonzo King LINES Ballet and the photographer Margo Moritz.

choreography and soundtrack, making the lights tools for visualizing both narrative and emotion, in addition to altering the stage's spatial composition.

Throughout the piece, Campbell's technology appears increasingly unsympathetic to the work of the dancer. The performance's most interesting moments—while not its most graceful—are those in which the dancers' interactions are aggressively mediated by Campbell's installations. In one climactic instance, three dancers trap another, cowering, beneath the glow of handheld computerized circuit boards whose downward radius of digital light obscures the swarm's heads while illuminating and shrinking the space in which the confined dancer can move. The dancers tasked with hoisting the gadgets—clunky, infrastructural, and utterly inhuman—can't help but look

awkward, like they have been forced to participate in the ritual of an alien world. The scene encapsulates the affective power of a collaboration between choreography and engineering; it is this clash of flesh and circuitry, of primitive and futuristic, that designates *Constellation* a performance of critical value.

References can be found on page 75