Tesseract, a work by Charles Atlas, Rashaun Mitchell, and Silas Riener at the BAM Harvey from Dec 13 to 16, is in two parts: a 3D dance film, and a live performance with video. The three artists all worked with Merce Cunningham.

Can you talk about the visual concepts and costumes in the film? Were there any specific sources or influences?

The visual design is based on a spectrum of ideas ranging from exposed and conspicuous imagery to notions of concealment and camouflage. There's a foundation question about how bodies might exist in different environments, how we might assimilate or rebel in a given setting. We explore the disembodiment of shape in abstract geometry and how it might refer back to something on a body, a landscape. We found anchors in Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions, a satirical 1880s novel and animated film of politics set in a geometrical universe, the low-budget film Cube 2: Hypercube, a futuristic experiment where the participants are in a disorienting cube that keeps changing.

But influences are so hard to track. They splinter and unravel over time and then emerge in mysterious ways, often layered with other influences until they become unrecognizable or take on new meanings. The “desert scene” may or may not relate to Frank Herbert’s novel Dune. We worked with excellent costume fabricators and artists Julia Donaldson and Yvette Helin, both of whom take our hare-brained ideas and make them a wearable reality.

Discuss the technical side of the film—collaborating with Charles Atlas, the set designs and fabrication, the shoot, the integration of the green screen elements, how long the whole process took...

The process took 2½ years. Initial conversations about science fiction grew into brainstorming sessions that were mostly eclipsed by the technical realities and the financial concerns with mounting something so ambitious. We conceived of the sets and the brought in images for the team at EMPAC to construct to our specific measurements. The “kaleidoscope” scene was made of many interconnected, faceted triangles that ultimately form a supine human figure disguised as a mountain range. Another scene was a reworking of figurative and abstract tapestries that were printed and designed by
Fraser Taylor and used in a previous piece as a backdrop. Here they were placed throughout the stage space to create multiple “rooms.” The green screen shoot was the most unplanned scene. We had all worked with green screens before so we knew many decisions could be made in post-production. The background desert topography was added later. The final duet scene is composed of tubular crinoline, a stretchy, reflective material that we hung throughout the theater like jungle vines.

**How do you two collaborate on choreography?**

We argue until we don’t anymore. We take turns bossing each other and the dancers around. We work on multiple things at once. We are interested in the blurring of authorship.

In part 2, Ryan [Thomas Jenkins] is almost like another dancer on stage. Are his movements as choreographed as the dancers’, or does he have some leeway in his patterns?

Ryan’s pathways and timing are completely choreographed. The equipment is very heavy and takes up a lot of space. The framing of the shots is so sensitive that he has to be incredibly exacting in performance in order for the image to be captured in the right way. He has to know his own choreography, the camera tracking, and each individual dancer’s choreography. He is the seventh dancer in the work.

**How involved is Charles Atlas in Ryan’s movements, and what is his role (if any) during the performance?**

Charlie is usually stationed in the back of the house and is responsible for mixing the live images and the pre-designed images. It’s a live act. The creation of Ryan’s choreography and camera angles was very collaborative. It reflects a mixture of our conceptual and spatial demands as well as Charlie’s process of responding to the choreography and the technical demands of producing a potent and incisive image.

**How did you come to collaborate with Charles?**

We first worked with Charlie in the Merce Cunningham Dance Company on numerous film/dance projects so we had a shared history and model for collaborating. Charlie approached us in 2014 to work on the EMPAC commission. While in Troy, NY, we went to the movie theater together to see 3D films whenever we could.

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