



Past/Forward at ADF

by Kate Dobbs Ariail

EXCERPT

July 14, 2008, Durham, NC: This year's Past/Forward program, performed by students at the [American Dance Festival](#), presents three reconstructed works from the 1980s, and one whopping world premiere. The whole evening in Duke University's Reynolds Theater proves to be a treat. Nobody on the stage talks, and the works echo with commonalities, proving harmonious with each other, yet far too varied for tedium.

Mark Dendy, North Carolina native, former NC School of the Arts student, previous ADF participant, and an active choreographer for 25 years, returned at the behest of the ADF to create a commissioned work set on students in the festival's six-week school. The result is *Preliminary Study for Depth: The Upper Half of High and Low*. This remarkable dance draws on the imagery, and more importantly, the aesthetic ideas of 20th century Dutch graphic artist [M.C. Escher](#), and is set to an energetic rolling roar of music by the Finnish cello metal band [Apocalyptica](#) with lots of reverb and modulating blues lines. Melody Eggen's striking costumes for the 22 dancers, many of which have some bifurcated or mirroring element, and David Ferri's constantly changing lighting are crucial to the impact of the 20-minute dance.

Like Escher's prints, Dendy's dance is mathematically precise, a flow of crisp, interlocking lines and images that unexpectedly morph and reverse direction. With the help of Ferri's lighting, Dendy briefly even manages figure-ground reversal, making the shadows the image and the dancers into shadows. One can glimpse some of Escher's motifs in the dance's imagery, but the power comes, in the dance as well as in the prints, from the ever-shifting relationships among the elements. The advanced student dancers were on fire during the first performance — well-controlled and sharp in their delineations; relentless in their advances and retreats through the tight patterns and demanding spins and switchbacks. The work finishes with a variant on Escher's two-plane studies, with half the dancers rolling in close formation away from the audience, while the others, upright, step over them towards the proscenium. If this exciting dance is a preliminary study, I can hardly wait to see the final version!