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Dance Review: In 'Aether,' fingertips matter in digital age

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Rachelle Roberts

A scene from "Aether," which the Lucy Guerin Inc. dance troupe performed Saturday night at the Byham as part of the Australian Festival.

The porte bras or arm movements add a whole world of expression to the dance. Lucy Guerin Inc. stretched that down to the fingertips, making it a major thematic element in "Aether," the latest installment in the Australian Festival, sponsored by The Pittsburgh Cultural Trust and Pittsburgh Dance Council on Saturday.

One might consider "Aether" to be a variant of "ether," which, according to Webster's dictionary, could be an element filling the upper regions of space, but here is more likely "a medium that in the undulatory theory of light permeates all space and transmits transverse waves."

Putting it plainly, Guerin's artistic premise was to explore communication, both the global tsunami that is dashing our private lives (cellphones, television, Blackberries, etc.) and the ever shrinking personal interaction space that is left.

In other works, with all of this technology at our, ahem, fingertips, are we any closer to understanding each other?

From the start, the usual message asking patrons to turn off electronic devi

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at the Byham Theater took on a whole new meaning. The dancers, four men and one woman dressed in short, pleated baby doll dresses, took the stage slowly. But it was merely a clue that Guerin would go beyond gender bending (the lone woman, Kirstie McCracken, had a buzz haircut in keeping with the men) to a humanoid blending of man and robot, digits and digital.

They began to toy with fragments of paper arranged in undulating patterns around the stage. Random lights blinked, some in the shape of television screens, and a large screen behind them began to fill with data while Gerard Mair's music oozed through a static landscape.

Guerin took her time. The screen and the floor got messier. The dancers wiggled their fingers like divers before they take that plunge off the platform. Their legs sliced in wide arcs. A nervousness began to prevail.

Then, well, she switched channels.

We saw a band of light grow across the stage, catching only parts of the dancers -- torsos, a few legs, some finger-pointing.

Switch.

All of a sudden the dancers were more human, dressed in soft pants and tops. "Aether" started to take shape. In the first section, the dancers had been robots with a human veneer. Now they were just the opposite -- humans who performed with an unconventional robo-monkey-baby speak as they tried to communicate. One man seemed to manipulate parts of another like the suction of a vacuum cleaner, a cleverly fanciful section.

There was an awkward interaction between a man and a woman. Then another man engaged in a overly long solo, trying to get the others' attention with nonsense syllables and child-like babble and taking the absurdity a step further. At this performance, despite skillful jumps between humor and pathos, it seemed overlong, interfering with the poetic inference of the ending.

So with mild applause from his peers, there was one last switch.

At the end, it came down to the ultimate connection -- the dancers touching index fingers. Michelangelo's "The Creation." E.T. go home. One hello, one goodbye. A shrinking spotlight focused on just a single digit. It was pointing at us. What would be our decision?