

Professional Live Performance Analysis: Scottish Ballet's *Coppélia*

What does it mean to be human in a digital world? Scottish Ballet's recent reimagining of *Coppélia* attempted to stage the questions brought about by an increasingly technologised world by innovatively incorporating digital technology into its production.¹ The ballet follows a female journalist, Swanhilda, who visits a technology lab run by Dr Coppélius where a new artificial intelligence model, Coppélia, is being developed. The narrative was principally concerned with humans' relationship to technology and this theme was expanded upon through the employment of projections of live and pre-recorded footage. This analysis will examine the ways in which digital technology was utilised to blur the boundaries between the human real and artificial technology to reflect upon the nature of human existence.

In the early scenes of the ballet, movement between the living and working spaces as well as danced interviews between Dr Coppélius and Swanhilda were filmed live and projected onto a large screen upstage. This projection was made possible by one of the dancers in the *corps de ballet* who simultaneously danced and filmed choreography. In later scenes, however, this live footage was interspersed with previously filmed footage, which often made it difficult to differentiate between the two forms. In an energetic party scene, pre-recorded scenes of the workers were cut with live footage of Swanhilda dancing backstage. The use of this pre-recorded footage, which had gone through an inherent process of mediation, complicated the very essence of theatre's live presence. Bill Blake argues that liveness 'provides theatre with a special claim to the real' such that when my theatrical expectations of liveness were

¹ Morgann Runacre-Temple and Jessica Wright, dir. (2022), *Coppélia*, The Theatre Royal, Glasgow

destabilised by the inclusion of recorded material, my ability to discern the real from the artificial was also confused, fostering a sense of unease.² Matthew Causey suggests that this has a transformative effect on performance as it occurs ‘here and not here, now and not now’ because the subject of the performance ‘resides in both the cyber/virtual and the physical/real environments simultaneously.’³ The inclusion of pre-recorded footage thus drew attention to the relationship between the live/real and pre-recorded/artificial, invoking the doubleness of theatrical performance in doing so. Theatre’s liveness may give it ‘a special claim to the real’ but ultimately it is centred around performance, that which is arguably inherently false. Similarly, human presence has a ‘special claim to the real’, but we too perform, presenting different versions of ourselves in different situations to different audiences. Performance thus complicates our notion of human existence as real. *Coppélia* engaged in this idea by posing the question: if artificiality is defined as being not-real, can’t humans also be described as artificial when we engage in the act of performance?

These questions of the increasingly indistinguishable nature of humans and artificial intelligence came to a climax when Swanhilda provided her body as the physical entity required for the completion of the *Coppélia* invention. A screen appeared centre-stage and revealed a computerised display of *Coppélia* prototypes. Filled with curiosity, Swanhilda, although the only physical presence on stage, began to perform a *pas de deux* with the A.I. version of herself. This scene spoke to the notion of the Artaudian double, which Steve Dixon argues has been transformed through digital modes of representation: ‘the double as a digital

² Bill Blake, *Theatre and the Digital* (United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 14
<https://bookshelf.vitalsource.com/#/books/9781350316119/>

³ Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture*, (ebook format: Taylor & Francis, 2007), Chapter 2: Televisual Performance: Openness to the Mystery (no page numbers available in this edition)
<https://bookshelf.vitalsource.com/books/9781134205691>

image replicating its human referent has been used to produce a range of different forms of imitation and representation which reflect upon the changing nature and understanding of the body and self... technology, and theatre.⁴ In this instance, the double was realised in AI form which, although evidently a pre-recorded film of the dancer, appeared to replicate the live Swanhilda's movements. With this mirroring, the distinction between the artificial technology and the human Swanhilda became obscured to the point where the virtual seemed a reflection of the actual. Her limbs seemed to enter and exit the screen, freely moving between real and artificial states, until eventually her physical reality appeared to be pulled into the screen and combined with A.I. pixels. The screen rose and a single working Coppélia emerged. Was Coppélia human now that the dancer's body and its digital counterpart had merged? If the act of performance, that is falseness, is part of being human, then the artificiality of the Coppélia A.I. isn't necessarily what distinguishes it from being human. By relating the artificial technology to the artificiality of human performance, the production's exploration of our relationship to technology was ultimately one which questioned how we define being human.

The production thus appeared to stage questions about human existence, rather than provide answers or solutions. Swanhilda, however, eventually separated herself from the Coppélia model by replacing her body with Dr Coppélius' and following her return to her physical body, the final scene put forth a potential answer to the overarching question of what makes us human. As the curtain rose, the dancers stood with their backs to the audience looking up at large digital projections, but as it was time for the curtain to fall, the dancers turned to face

⁴ Dixon, Steve, *A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (ebook format: The MIT Press, 2007), p. 244 <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/2429.001.0001>

those of us in the audience. With this symbolic look to the audience, *Coppélia* suggested that our humanity may be found in our relationship to other people.

The incorporation of digital technology in Scottish Ballet's production of *Coppélia* thus did more than merely heighten the impact of the narrative's themes. The inclusion of pre-recorded footage minimised the live/real aspects of theatre, drawing attention to the falsity of performance, and subsequently heightened the concerns surrounding the obscured boundaries between humans and artificial intelligence. Likewise, the use of a digital double, signifying the merging of the physical and technological, encouraged reflections on the very nature of human existence and artificiality. In the end, however, *Coppélia* emphasised that these anxieties around our relationship with technology may in fact be resolved through our connection to other humans. As such, the audience's presence symbolically aided the characters' rediscovery of their humanity. The site of performance enabled human to recognise human.

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