

Current Dance Work Saison 2011-2013

“From B to B”: Thomas Hauert/ZOO & Angels Margarit/Cia Mudances

Choreography is about creating sensory compositions

Improvisation is at the heart of your work. Why is that?

Improvisation has been a presence throughout my career. In the village where I grew up there was no dancing, but when I was a child I danced! I'd put on some music and perform pirouettes on the parquet floor, and try out different movements: in a word, I improvised. When I began my dance training at the Academy in Rotterdam – quite late, as it happened, I was already 22 – I started learning fixed forms. And I realised how much your movement is impoverished when it has to follow a prescribed path. Lots of subtleties and qualities are lost. Slowly but surely, I became convinced that the body is capable of far more movements than can be captured in codified forms, and those movements are only accessible through improvisation, by drawing on the resources of the unconscious. Of course you can't do everything through improvisation, and some written choreographic forms are very interesting. I've sometimes inserted fixed phrases of movement into my work. But improvisation still remains crucial to me, because it grants you access to the latent potential of the body. Provided of course you stop your body from taking the line of least resistance and repeating what it already knows.

So improvisation is a rigorous discipline.

Yes. There are various trends in improvisation, and if there's one that I mistrust a little, it's where the improviser has too much freedom. The risk then is that you end up expressing a kind of laziness, of the body and the nervous system. The dancer does what comes easiest, most spontaneously. Incidentally, there's a neurobiological explanation for that. The brain, the muscles, the metabolism: the whole of our organism tends to conserve its resources. So what you have is a tendency to reproduce the same plans of action every time, even though an infinite number of others are compatible with the body's structure! You need firm discipline to stop yourself from going round in circles and allow other possibilities to manifest themselves. That's why, over the years and working with the dancers in my company, I've developed a range of strategies for “directed” improvisation, based on systems of instructions (rules, “tasks” and so on). Their chief aim is to de-condition the dancer's body, to restore its basic anatomic potential, and then activate its ability to react and be creative by confronting it with new parameters.

How can you reconcile choreographic composition with the unpredictability of improvisation?

I try to sustain the paradox of choreographic writing that is able to embrace the richness and freedom of improvisation. Most often, this work takes shape through the exchange between my dancers/collaborators and me. The phrases of movement aren't written down. Instead I put forward structures or modules within which we improvise, but on the basis of very precisely defined rules and parameters. A choreographic module can be governed by rules of movement and positioning relative to a partner, for example, or parameters of rhythm and speed of motion, possibly linked to a musical score. I can also offer a selection of words that indicate the quality of the movements to be produced (such as "attack", "pull", "take", or "travel", "radio tuning", "abandon"). In this way, different parameters of improvisation can interweave within a given choreographic module. So as a choreographer I create the framework but the danced situations that we end up with are unpredictable and complex. They require a high level of concentration and commitment from the dancers. I'm always amazed by the body's ability to synthesise a multitude of factors in a fraction of a second, to react in the moment. I love those times when the body's inventiveness really takes off...

Do your creations always revolve around a search for the intrinsic possibilities of movement?

That concern is constant, but my choreographies aren't simply "studies of movements"! I also want to create atmospheres and awaken imaginations. So I make choices in terms of staging, dramaturgy and music. For me, choreography means creating sensory compositions, associations of sensations. I pay close attention not just to the gestures but also to the visual effect, the quality of the lighting and, especially, the dimension of sound. I often get my dancers to work with their voices. As I see it, there's an obvious parallel between the movements of the body when dancing and the movements of the sounds in music. Tension, relaxation, suspension, timbres, dynamisms, rhythms – all of them are common to both dance and music, probably because music has its origins in the experiences of the body. And it so happens that the most immediate way for the body to create music is through the voice, because it combines the body's movement with that of sound. I'm particularly interested in song because it superimposes a number of layers: the voice, the words and the musical accompaniment. I've composed songs for several of my choreographies, and I've also encouraged my dancers to do likewise. These songs are not necessarily audible to the viewer. In *Accords*, for example, several sections were danced in silence, but we synchronised using a song that we had memorised. When we use this approach in a group, it gives rise to a special kind of collective musicality, like a flow mysteriously linking us together without hindering anyone's freedom to improvise.

So there isn't necessarily a contradiction between individual freedom and the cohesion of the group!

I'm convinced there isn't. Since 1998, my company and I have operated like a little social laboratory. For *Accords*, for instance, we used choreography to experiment with a range of group situations in which each person took it in turns to be the leader. In other words each dancer had to be able at some point to take the initiative, to suggest a movement for the group – to take responsibility and carry the others along with them. The group would incorporate and amplify the suggested movement. Then another dancer would take over and inject new creative impetus by starting another idea or transforming it. The previous leader became a follower, and so on. Instant responses and listening to each other are fundamental to this process. When it works, the group's cohesion appears organic and living. It's very exciting to experience and feel. You see what I've called "improvised unisons" emerging, just like in nature, with shoals of fish or flocks of birds. In my most recent show, *MONO*, where we spent a lot of time working on duos, I explore a different idea that's been with me for a long time: how to exchange and share forces. There again, trust is essential to building other ways of making contact and being together.

Interview conducted by Annie Suquet