

A stellar performance

DANCE

We all find inspiration in different things, and when artists turn to science, the result is often unexpected. From poets in antiquity, to William Shakespeare, to Cirque du Soleil — astronomy has inspired countless works. When it comes to interpretative forms like dance, the reference can

be imperceptible. Should we even search for a literal connection? In the case of *8 Minutes*, the new performance by Alexander Whitley Dance Company, we most definitely should!

At the premiere of *8 Minutes* — the time it takes the Sun's light to reach Earth — the Sun and its dynamics are never far from the senses, and for good reasons. The piece was in fact commissioned by the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory (RAL) Space, and one of the RAL researchers, Hugh Mortimer, worked as scientific consultant for the project — see June's Q&A for more background information (*Nat. Astron.* 1, 0160; 2017). The dance is accompanied by an ever-changing video backdrop, which incorporates actual images from solar spacecraft or planetary flybys (pictured, top). More schematized representations of the Sun, such as simulations of the solar granulation (pictured, bottom) or the solar wind, also make an appearance.

The seven dancers provide an extra dimension to those images. In the first part they accompany a close-up of the granules



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on the photosphere with graceful, fluid motions that suggest plasma flow. Lifting and looping mirror solar prominences. Sometimes their steps suggest orbits. The stage feels like a very natural and dynamic description of the physical phenomena that are projected on the screen.

In the next part, Daniel Wohl's score changes from electronic to acoustic, and the video images become less literal and more expressionistic and geometric. We see things that look like planets and landscapes in false colour. It seems that the dancers are moving in quick-time, as if living in fast-forward, reproducing common life scenes such as chatting or sleeping. The soothing melodic

music and pastel stripes across the screen suggest a new dawn. Could this be how choreographer Alexander Whitley imagines future life on an alien exoplanet?

In the final segment (there are no intervals, but the show has three distinct parts each introduced by a voiceover from a scientific lecture), the Sun makes a dramatic return to the stage as a majestic fireball, along with more rhythmic music, reminiscent of a beating heart or war drum. The images are again very literal, but the dance suggests an additional, almost spiritual, reading. The dancers' movements become more intense, as if they were no longer particles subjected to space physics but rather living beings in awe of the spectacle of the active Sun. We can sense the energy and power of our host star in the different movements on stage. This intrinsic connection between human and Sun (and, by extension, the Universe) seems to be the message Whitley wanted to convey to the audience. As far as we are concerned, he definitely rose to the challenge. □

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■ Upcoming 2017 tour dates: 3 October, DanceXchange, Birmingham, UK; 6–7 October, Laban Theatre, London, UK; 10 October, The Lowry, Salford, UK; 10 November, DanceEast, Ipswich, UK; 17 November, Kulturzentrum Tempel, Karlsruhe, Germany.



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