

# Crystal Pite: a deafening semaphore

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## Crystal Pite's *Emergence*

The National Ballet of Canada

Innovation: March 4-8, 2009, 7:30pm

This year is the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth, and the 150th anniversary of *On the Origin of Species*. We've mapped the genome, we're synthesizing life, fearsome diseases roam the earth, nuclear armament is a nebulous threat, and we still don't know where we're headed...

On Friday night I saw The National Ballet of Canada perform Crystal Pite's latest work *Emergence*, with score by Owen Belton and set by Jay Gower Taylor, (on the Innovation program along with new works by Peter Quanz and Sabrina Matthews). Pite's work doesn't make direct reference to Darwin's ideas; however, the program notes her interest in author Steven Johnson's book of the same name, in which he discusses emergent behaviour and self-organizing systems. Johnson considers slime mold, ants, computer games and the future of artificial emergent systems. Pite apparently started with a curiosity about the communication and social organizational strategies of bees (and ballet companies), but from there, her theatrical imagination and deft dancemaking take us into the heart of things...

hive, nest, cave, womb... warm and dark with a radiant amber core... moth  
elixirrrrrrrrrrrhhhhh  
larval metamorphosis of a luminescent female coaxed and encouraged by a  
dark male form...  
struggling, sliding, contorting, gliding, and swirling toward the core of the  
shadowlight...  
a swarm of male abdomens in the chiaroscuro, twitching, pulsing, arrested -  
convulsing...  
angled jutting limbs, randomly a-rhythmic, yet in isolated echoes beats  
recur-recur-recur...  
bodies upon bodies upon bodies swarming through: feeding, breeding,  
leading - but by who?  
fine ferocious females with sharp needle legs... advancing, advancing,  
advancing en masse...  
whispered voices hissing, counting under breath: "five, six, seven" time  
expands...  
ominous inhalations, courting coalescence, a military force marching others  
to their death? ...  
gestural behaviour, seeping sideways through the group, and it builds and it  
builds...  
to a flash annihilation.

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A blinding light burns fleetingly at the end of the work, as the group of thirty-eight dancers stands in a regiment facing the audience gesturing urgently in unison, counting upward in an audible whisper at once desperate and jubilant. A complex organized society faces us, one that we have witnessed developing through seemingly random organic movements to an apex of systematic action. There is power in this unison commitment. Are they signaling to us?

Plato's Cave, *Heart of Darkness*, *Apocalypse Now*...? Future extinction or the origin of species? From the social life of bees to a sober song of suicide - or triumphant survival? It's a deafening semaphore.

Pite's apocalyptic vision is beautifully dark; but also fiercely defiant. In the face of extreme challenge and inevitable end, creation - life - occurs, finds a way, survives, persists, transforms. Other works in her repertoire also address an ephemeral fragility, an eloquent de/con/struction, whether dealing with creative process, a strange death, the crisis of loss - in dance or war, the human desire for connection, the tragedy of earthquakes: *Field: Fiction and Farther Out*, *Double Story*, *Lost Action*, *A Picture of You Falling*, *Fault* ... Her movement vocabulary, influenced by her work with William Forsythe in Germany, explores the poetics of the sequential body - often described as referencing a kind of pop-and-lock breakdance tone - savoured and refined for its metaphoric resonance: the exuberant-and-defiant-breaking-down-fragmentation-falling-apart-ness-of-generative-creativity-and-life-itself...

I hope this work will have a life before more audiences.