

Harmony From Chaos

Harmonic Laboratory brings a dazzling avant garde show to the Hult

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Hanna Bulkley, Brad Garner, Sarah Ebert and Jill Breckenridge rehearse for *Four Corners*.

Everything is dark except for the truck-sized monolith. Two female figures emerge from the shadows, their bodies athletically twisting and spinning and stomping to the electronic beat, which sounds like someone drumming on crystal stalagmites. Crisp, geometric patterns project upon the monolith, creating a digital *trompe l'oeil* effect, the electronic shapes dissolving into and out of the forms of the dancers, whose projected images appear to be writhing within the structure as their counterparts writhe freely outside. The piece, “Zero Crossing,” could pass for a collaboration between the late modern dance master Merce Cunningham and the creators behind *Tron*. “Zero Crossing” looks like a performance from the future.

Harmonic Laboratory, the Eugene interdisciplinary artist collective behind “Zero Crossing,” hopes that its work is what the future holds for performance art: harmonious collaborations between several mediums, i.e. dance, digital animation and electronic music composition that offer several entry points for an audience. (For example, dance enthusiasts may come for the choreography but leave pondering the interplay of interactive animation and music.) The collective, made up of four UO professors and instructors — Brad Garner (choreography), Jeremy Schropp (music composition), John Park (animation, programming) and Jon Bellona (intermedia art, audio composition) — has been performing its work on campus since its inception four years ago. Now they want to bring it to the city.

On May 31 and June 1, Harmonic Laboratory, accompanied by nine dancers (including New York dancer Brandin Steffenson), a string octet and local bands Medium Troy and Hamilton Beach, will present *Four Corners* at the Hult Center’s Soreng Theater. On one level, the show will be pure eye and ear candy, a festival of digital tricks and novelties layered over the organic and sensual choreography of the human body. But *Four Corners*, like Harmonic Laboratory itself, is not only about collaborative performance; it’s an exchange of ideas, or an explorative intellectual exercise that challenges our notions surrounding technology, gender, language and space.

“We don’t allow ourselves to just do magic tricks,” Garner says. “We, of course, are fascinated by them, but we are always trying to question what they communicate.” Garner points to some of Park’s visuals as an example. Park has created an interactive piece with the band Medium Troy by tapping into their audio feeds.

“The instrumentation that they play will trigger animations behind them as they’re playing,” Park explains. “Each time they play, they’re going to be essentially building a part of an image and then, at the end, that image will animate and move.”

“So people see the gimmick: ‘Oh wow, look. They’re triggering this motion on the screen,’” Garner adds. “But then what’s the metaphor? What’s the human connection to it? What does it say about human life and emotion?”

Bellona, who will be performing several audio pieces using nontraditional instruments like a digital drawing tablet, Xbox Kinect and a heart rate monitor (you can see him doing his version of the running man on stage), likes to think about the negative space between the audience’s thoughts and reaction and where that will push them.

“The audience is going to be viewing a new piece — something they are unfamiliar with,” Bellona says. “How do you navigate through that?”

Even with a more familiar medium — the human body — *Four Corners* pulls apart common conceptions of dance, especially within the realms of gender, space and body language. At a rehearsal, the dancers morphed between individual bodies, a swaying nucleus and fragmented cell groups of two or three dancers. “There are not a lot of choreographers that are doing really virtuosic, physical choreography outside of ballet,” dancer Sarah Ebert says of the local dance scene.

Harmonic Laboratory knows that asking an audience to take a leap into the unknown is a delicate dance: to be engaging without indulging or to be challenging without alienating. Innovation has always been a risk, but without these risks, we wouldn’t have the Impressionists (think Salon des Refusés) or jazz (see Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*) or modern dance (e.g. Merce Cunningham).

Four Corners runs 8 pm Friday, May 31, and Saturday, June 1, at the Hult Center; \$15 students, \$25 general. For more information, visit harmoniclab.org.

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