Streching her skin

Performance artist Isabelle Choinière merges body and machine

by LINDA HOWE-BECK

To see Isabelle Choinière perform is to time travel in dance. She is a performance artist who goes beyond even the unconventional into a strange and seductive realm. She creates new experiences by testing her limits, pushing frontiers between organics and high tech, stretching her skin into technological dimensions.

Eighteen months ago in a tiny, hot gallery, I first watched the performance artist in Parc de la paix, a multi-disciplinary work incorporating dance, video, computer graphics and sound. There she was, her stocky, voluptuous pre-Colombian body wired and consumed for special effects, moving through a field in which her electronically amplified heart beat vibrated in blue waves around her and through her computerized twin.

My perceptions have been skewed ever since. As I look at these aspects of Choinière, I know I was watching history—a flower blooming inside my head. My own sensory system reached out of my body to dance through time with hers. I had no idea then how she achieved this unification. I only knew I was hooked.

Choinière’s performance in Commmunauté, part of the Parc de la paix in last fall’s Deuxième Manifestation Internationale de la Video et Art Electronique, elicited the same visceral warning.

Choinière in the flesh is part of what she calls a “luminescent bee” in which presence (her real self), representation (her video self) and simulation (her computer-animated self) celebrate the human body in present, past and future. This fusion of organic and synthetic flesh stimulates and confuses spectators as they struggle with identification.

A graduate of Concordia’s dance department, Choinière had just begun to explore an interest in multimedia when she met Jimmy Lakatos, a former pal from her days at CEGEP Maisonneuve where she studied humanities seven years earlier. Lakatos had become a sought-after video artist, one of the first wave of the wave of the rave creations and innovations of Synergie, a multimedia production company.

Their coincidental meeting triggered philosophical discussions and questions about electronics and art. They realized they were both interested in exploring technology through dance as a means of communication. They shared the opinion that the body is the cause of technology and not the reverse. They founded the company, Synergie, multimedia production company.

Soon, Michael David Smith joined them to provide sound design and computer graphics. For Communauté they grew to four with Alexandre Bureau on interactive systems. Buton at 22 is what Lakatos, 30, and Choinière, 32, call the “other” generation—the first to be brought up with computers at their fingertips.

Technological demands caused the dancer to develop a different way of working. Instead of rehearsing alone in a dance studio, Choinière works out in a Béatrice studio with machines. This daily contact with the equipment has become an intimate relationship far removed from the fascination she had for the machines when she worked with them intensively. Through daily contact, she has found a way to merge with the machines, allowing them to dictate the kind of movement she produces.

Choinière’s approach to choreography differs from most. While other choreographers may have more people to create for, she has more media. While they deal solely with actual bodies, she is concerned with several realities—actual, virtual and electronic. And she must now find each one individually, so differs are their needs.

To do so, Choinière relies heavily on Lakatos. “He is our radar. He is good at detecting new ideas. But I choose. I do the synthesis. I refine.” There is a sense of sharing, valuing and respecting each other’s methods of perceptions. And a lot of laughter.

When they begin to work, they have no idea what form the product will take. “It’s a total adventure.” They stay open to new ideas and disciplines, picking and choosing as they go along. “We know how each of us reads information. I do it from here up,” she touches her solar plexus area and then her head, “and Jimmy gets it in his head and tries to bring it down.”

Last summer, Communauté was shown at the international festival of performance art and theatre in Londres, Brazil, where it generated good critical and popular response. It also gave its creators a clearer insight into international attitudes towards Choinière’s performance art. Most of high tech’s intellectual following.

But so far, there has been too much ado to feel isolated. As Lakatos says, they have only just begun to tap their resources. Choinière has “no idea” of where the next piece will look like but she has “flashes—I have to talk to Jimmy,” she says perceptually. And Communauté has a big year lined up for ’96. There’ll be a tour of the eastern United States and possibly Madrid in the spring and another tour of Brazil, Argentina and Mexico in September.

They will be followed by appearances in Los Angeles, where Choinière will perform as part of a Tangente exchange called Le Corps Electronique.

She’s also planning for January 1997, when she may link into a big international exploration of art and technology. This is an unannounced project guarantees to stretch Choinière’s skin into even newer dimensions.

Montrealers will be hearing from Choinière in the next 12 months.

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Our apologies

We failed to include a credit on a photo of Isabelle Choinière that ran in last week’s issue. The photo should have been credited to Stephanie Ballard.