

New Dance Production a Powerhouse of Energy **By Diane Parkes**

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Motionhouse's new production will be aiming to spark our interest as it explores the power of electricity in our lives, loves and logic.

Charge explores the energy in our bodies and its relationship to the world around us in a dynamic combination of dance-circus and digital technology.

Forming the third part of a trilogy inspired by the earth and created by Motionhouse founder and artistic director Kevin Finnan, Charge follows the phenomenal success of Scattered and Broken.

"I wanted to make a show about energy and I wanted to tell it through the human body," Kevin says.

"I became really interested in the idea of the human body as an electrical system and its relationship to the world we live in. It's all a flow and exchange of energy.

"We tend to think of energy as something external to us rather than something we are part of. But as soon as you start to look at it there's a sense of wonder at how the body operates as energy.

"The idea of making a show about energy has been in my mind for a very, very long time but its actual form and the commitment to making it started about three years ago. That's when I started a general period of research and it started coming together."

Kevin's research saw him working with professors at the University of Oxford as he sought to understand more of the mechanics of energy and of how humanity has discovered and comprehended electricity in human beings and in the world around us.

"I was looking for a poetic narrative that would tell the story of our relationship to energy," he says.

"And what I discovered was that it all comes down to a simple thing – ultimately thought is an electrical process. If your brain wasn't able to pass electrical signals around then there would be no love, there would be no memory, there would be no empathy. And that is so fundamental. When you turn on a light bulb you don't think 'without energy I couldn't love someone' but it's true.

"So I began to delve into a story where energy is the movement of our lives. A city is a hive of energy and moves things around by energy and we are familiar with that but we also have an internal energy hive in which energy moves from cell to cell. And so I began to overlap things. If you look at a map of a city at night or the planet from outer space and you see it all lighting up, well you have the same process with the human brain. When the brain is imaged, it's a massive fluctuation of light.

"It's also fascinating that with various mental conditions, things like Alzheimer's, when they scan people's brains it's like a city with certain areas blocked out. What happens is that areas of the brain just go dark and the messages that should pass through just don't go and gradually you're not making short term memory and you forget the ones you love. It's incredibly sad."

Kevin then looked at how to tell these stories in a dance piece.

"From all of this research I could feel the strands of the show coming together. It's about how the body is a cauldron of energy living in a cauldron of energy, which is our society, and then how all the subtlety of our lives is all electrical signals in our minds. So I began to make the poem that can be told in movement - and dance-circus is the perfect form for that because the body is energetic."

And added into this cauldron are elements of humanity's relationship with scientific discoveries around electricity.

"The first animation of tissue with an electrical charge was a massive conceptual shift in a society which understood, when it saw frogs' legs twitching, that we were electrical beings," says Kevin. "This was a massive revelation and there was an outbreak of wonder.

"And in Mary Shelley's book Frankenstein, it's not about mad scientists, it's this idea that electrical energy is within us. With the information they had at the time the idea that if biological elements were arranged and given energy it could create a life force was an interesting concept.

"This whole opening up of humanity in beginning to grasp that we are electrical is fascinating. There's a moment of comprehension of us being electrified beings and then something more once consciousness is present. That had to be part of the story – how we understand we are electric beings but then how we kind of forget that."

Founded in 1988 and based in Leamington Spa in Warwickshire, Motionhouse has built up a reputation for strongly physical and dynamic work, which blends dance, spectacle, circus and often digital projection. Kevin was keen for Charge to include these elements.

"I'm very interested in working with film as a digital element both on the environment and on the body. How you interact with the film is really important," he says. "Film can take you to places quickly and I really love film in theatre but it is two-dimensional, so for us it's all about 'how do we stretch that into a three-dimensional sense of space?' It's about how we interact with the imagery and the realities that we are able to create.

"For a show like Charge where one minute we are in a spinning urban environment and then for the next part of the scene we are inside the human heart and then in someone's house and then within someone's brain, that kind of mercurial transmission between places is really only possible with a real interaction with digital."

Having performed at venues and festivals both nationally and internationally, Motionhouse has become one of the leading independent dance companies in the UK. Founded by Kevin with his partner Louise Richards, former performer and now executive director of the company, Kevin says the priority has always been producing top quality and innovative work. This has seen them performing alongside diggers and JCBs, using giant sandcastles and taking to the air.

"With the hubris of the young you think 'I want people to see my work' but you don't really see beyond that when you first start up," recalls Kevin. "You really don't see beyond the next show – you are just struggling to build your reputation so you can get the money for the next show and then the next show. But you have a passion to make your work. And for us, it was always a passion to express ourselves through our work.

"Largely due to Louise guiding and developing the company, we are now in a position where the company is nearly 30 years old and what is really exciting for both of us is that, as we approach 30 years, we are more successful than we have ever been. We are more followed and more people come to our shows than ever happened in the past.

"It's a massively significant milestone for the company to be achieving 30 years and to be touring and growing and developing is incredible really. A lot of this is down to the hard work of everyone in the company.

"We seem to have expanded on three fronts – we've just been in Denmark working on a massive aerial piece working with aeroplanes and skydivers - so something really huge scale, then we're making Charge and we've already got two tours booked and our previous works are still touring and then our outdoor work has gone from strength to strength."

Motionhouse is supported using public funding through Arts Council England. Charge is supported by Warwick Arts Centre, The Rothschild Foundation, the Ernest Cook Trust and TippingPoint Stories of Change with the Official Energy Partner of Charge being First Utility.

And the company's success has been supported by Arts Council England which has granted Motionhouse a 38 per cent uplift in funding for 2018-22. Kevin says this is a testament to the company's success.

"We have ever-expanding audience figures which is tremendous and the kind of physicality that we are exploring in our work really chimes with people," says Kevin. "We want to challenge our audiences, we want to engage them, we want to thrill them, we want to delight them and we want to share with them.

"We are a very audience-centric company and I think that is a large part of why we were awarded the uplift. The testament is the wide range of audience who come to our work. We know a lot of people who see our shows haven't seen a dance show before and when we do our outside work we touch huge numbers of people who may never have been in a theatre."