The light fantastic

DANCE

Turning cartwheels across the floor, the dancers emerge from complete darkness, LEDs outlining their otherwise unseen bodies. And as cool electronic beats fill the theatre, the lights start to move like dancing constellations. So *Tree of Codes* begins — and it's clear from the outset that

it's not just any other ballet. This show is a truly collaborative project, bringing together choreographer Wayne McGregor, artist Olafur Eliasson, composer Jamie xx, and starring the dancers of the Paris Opera Ballet and Company Wayne McGregor.

Inspiration for the show comes from Jonathan Safran Foer's book of the same name, in which the author fashioned a new story by literally cutting out words from the pages of another book, creating a three-dimensional sculpture of text (pictured). The idea that new art might be reborn from existing art guided McGregor and his collaborators on their own creative journey.

The performance is an exhilarating combination of dance, architecture and electronic music — and each component could be a stand-alone work of art. The backdrop, composed of large mirrors, gives the 15 dancers the presence of 50. These mirrors not only reflect the dancers' movements; they also reflect the audience back on itself. In some scenes, panels of partially reflecting glass descend on stage, and with the dancers on both sides, they are suggestive of an optical cavity, creating kaleidoscopic repetitions of patterns. The interplay of bodies is indeed dizzying — you're never quite sure whether you're seeing a reflection or the dancers themselves.

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There is a clear evolution to the piece: dancers' clothes, which are initially skin-toned, change to block colours to accompany a transition in structure and mood. The piece culminates with intense rhythms as the dancers gradually become enclosed behind coloured glass, with huge rotating window panes catching the different hues and reflecting them back onto the audience (pictured). It feels as though the spectators are looking in on a party — or, perhaps, a perfectly choreographed rave. Then, abruptly, the music stops; the lights go out.

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The show dips into every physicist's bag of tricks — light, mirrors, colour and sound — and this all-inclusive experience challenges our common perception of ballet. It is chaotic, often with no sense of the choreographic unity that we might expect from a classical piece; there is no character connection, storyline or setting. But that might be the beauty of it. At some point you start thinking of the dancers merely as physical entities that transfer energy to one another and react to changes in light, sound and colour. Any scientist would find it difficult not to draw their own comparisons.

McGregor, resident choreographer at the Royal Opera House, is known for complementing his choreography with technology. And Eliasson, who provides the stage design, is no stranger to exploiting light in his work: a gigantic sun installation formed the focus of his *Weather Project* in 2003 at the Tate Modern. The soundtrack, composed by English music producer and remix artist Jamie xx, uses an algorithm to turn both the text and shape of the book into melody. While the inspiration is not easily discerned from watching the show, the result is a heady mix of sound, colour and movement. And it is this combination that provides a depth and emotion to the ballet, in ways a story with characters usually would.

The show's marketing campaign is not necessarily pitched to physicists — but perhaps it should be. There is certainly enough to keep every scientific mind busy, with comparisons to the physical world that will no doubt surprise and delight. □

REVIEWED BY
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■ *Tree of Codes* is at Musikhuset Aarhus in Aarhus, Denmark, 27–29 April 2017. Future performances are listed at <http://waynemcgregor.com/calendar>.

VISUAL EDITIONS