

## 'Robot dance'

By Kinsee Morlan

### Taiwanese choreographer/inventor brings his graceful bot to San Diego stage

A good chunk of the reviews of choreographer Huang Yi's performances aren't even close to raving, but anytime anyone innovates in their field it opens them up to both huge hits and major misses.

Huang dances onstage with a robot named KUKA, an articulated arm-style bot most commonly found performing assembly-line duties in manufacturing plants. It takes the famed Taiwanese choreographer about 10 hours to program just one short minute of KUKA's movement. That's a lot of labor when you consider that the show is an hour long. But Jordan Peimer, the relatively new executive director at ArtPower!, UC San Diego's purveyor of arts and culture, says Huang's efforts pay off in the live performance.

"When I think robots, I think animatronics or Abe Lincoln at Disneyland or Yul Brynner in *Westworld*," says Peimer, who's seen a preview of Huang and KUKA's performance and decided to bring the duo to San Diego on Oct. 14 at UCSD's Mandeville Auditorium. "You don't think of these kind of gorgeous fluid movements...When you see Huang and KUKA, it's very hard to remember that everything the robot is doing has been painstakingly preprogrammed because it seems just so full of life."

Peimer describes the performance as very minimalistic in terms of the setting and lighting—the stage is mostly black and dark, a fog machine is going and there's often just one spotlight on Huang and KUKA. There are duets between Huang and KUKA, plus performances with other dancers and experimentations with lasers and video. Peimer says the most striking thing about the piece is just how human KUKA seems.

"I could see the robot before the show started, and as I sat down to see the show I was thinking to myself, I am not going to anthropomorphize this robot; I'm just not going to do that," he says. "But it turns out it's just impossible not to do. The robot is a product of a human talent, so the robot never ceases to be human because everything the robot is doing is what the choreographer has made the robot do."

One critique that's popped up in reviews of the innovative performance is that KUKA can sometimes upstage its human counterparts and the actual dance aspect of the show can appear relegated secondary to the spectacle of such a gracefully moving bot. Peimer, though, says Huang and his dancers hold their own.

"Personally, I never thought the robot was outshining the dancers," he says.

Thematically, the performance explores more than simply man's ever-evolving relationship with technology. Huang delves deeper into less expected territory.

"He tends to look into a much more spiritual place," Peimer says. "Without wanting to give anything away, the performance really is more about mortality and the difference between the finite life of man and the infinite life of objects."

#### More dance

**Newness:** The **PGK Dance Project** will be debuting new works by nine choreographers from across the country—including San Diego's own Blythe Barton and Nicole Lee—in a performance titled *The First Time* at 7:30 p.m. Friday, Sept. 18, and Saturday, Sept. 19, and 2 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 20, at the Lyceum Theatre (79 Horton Plaza) downtown. \$10-\$20. [thepgkdanceproject.org](http://thepgkdanceproject.org)

**Get into it:** Malashock Dance continues *The Engagement Ring* series at 8 p.m. and 7 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 5. The series increases audience inclusion through interesting strategies, such as incorporating audience karaoke (Nov. 14) and performing interactive secretive rituals (Dec. 5). The intimate

performances take place at Malashock Dance at Dance Place San Diego (2650 Truxtun Road at NTC at Liberty Station) in Point Loma. \$10-\$15.

[malashockdance.org](http://malashockdance.org)

**City-inspired:** In celebration of Balboa Park's Centennial this year, the annual **Trolley Dances** event will travel from the iconic new County Waterfront Park to Balboa Park and other special locations on and off the trolley line. Trolley Dances founder Jean Isaacs and other choreographers will create site-specific pieces directly inspired by San Diego's urban core over two weekends, Saturday and Sunday, Sept. 26-27, and Oct. 3-4. \$15-\$35.

[sandiegodancetheater.org](http://sandiegodancetheater.org)

**The right mix:** Mixing together ballet with hip-hop and giant puppets, the San Diego Ballet's upcoming **Carnival of the Animals** performance sounds like a jaw-dropper. The animal-inspired piece is set to the music of Camille Saint-Saens and other folk music from across the globe. At 2 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 24, at Old Town Temecula Theater (42051 Main St.). [sandiegoballetdancecompany.org](http://sandiegoballetdancecompany.org)

**Dance magic: MOMIX** calls themselves dance-illusionists. The group uses multimedia to create an other-worldly experience in which dance is transformed into a trippy kaleidoscope of onstage imagery that might just melt your mind. MOMIX performs at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 24, at the California Center for the Arts Escondido (340 N. Escondido Blvd.). \$25-\$65. [artcenter.org](http://artcenter.org)