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Edinburgh festival: Trip the laser light fantastic

An Australian company sets out to dazzle, and Steve Reich gets a Belgian makeover

Geraldine Bedell

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Dazzling and disturbing ... *Mortal Engine*. Photograph: Murdo Macleod

Chunky Move: *Mortal Engine*

Edinburgh Playhouse

Rosas: Steve Reich Evening

Edinburgh Festival Theatre

Two highly challenging dance works at the Edinburgh International Festival last week looked in some ways quite similar - throbbing, minimal music, small groups of contemporary dancers trying to create new relationships between sound and movement - but they had diametrically different impacts. One felt like an assault, the other almost painfully cerebral.

Australian dance company Chunky Move gave the European premiere of its work ***Mortal Engine***, which uses digital technology and infra-red-sensitive cameras to create dazzling and disturbing effects of light and movement. I can't begin to explain the technology, but it's obviously all very cutting edge, created by a

German computer engineer whose video cameras follow the dancers' movements, apply algorithms to them in real time (in the space of a 50th of a second, apparently), then use these to create lighting effects around them.

The upshot is that the light becomes the predominant performer, pulsing and retreating, forming grids and circles, thudding across the raked stage, then breaking into particles. The barrage of light waves creates an otherworldly environment in which the dancers' bodies seem shadowy, beautiful and vulnerable.

Gideon Obarzanek, Chunky Move's director and choreographer, also collaborates on this work with a 'sound and laser artist' who is a former heavy metal drummer with a PhD in electro-acoustic composition. And, like the lights, the electro-acoustics are not what you could call unobtrusive. Yet there's a paradox here: despite the reliance on technology, the implied faith in its ability to deliver what human beings want, the emotional effect of *Mortal Engine* is dystopian.

The dancers' bodies make shapes suggestive of scuttling spiders, fumbling sea creatures or lonely human beings trying to make contact with one another. The light follows and preys upon them, breaking them apart, splintering them into shards or reducing them to shadows as the technology creates its own heedless world, in which the evolution of organic things seems to have only a marginal place.

This feels scary. Sound and light seem physically to invade the audience, who watch helplessly as the dancers struggle and fail to make lasting connections in near darkness or piercing white light. And it all takes place to the accompaniment of insistent electronic beeps and crackles or, at one point, horror-movie sucking sounds, as of a body deliquescing and becoming a blob of protoplasm.

Mortal Engine is an undeniably thrilling work, extraordinary to look at and exciting in its sense of possibility. For all his fascination with technology and the apparently abstract qualities of his choreography, Obarzanek has a strong feel for narrative and the emotional weight of dance. This is a great quality, but, in this work, it is also troubling. Watching a permanent state of struggle and flux turns out to be exhausting.

The **Steve Reich Evening**, from Brussels-based company Rosas, is, by contrast, cool and austere. Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, Rosas's founder and choreographer, has been fascinated by Reich's music for more than a quarter of a century. Here, with the group of performers collectively known as Ictus, she presents her interpretation of seven of his works.

It is understandable that Reich has inspired de Keersmaeker (and several other choreographers): the overlapping rhythmic patterns of his work, repeating, desynchronising and counterpointing, have an energy that is almost primitive. This is most apparent here in *Drumming Part 1*, a world premiere, where four bongo drums played with sticks create a visceral pulse of a kind to which human beings must have danced in all times and all places.

At the same time, Reich's music is so finely patterned and complex that it demands a sophisticated choreography. The subtle differentiations in the repetitions mean that timing is everything, and precision is at a premium. Sure enough, the dancing here is impeccable. Reich has commended de Keersmaeker on her understanding of his music, and her choreography is capable of communicating meanings in his work to the audience; the fluidity and coherence of the compositions is more apparent, to me at least, when her

dancers are moving to them.

That said, the dancing, like the music, can be wearily austere and rigorous, with much of the movement feeling quite constrained. In Piano Phase, two dancers do little other than step, turn, swing their arms and clench them round their waists as they move in and out of synch. Their shadows on a backdrop merge and split, so that there seem to be three figures moving, then four.

The patterns are pure, fluid and prompt meditations on time passing. The choreography isn't passionless, in other words, but seeking out the passion requires a degree of application. I wasn't altogether surprised that a man next to me fell asleep.

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