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Performing arts company creates collaborative, telematic performance art on campus

By: Alexandra Gregory
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Another Language Performing Arts Company unites specialists in fields ranging from dance to neuroscience in three upcoming telematic network performances at the U.

Being one of the first to acquire an independent performance space in Salt Lake City, Another Language Performing Arts Company is a dance-based interdisciplinary company that is constantly forging new paths.

The three nights of art-technology work, titled "InterPlay: Dancing on the Banks of Packet Creek," take place via the medium of real-time video streaming and broadcasting to create a surreal cinematic experience. Artists from across the country will simultaneously send and receive live performance video feeds using Access Grid videoconferencing technology.

Participating performance sites, in conjunction with the U, include universities in Fairbanks, Ala., West Lafayette, Ind., College Park, Md., and Boston.

"Each site transmits two or more live video streams of their performance, and here in Utah, we collect, mix and retransmit the main video back to the other sites," said Another Language Company Director Jimmy Miklavcic.

The music for "Packet Creek" will be performed and transmitted from the Fairbanks and Boston locations.

"Packet Creek" gathers, combines and processes the video images into what can become a surreal, dreamlike sequence, Miklavcic said.

"It's similar to how the brain works during the dream state," he said. "It collects and processes all the images it has gathered—some new, some old—and tries to present them in a coherent manner."

Deciphering and directing real-time distributed videos coming from five different locations can also pose the same challenge as a dream: "Sometimes you can understand your dreams; sometimes they scare the hell out of you," Miklavcic said.

Elizabeth Ann Miklavcic, artistic director of Another Language Performing Arts Company, said that the primary focus is to create a high quality work that addresses the context of the collaboration. The processing and managing of the video streams is not, however, a task merely involving the director.

"The role of the (performer) is to provide the director with a sequence of text, images, events or scenes that are useful to the director as he threads the needle of image relationships together between the streams (and) into the main mix," she said.

Elizabeth Ann Miklavcic noted that when performers think through their pieces as a filmmaker would, their current stream becomes more focused and useful to the director. The company works in partnership with the U Center for High Performance Computing, where both directors serve as multimedia specialists. They both hold degrees from the U in computer science and modern dance. The participants with whom they are working in "Packet Creek" hail from a vast array of fields.

Students and professors alike who are involved in "Packet Creek" are well-versed in such areas of art as film, radio broadcasting, language, lighting, music, dance and theater. Their scientific and technological backgrounds include biomedical engineering, mathematics, computer engineering, digital art, 3-D animation and computer sciences.

One particular student from Indiana's Purdue University, Leigh Schanfein, boasts an impressively eclectic field of knowledge. Schanfein has received a Bachelor of Science in animal physiology and neuroscience with a minor in dance. Currently studying with the Purdue University department of health and kinesiology, she is working toward her master's degree in biomechanics.

Schanfein is featured in "Packet Creek" as a dancer inside a "virtual reality cave system," in which she wears motion capture markers. Her markers allow her movements to be captured and then converted into Musical Instrument Digital Interface data. From here, they will be transmitted to the University of Alaska Fairbanks where she will control and manipulate both audio and computer graphics in real-time.

Locally, "Packet Creek" will feature performances that take place in a "living gallery." Elizabeth Ann Miklavcic will create a Zen garden using images of the Great Salt Lake and Spiral Jetty alongside an 8-year-old girl. Members of Children's Dance Theatre will perform in a stairwell, and sculptor Adam Bateman will construct a live piece in a lobby.

Jimmy and Elizabeth Ann Miklavcic founded the company in 1985 and have since received the Salt Lake City Mayor's Artist Award for the Performing Arts.