

Current Dance Work Saison 2011-2013

“Diffraction”: Cie Greffe / Cindy Van Acker

“My leitmotif is: don’t try to please, don’t seduce”

Our faces are shaped by our inner journeys. Cindy Van Acker’s face is both beautiful and serious. She receives us at her studio in Geneva, where she maps out voyages within the boundaries imposed by standards and reconfigures the body, methodically and with a craving for adventure that is at once artistic, anatomical and sculptural. Cindy Van Acker is, indeed, an adventurer: she invents a geography of the subject that looks towards the cosmos even as it pores over the building blocks of existence.

Where are you from?

Belgium. I grew up in Gistel, a small town between Ostend and Bruges that’s best known for the cycling champion Johan Museeuw. For the purposes of dance, though, I come from Geneva, because I’ve built my entire professional career here and it’s where Cie Greffe is based.

What is the landscape of your childhood?

The North Sea. Brick houses. Fields as far as the eye can see, cows, the horizon. The force of the wind, the salt on your lips and the constantly changing weather. I’ve been living in Geneva for nearly 22 years, which is just over half my life. What matters to me now is not to integrate but to avoid losing my roots.

What do you owe to your original culture?

An attitude to work. Flanders is a Catholic region. The sense of duty is very strong, historically and culturally.

When did it dawn on you that you would become a dancer?

There was never a moment of realisation. I never dreamed about becoming a dancer. My mother signed me up for dancing lessons when I was six years old and I immediately loved the classical technique, working at the barre. When I was twelve someone suggested I should apply to the professional school in Anvers. I was accepted and I joined as a boarder. It’s one of those experiences that leave their mark on you.

What did you learn during those years of training?

I learnt the trade, and what it meant to dance all day: discipline and perseverance – but what was missing was open-mindedness.

Did you consider a career as a classical dancer?

No. By the time I was fifteen I knew that contemporary dance was what interested me. I liked to devise new movements. But I liked the classical technique, and I wanted to

take the experience to its logical conclusion. That's why I continued my training for two years at the Royal Ballet of Flanders. It's good to have danced the great classics, to have experienced part of dance history physically.

Why did you come to Geneva?

Because of the Ballet du Grand Théâtre where I danced for two years.

What did you learn there?

(Silence) I learned a lot from the "seniors", experienced and magnificent dancers, and from working with choreographers such as Ohad Naharin and Christopher Bruce. But I realised that this was no longer the right place for me. I was sick of dancing pieces that I couldn't defend artistically.

Did you already feel you were a choreographer?

Ever since I was fifteen I had been creating pieces in my head. At the Flanders Ballet, I asked the director of the company for permission to try things out with the young dancers. It didn't come to anything because there wasn't time, but it reinforced my desire to explore. After the Grand Théâtre, meeting Yann Marussich, who was head of the Scènes Libres at the Grütli theatre at the time, was a key event. He urged me to strike out, and gave me the space and time to do so. It was amazing to have complete creative freedom. There's a desperate lack of such spaces for freedom these days in Geneva.

One of your first pieces, from 1996, is called Sans fard – "Without Make-Up". Is the title symbolic?

Yes. It's my leitmotif: don't try to please, don't seduce. It's my trademark.

In 1998, you presented Subver-cité at the Théâtre de l'Usine in Geneva. You are seen eating pears and then spitting them into a champagne bucket. You come across as very critical.

Yes. My first solos were critiques of dance but also of the system within which we evolve. The pieces from that time are a kind of manifesto. Later I wrote *J'aimerais tuer avant de mourir*, which was inspired by Jean-Luc Godard's film *Les Carabiniers* and marks a return of confidence in movement.

In 2002, you took a major new turn with Corps 00:00, a solo in which you go on an astonishing journey, hooked up by electrodes to a machine which acts directly on your muscles. The sensory experience takes precedence over the discourse. Why is that?

In *Corps 00:00*, I was trying to give my work a different meaning: to propose rather than criticise. I reset all the counters to zero and tried to view the body objectively, first and foremost as a collection of bones and muscles. I wanted to think about what makes that mass move. At one point in the piece I fall from a promontory. I wanted to fall like an object, and to do that you have to suspend your reflexes.

Which presumably requires total self-control.

Yes. Your thought becomes uniquely free. At the same time I'm subjected to electrical impulses via electrodes which condition my movements. So *Corps 00:00* also refers to the social body, the conditioning it is subjected to and the attempt to gain our freedom.

With Corps 00:00, and then Balk 00:49 in 2003, you construct a body that is novel, rarely seen on the stage, unrecognisable.

Yes. I go against the body's natural tendencies. I develop movements that I don't yet know how to carry out. That gives rise to new forms and, once they've been integrated, a new organicness.

In 2008, you were invited to collaborate with Romeo Castellucci who staged an Inferno based on Dante in the Cour d'Honneur of the Papal Palace in Avignon. Then in 2011 he asked you to work with him on Parsifal at the Opéra de la Monnaie in Brussels. What has Romeo Castellucci brought to you?

The collaboration with Romeo is very important to me. It releases a concentrated vital force, it transcends. It's a very powerful artistic experience, of course, but also one that is philosophical. When you are with him you are learning all the time, in a human way; he's extraordinary. I admire his immense openness, whatever the time and whoever you are. He taught me that you shouldn't be afraid to expect a lot from people. He faces up to problems, grabs hold of them with a kind of relish. He's a labourer in the cause of art. He pushes his performers to embrace a design, one that he is constantly enriching. He stands ready to serve a work still to come. I see myself in that aspiration. For me, creating is not about listening to yourself but serving the object.

It's very pure?

Yes, perhaps.

Your first pieces were solos. For a few years now, they've regularly involved other dancers. What kind of performers do you prefer?

I look for people who are convinced about the project. Generally speaking they are dancers that I already have links to. Until now I've never conducted auditions, with one exception, which was *Parsifal*. I had to really force myself. But it proved instructive. Choosing a performer is a decisive act.

If I said that your work is very sculptural, would you agree?

Yes, completely. My work leans sometimes towards sculpture and sometimes towards abstract painting. I cultivate a very strong relationship with the materiality of the body and of objects, with geometry and the visual. I am very sensitive to light. The body is an important player, but so are sound, lighting and set design.

Diffraction, which received the Swiss Dance Award, is a prime example of this conception.

Yes. Because in *Diffraction*, the movement isn't just inherent in the dancers but is also contained in the illuminated elements of the set including *9 Tubes*, which conditions the choreography.

What do you want your audience to experience?

I can answer that question by saying what I like to experience when I'm a member of an audience.

I like to be touched in unexpected ways. I like to have the sensation of mental space, the freedom to wander through my imagination, for the creative instinct to awake.

Do you feel that you are part of a trend?

No. I'm not even fashionable.

Interview conducted by Alexandre Demidoff