

Outstanding Male Dancer 2013

## **Footwa d'Imobilité**

### **Footwa – “dancer and seeker”**

*You received the “Outstanding Male Dancer” accolade at the Swiss Dance Awards. What does the word “dancer” mean to you?*

I find it a bit difficult to recognise myself in that, because I'm not just a dancer. My approach is more complex. I sometimes use the term “dancer-choreographer” to express what I do. My experience as a dancer feeds into my work as a choreographer. The act of choreography has to pass through my body. But when I dance in my own pieces, I'm also performing (and so interpreting) them. There is a dichotomy, or rather a constant dialogue, between these two poles. I sometimes say that I am a dancer and seeker, because what matters to me is to search, to experiment, in practice as well as in theory. There's also a constant to and fro between the two approaches. Of course I'm well aware that when I'm dancing some of my pieces, such as the *Histoires condansées* series or *Pina Jackson in Mercemoriam*, I'm delivering such a “performance” that the majority of people forget, or stop noticing, the choreographic construction work (and the searching, reflection and decision-making) that underpins and structures those shows. It's as if I were shadowing myself, the dancer-choreographer passing behind the dancer-performer!

*What, for you, is performance?*

Ideally the term needs to be understood in a very broad sense. For me, the audience are part of the performance inasmuch as they interpret it: they decode the performance, give it meaning, talk about it with others. In a way, the choreographer is also an interpreter. Choreographers don't create something out of nothing. They work from ideas, from information taken from the world, transposed and transmitted through a subjective vision. And then there is the dancer: the performer who interprets. For me, that person is the “all-powerful servant”! More than anyone, they serve a vision that demands to be communicated (they have to listen, understand, assimilate and represent the information, and so on). At the same time, only they can give life to the choreographer's vision: without them, it would remain virtual. That attitude, that responsibility, is magnificent, especially because it's not a question of pure self-effacement. The singularity of the performer – what makes them a unique individual – is crucial to the way in which a choreography comes to life.

*How do you work with your performers?*

I give them a lot of freedom, but without letting the roles become confused: I'm still the one who supplies the themes, guides the search and takes the decisions. Simply put, I take on the responsibility of the choreographer. That doesn't mean that my

performers have no say in what goes on – quite the reverse. I also firmly believe that the choreographer should share as much information as possible with the performers during the creative process, precisely so that they can make choices in their interpretation. The more freedom you give someone, the more you make them responsible. Since 2005, I've been working with my performers to develop a more profound sense of availability to the moment, openness to sensation, which I refer to as "being present here". I try to guide them towards states of hyper-receptiveness which are also, paradoxically, moments of letting go. It means their attachment to whatever transpires is total. Some of the exercises we do every day have an amazing delayed effect, especially the ones that involve the voice. Everything is mobilised: the facial muscles, the viscera, the organs. It's as if we were wringing out areas deep within our bodies, or coming out of a shower – one that is both physical and emotional. Afterwards, we feel both more grounded and more open, more receptive to the other. It means we can move from one register of expression to another without the slightest awkwardness.

*Slipping from one register of expression into another is something you often do in your choreographies. Why is that?*

I'm less and less interested in adopting standardised registers of expression. In the piece I'm working on at the moment, which is called *Utérus, pièce d'intérieur*, my two performers (Anja Schmidt and Raphaële Teicher) and I are constantly ricocheting from an expressionist mode to a realist one, to an impressionist one, and so on. Why should we have to choose between them when each of us carries that multiplicity with us throughout our lives? If I had to make a comparison I'd say that my working method right now is closer to that of John Cage than Merce Cunningham. I like to let things "be", allow them to appear for what they are. That transparency and that openness interest me. But I also like intermingling, the overlaying of meaning. Before my creative periods I gain vital nourishment from reading. I love playing with words, multiplying the signifiers by activating the polysemy of language. I also like to move between fields of reference in a non-hierarchical way: where philosophy rubs shoulders with what's termed "popular" culture, avant-garde cinema, sport and so on. I think re-appropriation, paraphrase and giving a new twist to a familiar quotation are interesting ways of stripping away perception. I'm fully aware that in interweaving layers of meaning in that way I'm creating an alchemy that sometimes makes the choreographed object a little difficult to grasp, or at least resistant to unequivocal analysis. And yet that's also the meaning of art and dance: you need the courage to venture into areas that haven't been signposted or codified.

*So what you're doing is breaking with codes? Would you describe your work as transgressive?*

I'm not motivated by a simple desire to provoke, by aggression or cynicism. I wouldn't call it transgressive: I'd prefer to talk in terms of de-sanctification, rather in the way

that the philosopher Giorgio Agamben talks of “profanation”. Agamben says that “profaning” means restoring things to common usage, returning them to circulation (Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, translated by Jeff Fort, New York, Zone Books, 2007). And it’s certainly true that when I perceive something as untouchable or respected, simply because usage and convention have it that way, it arouses my mischievous streak: I want to find the sore point and prod away at it, to explode the cliché. It’s my “court jester” side! I’m not de-sanctifying for the sake of it, but trying to shift perceptions and expectations. In a way it’s also a Buddhist attitude: emphasising precisely the fact that in life everything is perpetually moving, transforming itself. In dance especially, the moment forms are fixed something dies. You can take a break from time to time, of course, but I think you should always be letting go of your assumptions about what you know, putting yourself back into play and into movement. I firmly believe that today more than ever, things have to move, to dance, be it in codes, genres or territories. I’m far less interested in provoking than I am in sharing with people – that’s actually very important to me. That humanist aspiration accompanies me wherever I go. It also seems to me that laughter is a very powerful tool for communing with an audience. Not all of my work makes use of the comic, far from it. But I think being able to make fun of something together is a fertile method of confronting certain realities and shifting them, but without aggression. I’m an idealist at heart. I cherish the hope that art and dance can help to transform our relationship with the world, to change the way we engage with ourselves and our bodies, but also the way in which we share space and live together while respecting the other person’s freedom of expression. In that sense, for me, choreography and dance are philosophical, social and political acts.

Interview conducted by Annie Suquet