Current Dance work Saison 2011-2013

“Sideways Rain”: Alias Cie. / Guilherme Botelho

“My subject is always the same: the private and personal”

It’s morning in Geneva, and Guilherme Botelho is just a short distance from his studio. He’s rehearsing *Ante*, the piece that will mark the twentieth anniversary in October of the formation of his company, Alias. He’s run off his feet and happy to be so, yet also concerned: about his three daughters, soon to be grown up, his team of a dozen dancers, the day’s rehearsal. He tells us more.

Where are you from?

Guilherme Botelho: I’m from Brazil. More or less. But it’s a funny question to ask. A writer once said that you can’t choose your family but you can choose your friends; I’d say the same about country. You don’t choose where you are born, but you can choose where you spend your life. I’ve been living in Geneva for ages, but I’m not really Swiss. And when I go back to Brazil I’m not really Brazilian. I’m floating somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic.

When was the first time you danced?

I was very small. My parents used to go to the carnival, like everyone in Brazil. I would dance the samba. My family comes from Recife but settled in São Paulo. By the time I was fourteen I knew I would be a dancer.

Why?

I had an art teacher whose girlfriend was in charge of communications at the São Paulo municipal ballet. He took us to see *Escenas de familia* by the Argentine choreographer Oscar Araiz. I cried. And I realised that was what I wanted to do: dance in order to express what words cannot say.

What did those early years of training teach you?

When I was fourteen I worked like crazy. I had a teacher who used to say: “You have to listen to your body and tame it. You have to impose things on it, but be gentle.” The most fundamental thing my teachers gave me is a love of the beautiful. At the same time, they also taught me the importance of technique and discipline. You need a strong framework before you can break free and define your own desire.

What drew you to Geneva in the early 1980s?

Oscar Araiz. I was dancing with the São Paulo Ballet. He spent a day with us and we rehearsed in front of him. I was scared stiff. Shortly afterwards, I learned that he had been appointed director of the Ballet du Grand Théâtre. I wrote to him, and he replied that he would arrange an audition soon. I sold my camera and my bed to pay for a plane ticket. And that’s how I joined the Ballet du Grand Théâtre.

What was your image of Switzerland?

I didn't know anything about the country except what I read in the book we had at home. I was impressed by the snow. My mother told me they spoke three languages here, that just blew me away. But I can't deny it was tough at the start. In São Paulo, everyone is on the streets. On a Sunday in Geneva twenty years ago you never met a soul. It was as if a bomb had just gone off.

What did Oscar Araiz teach you during those early years at the Geneva Ballet?

He didn't treat us as mere performers; he involved us in the creative process, both artistically and intellectually. He taught me about the relationship between our lives and the stage. Our job is to take the invisible that makes us what we are and render it visible.

Why did you decide to set up your own company?

After ten years at the Ballet du Grand Théâtre, I was thinking about giving up dancing. Oscar Araiz had left some time before. I no longer recognised myself in the dance I was performing. I left the company and found myself unemployed. That's when we created Alias, and the name itself was symbolic: I wanted to dance differently.

Setting up your own company in Geneva in 1994 was quite a cheeky thing to do.

I wrote my first dossier and submitted it to the director of the La Bâtie festival at the time, Jean-François Rohrbasser. He explained that we were going through a crisis, and that funding for culture was being cut. But we persisted. We had an idea for a piece, about a boy and a girl who never quite get together. The man evolves beneath multiple layers of clothes. The woman abuses him, assaults him. We rehearsed it, gave it a title, *En Manque*, and off we went. It was an amazing success. We made it onto the programme all over the place, in Switzerland and Europe.

How did you feel at the time?

We had no idea about how the system worked, which was an advantage. We were also lucky enough to get support from the City of Geneva, the canton and Pro Helvetia.

Did you feel that you were part of a trend?

I don't think so. My work is rooted in my experience, in what I see around me. In 1994, contemporary dance was still seen as very much something for the "lucky few". We wanted to reach a wider audience but without compromising on rigour: to be popular but maintain high quality. I remember how people would come up to us after our shows and say "I didn't think it was possible to laugh while watching a dance performance."

Do you feel you are building a life's work?

That’s not for me to say. It’s never been my aim, anyway. Did Pina Bausch think she was building a life’s work? My pieces are linked to the performers who have danced them. I don’t have a plan to pass them on to others, to young dancers for example.

Do you ever revive a piece?

I’m not working in a museum. Once a piece has been done, you have to move on to something else.

Do you feel that you’ve achieved recognition?

Yes, the public authorities support me, society gives me resources – that’s a powerful acknowledgement. But I’d like to tell you a story. In 1995 we put on our second piece, *Moving Perhaps*. It’s about a woman whose existence is so regulated as to be lifeless. Except that there comes a moment when she loses control of it and maybe discovers happiness. We were performing in Scotland. As we came out of the theatre a member of the audience was waiting for us, nervously. She confided to us: “Your show will help me to live.” For me, that’s recognition: offering a bit of meaning to someone who’s watched us.

How do you see your aesthetic evolving? Since Sideways Rain *in 2010, your works have become less theatrical and more graphic. Did you feel a conscious need for self-renewal?*

I told myself: “You have to do the same thing, but differently.” My material remains the same: it has to do with the private and the personal. I talk about our weaknesses; I always admire people who are fragile. *Sideways Rain* has its roots in a painful experience: the death of my father. I wanted to give form to my questioning about that period in my life, to give it a dimension that was not individual but choral. That’s why I wanted to work with a large number of dancers.

What comes first in the creation of a work? Is it the subject, the movement, or the stage set?

For a long time I had a topic, a set and characters. I would get the performers to improvise on an image, for example; I would film them and then ask them to rediscover the spontaneity of improvisation for the performance. Today I try to give shape to the atmosphere within, as I’ve done with *Sideways Rain*.

What kind of choreographer are you?

In the studio I very much take the lead. And I expect the dancers to commit totally to a project. I ask them to come up with ideas and movements, but also to accept that I may not take up their suggestions. We interact, obviously, but in the end I’m the one who decides.

What do you expect from a performer?

That they should be themselves. That’s the hardest thing in life. To be yourself. On the stage, a dancer is tempted to display their virtuosity. What interests me is a

person’s faults, their ability to acknowledge them in front of everyone. In truth, I don’t like dancers, I like people who dance.

Do you aspire to a kind of innocence?

Yes. Pina Bausch said that she likes dancers who are shy. So do I.

Is there an age where you can no longer dance?

Definitely not! In theory, anyway. I’d love to recruit dancers who are 55 or 60. But you never find any. Because unfortunately, dance is still associated with a caricatured idea of beauty. But if you want to talk about life, why shouldn’t there be older performers?

What is dance for?

To make the world a better place, to bring people together, to encourage them to be touched and to touch someone else, to stop sheltering behind screens, to put the dictates of economics in their proper place, to appreciate the tenderness of a movement, the tenderness of a dancer, the tenderness that’s sometimes forgotten in everyday life.

What advice do you give to young dancers who consult you?

I tell them: “Shut yourself up in a studio, give yourself a subject, improvise, film yourself, don’t – whatever you do – stop working, learn to face up to yourself.”

Interview conducted by Alexandre Demidoff