

critical dance

Blinking: A Visual Interplay of Dance and New Media
By Lostwax Productions/ Jamie Jewett and R. Luke DeBois
Pell Chaffee Performance Center
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Reviewed by Elise Morrison, PhD.

Blinking, the newest multi-media dance production from Providence-based Lostwax Productions, recently completed its world premier in the 2010 "FirstWorks Festival" in Providence, RI – and we should hope that it will be produced again soon. The piece not only marks director Jamie Jewett's first (and hopefully not last) collaboration with New York based digital designer and composer R. Luke DeBois, it heralds a new level of sophistication and depth in Jewett's work with Lostwax, a company he has formed over the last decade while completing his MFA and PhD in New Media and Performance at Brown University. More often than not in the 70 minute piece, Jewett, DeBois, and the six female dancers involved in *Blinking* succeed in creating that rare and satisfying amalgam that so many mixed media performances fall short of: an event in which the technological design brings the intellectual underpinnings of the piece to life, while at the same time allowing the talented dancers to perform at their expressive peaks.

Under Jewett's skillful direction, *Blinking* was a thought provoking, toe tapping, and visually inspiring event that invited its sold-out audiences to take a closer look at the blind spots involved in any act of watching. The title of the piece provided the first clue to the link between the often abstract images, sounds, and movements that wove through the five-part performance. The program notes announced, "On average, we blink 10 times a minute. What is lost in these dark moments?... What are the stories accumulating in the blinks of the day? ... What do you see in the momentary? What do you know?" The team of *Blinking* imagined and embodied these questions in myriad ways, moving between intellectual play and artistic virtuosity, as they splintered the act of dancing, designing, and viewing into "tiny moving stills" that layered over one another to represent the "hallucinatory cinema of the back of the eyelid."

Upon entering the vaulted hall of the Pell Chaffee Performance Center, audiences were greeted by video footage projected onto a gigantic screen: a woman (Crystal Gandrud), shot from a distance, stands on an aging wooden pier (Providence locals would recognize it as the waterfront of India Point Park). She seems to be waiting, not so much for a particular person, we sense, but for something much deeper, more eternal, something that will not change for a long time. Or is it changing constantly? The camera cuts to a close up and the woman blinks. She begins to pace, walking briskly to the edge of the screen, as if testing the parameters of a thought experiment she cannot escape. She looks up. She blinks. A couple strolls through the frame, she takes passing note of them. Alone again, the woman blinks. She hugs a post, leans in to smell it. She blinks again. She pushes against the post to stretch her calves. Have we been watching a story or a series of random, unrelated events? The lights dim and we all blink automatically, adjusting to the new divisions of light and dark, the music that has shifted from ambient to ominous, as the Lostwax dancers take their turns on the stage.

Over the course of the next hour, our attention continued to shift and make meaning between the video footage projected on the looming screen – of the woman watching, blinking, as children play and dance in the background, the woman, blinking, as she looks at herself in a rearview

mirror – and the dancers tracing arcs and grids across the floor in front of us, moving in expressive single, pair, trio, and quartet figurations that were often joined by DeBois' playful abstract projections that skated, skipped, and responded to their movements in real time. At nearly every turn, Jewett and DeBois' metaphorical and technical platform supported strikingly vibrant performances of digital, filmic, and danced virtuosity, causing audience members to blink in disbelief at the unusually dynamic partnerships forged between the beautifully expressive dancers, the hauntingly mundane videos, and the interactive digital media projections that moved in violent slashes and languid pools across the large dance floor.

One moment in particular merits deeper description, as it stands as one of the most successful pairings of dance and digital media that I have ever seen. In the 4th section of the piece, the lithe, cat-like Kim Johnson danced a charged duet with a circular beam of light programmed to follow her movements around the dance floor. Johnson's fierce and fearless dancing would have been spellbinding to watch on its own, as she threw herself into the wild leaps and sharp turns that traced the contours of fantastic dreamscape and wild nightmare. However, rather than distract from her grippingly chaotic performance, DeBois designed the projection to be a dance partner worthy of her talent. Using "Jitter," a sophisticated movement-tracing software program he designed last year, DeBois programmed a set of projectors to follow Johnson's movements as she moved freely around the dance floor. The projected image was made up of a mass of tiny lines, vibrating against each other with frantic energy in a real-time visual representation of the frequency and tempo of the music (also composed by DeBois). Projected from two angles to avoid flatness or shadow, the projection washed over Johnson's body, engulfing her in crawling lines of light even as it spilled beyond her whirling body on to the floor.

While this could easily have become an awkward, stilted partnership between live dancer and programmed machine, the duet that resulted was nothing less than electrifying. At times Johnson moved too quickly, outstripping the projection's ability to capture her within its beams; and yet, these moments were far from failures. Instead, these moments showcased the strength and commitment of both the dancer and the technology, as each performed at the limits of their abilities. Locked in synchronized competition, the two bodies of light and flesh moved faster, leapt higher, and vibrated more wildly than either would have done on their own. The result was a mesmerizing dance that combined action and reaction, live body and software program, light and dark, sight and sensation to make a whole that was greater than the sum of its already impressive parts.