

AND...

PRESS CONFERENCE with Wayne McGregor,
July 18 at 11:00, cour du Cloître Saint-Louis

TOUR DATES AFTER THE FESTIVAL

- October 19, 2019, His Majesty's Theatre, Aberdeen (United Kingdom)
- October 22, Dundee Rep (United Kingdom)

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

"The body is a living archive."

Light rays sweep through the space of a stage engulfed in mist. A mechanical metallic structure rises and falls. It breaks the dance down into segments. Sections follow each other to the rhythm of electronic pulses, nervous, fragile, sharp, delicate. 23 fragments, chosen at random by an algorithm every night, reproduce the 23 pairs of chromosomes that make up the human genome. Ten dancers write a life in movement, in its infinite variations of sensations and reflections, through memories plucked from the life of the choreographer. What trace does movement leave in our DNA? This is the question Wayne McGregor tries to answer, using his own body as an object of study. He explores the secrets of genetics, looking for the memory of the body inscribed in the sequencing of his genome. Movement, written in his very cells, becomes memory, a choreographic imprint of his own essence. All leading to an abstract meditation of rare intensity, a unique experience made new with each performance, a reflection of life itself.

WAYNE MCGREGOR

A British dancer and choreographer born in Stockport in 1970, Wayne McGregor studied dance at the University of Leeds and at the Limón School in New York, before founding **Company Wayne McGregor** in 1992. He has been choreographer-in-residence at the Royal Ballet in London since 2006. A pioneer for over 25 years, his style combines speed, fluidity, and structure. He is internationally renowned and has won many awards for his creations combining dance, visual arts, technology, and science. He has worked as a director and choreographer for the opera, theatre, and cinema, and has directed music videos and created artistic installations.

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JULY 18 19 20 | 22 23
COUR DU LYCÉE SAINT-JOSEPH

INTERVIEW WITH WAYNE MCGREGOR

How did the idea for *Autobiography* come to you? Where does your interest in science come from, and in particular for cognitive sciences and questions about DNA and our genome?

Wayne McGregor : I founded my dance company twenty-five years ago. And if I did feel the urge to write an autobiography, a genre which is usually chronological, linear, and focused on the past, I felt that it wasn't quite what I wanted. I didn't want a conventional autobiography. The roots of the word autobiography are "self", "life", and "writing", and bringing together the exploration of one's deep self, the idea of the body's biology through its DNA, and writing as a choreographic form really appealed to me. It's amazing to me that today we can sequence our genes via a short but fragmentary DNA test. After taking that test, I wanted to go further. I contacted the Cambridge Wellcome Genome Campus to obtain a full sequencing of my genome, then I reached out to researchers in the Netherlands who interpreted the data. Here's what's extraordinary about our genes: they tell us about our primordial past, but they're also looking towards the future. They can for instance allow us to detect potential health risks. In a way, they look both backward and forward. I thought it was an interesting idea to explore. We spent fourteen years observing how new technologies allow us to understand what goes on inside the body, to understand biometry, cardiac imaging, brain scintigraphy... Cognitive science studies the effect of the physical on the mental, the relationship between body and mind, which gave me the idea of trying new choreographic experimentations. Scientists today can only read 9% of our genetic code... There are still so many things they don't know, so many things we don't understand about our own life. We can create stories to give meaning to our existence, but in truth we're all but collections of fragments and temporary thoughts in perpetual movement and evolution. That's the kind of dance I wanted to create, a dance open to interpretation. Although we try to know ourselves—it's at least in part the quest of our lives—we can't ever completely succeed... but not knowing everything is also one of the joys of life!

The 23 sequences which make up the choreography are chosen at random every night by an algorithm. The term random is, in a way, "part of your DNA": it was the name of your first company, Random Dance, and it's also the title of one of the pieces in the show.

Yes, we live our lives at random, without really knowing which opportunities will come next, whom we're about to meet. It's a great analogy for life. But it's also because DNA sequencing is so vast, because it contains so much data, that we try to find patterns in it. What we've tried to do here is to redirect those points of data and to draw inspiration from them to create a dance that would be forever renewed, to make it a unique experience for the audience. I love the idea that there are a total of 24,000 different permutations. It's not only the structure that's different, by the way: the motifs within it are different as well. The idea to create dance based on an algorithm was my way of dealing this huge pile of data gathered while sequencing my genome. I also wanted to keep two fixed sequences, at the beginning and end of the show, as if to describe birth and death, with the idea of a cycle. It was interesting to have two moments in the show from which spreads all this diversity, or life itself, if you will.

How did you create the scenography for this show, and how did you work with your collaborators?

We wanted to be very rigorous and disciplined, just like DNA. We built a mobile light apparatus within a fixed system, and we wanted to work within that framework, and not beyond it. Ben Cullen Williams created this serial structure, a sort of triangular version of DNA, with its compact architecture which can hold all the possible permutations. As for the costumes, Aitor Throup came up with a very practical, flexible, and fluid collection. Those are basic elements we organised based on the performance. Just like the choreographic structure changes all the time, the clothes of the dancers also change over the course of the show. We've created very precise parameters and we're observing how it all interlocks, just like in the algorithm created by Nick Rothwell. I work with artists I admire a lot. Lucy Carter has been my lighting designer forever. For this show, I worked with playwright Uzma Hameed (with whom I'd worked before on *Wolf Works*). I love Jlin's electronic music. She'd never composed for the stage before. We drew inspiration from Siddhartha Mukherjee's book *The Gene: An Intimate Story*, which helped her a lot to create musical sequences. It's the same with the dancers, we created the choreography together, it's a very organic dialogue, which happens all at once.

You've chosen to evoke 23 memories, which correspond to the 23 pairs of chromosomes in the human genome. Some of them are rather generic, like "education", "nature", "growing old", and other are more specific to your dance, like "three stages", "random", "(un)balance". How did you choose them, and what do they represent in your career?

Those are moments of life. For "three stages", for instance, the soundtrack is made up of bird songs and other natural noises, it's very focused on the environment. This fragment is linked to my house in Devon, where I love to be outside with my dogs, to run, to take a break from my usual urban life where things are always zooming past. I wanted to include short narrative parts, quick sketches of the past twenty-five years of creation. There's something very personal about those memories, those segments. They start blooming like seeds and then transform. It's not necessarily very clear at first. I like starting with an idea to see what comes of it. Dance for me is always in the making.

***Autobiography* is your first project about genetics. What do your personal data have in store for us?**

I'm working with the Google Cultural Institute on a big project about artificial intelligence which will premiere this summer in Los Angeles. It will be a performance created in real time by an AI based on a "reinterpretation" of all my life's work. Using machine learning, the AI will create an original movement never seen before. The algorithm will create the work which the dancers will perform, a work never before performed in real life. It will be an ongoing dialogue between the dancers and the work itself. It's a very exciting project!

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Interview conducted by Malika Baaziz and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach