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Tiny Bald Sexless Albino

The air hums with their binary chant of "00100011100011."

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Review by Ed Decker
Published February 8, 2001



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Event: *Wireless City*
Venue: *The Dairy-Aire performance space at the Reincarnation Project, 333 Tenth Avenue, downtown*
When: *8 p.m. every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday until February 18, also Monday, February 12*
Cost: *\$10/\$15*
Phone: *619-238-1153*

Wireless City -- a cacophonous, Orwellian depiction of our future -- where all humanity is connected to the main computer (except for those few living on the defiant outskirts). Life sounds grim, but the visual and aural stimulation of the joint Palomar College/Eveoke Dance Theatre production -- which continues down at the Reincarnation Project on Tenth and J for the next two weeks -- made a connection with the audience.

The sights: A woman stapled on a cross with wires and cables sprawling from her belly like mechanical serpents; a ghetto junkyard area -- home to deceased computer terminals (one wonders where they got so many junk monitors) and guerilla-like members of the Obsolete Resistance; a cage containing at least one writhing, scantily clad, braided blonde woman; a flickering, brainwashing video projecting the ethos of the corporation. How could the show miss?

The sounds: the percussive clack of computer keyboards; *the rat-a-tat-tatting* of a toy machine gun; the background hums and buzzes of a hyper-technological world; the robotic, monotonous repetition of such *Wireless City* mantras as "Defeat time," "Feed the corporation," or "What you want next is *not* your decision."

"What we want to have in our lives," explains Michael Mufson, director of *Wireless City*, "is sold to us with promises of freedom and free time.... We buy gadgets and computers to facilitate our lifestyles.... The question is, do any of these things really improve the quality of our lives? *Wireless City* is about what happens in a world where something as influential in our lives as technology is driven by the interest of corporations."

One way that *Wireless City* is different from most theatrical productions is that the audience is incorporated into the show. We are denizens of the city -- free to move about the space, free to speak to actors, free to examine and touch everything. In turn, the actors are free to speak to, examine, and touch us as well.

Such is the case with Oma (Cha Cha Cholaki), the roving bag lady, hunched over her big stick and covered in blankets, somehow resembling a walking sofa cushion. She roams the city rubbing, bumping, harassing anyone in her vicinity. (She trapped one poor soul into a corner and he had to be rescued by his wife.) As with the present-day street waifs, our cyburban bag lady instills guilt on the participants to the point where one begins to check one's pockets for spare change.

Wireless City is broken down into five areas: There is the nucleus -- Wireless City Corporation, the Domestic Area, the Dump, Club Touch, and NEXT (Neural, Enhanced Exo-genesis Technology).

The Wireless City Corporation is where the CEO runs the city and delivers his speeches. Behind and above him is the woman on the cross (the Engine of Desire, played by Noelle with no last name). The nest of cables issuing from her navel wraps around her waist to form a skirt and then plugs into the heads of crew members that sit below the podium where she is perched.

The director of *Wireless City*, Michael Mufson, explains: " 'What you will want next' is packaged by the marketing department of the corporation and presented by the Engine of Desire. The citizens of Wireless City have been implanted with small, powerful, wireless receivers...for the purpose of getting the newest software upgrade," which they get by suddenly all raising their right hands high like they're typing in their personal code at the ATM. The air hums with their binary chant of "00100011100011..." and the digits are projected on the large overhead screen.

"The only...people who do not receive these downloads are those whose bodies reject the actual technological devices -- like rejecting a kidney implant -- and are considered obsolete. They live in the Dump and are the Obsolete Resistance."

The Dump is a junkyard, home to expired electronic hardware and the most disturbing character on the set: A tiny, bald, sexless albino (as though whatever *it* is had been immersed in a vat of Wite-Out). Secreta Chyme (played by Charlene Penner) sprawls among the obsolete motherboards and monitors and appears to be in great pain, as though created by a horrible mutation of technology and humanity -- a digital wraith. So subtle was her performance -- sometimes eerily moving only one whitewashed finger -- that at first, many audience members didn't even know she was there.

Club Touch is an area of this cyburbia where human touch is still permitted. In one part of the show, DJ Bacchus (Tony Bevacqua) is demo-ing a new feature that allows the computer to do all the touching for you. For instance, Bacchus says, "Shoulder rub," and the Club Touch

girl feels as though her shoulder were actually being rubbed by a human. Naturally Bacchus heads straight for her genitals, and we get to see that scene from *When Harry Met Sally* all over again.

"Hurry Sickness," an early theme in the piece, "is about [how we] accelerate the tempo of our lives in order to keep up with the speed of our consumer culture.... All these electronic gadgets enable us to go faster." Hall explains all this over his cell phone while he loads in equipment for the show.

I ask Chris if he recognizes the irony of making this statement as he talks on a cell phone while standing on top of a moving computerized forklift.

"Yes," he answers, "but the conversation that you and I are having now over this cell phone is harmless. [Cell phones are] useful as we go through day-to-day business."

Another paradox of the show's production is the amount of technology used to present this techno-omen: There are three sound systems, a 24-channel soundboard, nine microphones, three PZMs [a special microphone that looks like a plate] from the piano, two 3000-watt amplifiers, two five-foot-tall subwoofers, and two speakers -- all of which is controlled by Chris Hall, Michael Mufson, Madelyn Byrne, and composer Peter Gach. When Rastakowitz (played by Jeremiah Williams) came out with his electric guitar and played a lot of minor scale improvisation, it was a nice respite from the constant clatter of the techno babble.

"This is like a postmodern musical," adds Hall as his cell phone sputters out of range. "It's not like we're gonna break out and sing *Oklahoma!* But...the music creates an image of the world we live in, in which there is always some kind of noise happening that we're not aware of. So included in the score are the hums, buzzes, modem sounds, warbles, and beeps that constantly surround us."

Whether you call it music or noise, it is mostly composed by Peter Gach, artist in residence and professor of music at Palomar College. He uses a Cable and Nelson spinet piano, which he prepared for the performance by mounting contact mikes in the soundboard of the piano. Sometimes Gach places a CD jewel case along the strings of his spinet piano to make a buzzing sound when the hammer strikes. Sometimes he smacks a rubber mallet across the harp (the bridge-like frame that holds the strings under tension). Sometimes he plucks the strings like a guitar.

"By using [these] techniques, the instrument really acts like a kind of percussion ensemble," Gach explains. "There are places in the piece where I play solo [amplified piano], also clusters of notes using the flat of my hand, and a single repeated note, which matches the wind chimes heard at the end of the show. The chimes, by the way, are the last sound heard."

The chimes are carried by Secreta Chyme, the chalk-like specter. She eventually untwists herself from her own wreckage, emerges from the dump, and does a Butoh dance as she carries a set of chimes through the otherwise silent city.

"Butoh dance is a relatively new artistic form that grew out of the ashes of the nuclear holocaust in Japan," says Hall. "What is there left to say or do after the ultimate act of destruction.... The dance is characterized by incredibly slow movement coupled with a non-gender-specific appeal, hence all the white, no hair, etc. The ideas behind Butoh are a reaction to the world today -- fast-paced, hurry sickness, personal appearance, and loss of touch with ourselves.

"The Butoh dancer carries the wind chimes so as not to make a sound. Since it is nature we cannot control, the winds carry us away in a sweet melody."

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