

## **Théâtre Sévelin 36, Lausanne**

### **A home for dance in an electrical storehouse**

The building is actually a former warehouse in the Flon district of Lausanne. Until 1995 it was used by the city to store electrical materials. Then, quite unexpectedly, it morphed into a theatre: a “DIY” effort that director Philippe Saire is actually rather proud of. Its walls may be immovable, but in spirit Sévelin 36 is akin to a Japanese house: mobile, constantly adapting, with its delicate partitions, the better to entice audiences to discover contemporary dance – and help the choreographers create their works.

In the welcoming lobby, where audiences often linger to share their impressions of the performance they have just seen, the team from “36” have gathered around a table. The talk is of dance and of passion.

**Programming.** For Maud Herzog, head of communications and outreach, the “humble” surroundings account for much of the affection in which “36” is held by the people of Lausanne. “It’s not an elitist theatre,” she explains, “it’s an easy place to meet people!” She fondly recalls some of the shows she discovered here: *A Coming Community*, by the Belgian collective CAMP, for example, which was staged last year. “Creating humour with contemporary dance at that level was sheer genius!” Christel Welsch, head of secretarial and ticketing services, likes watching audiences as they leave the theatre after a performance, observing their emotions. If she could keep just one show, it would be Daniel Lignon’s *Not About Everything*, from 2012. “The dancer spun round for 25 minutes, like a Whirling Dervish, it was captivating! I found it profoundly emotional.”

Director Philippe Saire takes over: “If there’s a thread running through our programming it’s the same as that of contemporary dance: eclecticism. We don’t rule anything out in terms of shows or the pieces we dance. The main thing is that we are convinced the shows are worth presenting to audiences here in Lausanne.” For Virginie Lauwerier, administrative director and deputy head of programming, Sévelin 36 needs to focus on the up and coming, in particular via the European network Aerowaves, of which it is a member (and which organises exchange platforms for programme organisers). In her view, what counts is the dramaturgy. “The rhythm, the dynamism. As a member of the audience, I want to be carried away! What interests me is the momentum, the movement towards a universe... I don’t start out with an intellectual view of the shows, perhaps because I was a dancer myself,” she notes, adding: “I’m very sensitive to the sincerity of a project.”

**Genesis.** Philippe Saire recalls his first visit to no. 36 rue de Sévelin. “At the time I was having to leave my rehearsal studio in Morges. The city of Lausanne invited me to check out a building in this district. Just off to the side I discovered this storehouse, quite by chance. I immediately saw that it could be turned into something more than a rehearsal room, but that patience would be needed.” The first show was performed in 1995: *Le Palindrome*, by Philippe Saire himself. His company went into debt to finish the work, which was partly financed by the lottery for French-speaking Switzerland. A few years later the city wrote off the debts, acknowledging the site’s value as a civic amenity. Rapidly, the choreographer resolved to open the building up

to other creative artists. “We didn’t have the means to put on a season, so we decided to establish a festival, back in 1997.” For the sake of clarity, Philippe Saire separates the management of his company from that of the theatre (the theatre’s projected budget for 2014 is almost 800,000 Swiss francs; that for the company is approaching a million).

Two festivals were launched in 1997: the Festival international de danse de Lausanne, subsequently renamed “Lausanne Danse”, and Les Printemps de Sévelin. Since 2012, they have operated under the single banner of Printemps de Sévelin – “Sévelin Spring”. The festival is held between March and April each year, and some twenty companies present their work over a three-week period. For the 2014 edition, international choreographers David Wampach, Omar Rajeh and Jan Martens have been scheduled to take part. To make the shows more accessible, a single ticket price of 15 francs has been set; a ticket for the entire season costs 45 francs.

**Supporting creativity.** Programming accounts for no more than a third of the theatre’s activities. Its second key emphasis is on supporting creativity. Choreographers are invited to apply for one of three types of residences: Open Studio, Les Quarts d’Heure or the Danse et Dramaturgie project. The beneficiaries for the first half of 2014 include artists such as Barbara Schittler, Jozsef Trefeli, Natacha Garcin, Sarah Waechli and the Lumen company. Each year, Open Studio allows around fifteen residents to take over the theatre or its annex for two or three weeks in order to rehearse, after which their work is presented to audiences in an informal context. The Quarts d’Heure also offer fifteen minutes of stage time during the festival. Seven choreographers have been chosen for 2014. “We also arrange for them to be coached by a local artist,” explains Virginie Lauwerier. Film-maker Lionel Baier and Véronique Ferrero Delacoste, programme organiser of the FAR living arts festival, have already taken on this role. The last – and the icing on the cake – is the Danse et Dramaturgie project; the most elaborate of the three, it was launched by Philippe Saire and involves a number of partners (this time round it’s the Théâtre de l’Usine from Geneva, the Dampfzentrale in Bern and the Tanzhaus Zurich). Each location puts forward an artist whom it supports and produces, and the others offer that artist a residence. This year, Sévelin 36 is backing the work of Yasmine Hugonnet: “We arranged for her to be supported throughout the process of developing her show, *Le Récital des Postures*, by the Belgian dramaturge Guy Cools.” Her creation receives its premiere during the 2014 edition of Printemps de Sévelin.

**Outreach.** The third – and by no means least important – of the theatre’s activities is outreach. So successful has it been that the 142-seat auditorium boasts an 84% occupancy rate. Outreach began at a very early stage (due in no small part to Philippe Saire’s background teaching in a training college). Maud Herzog, who is in charge, is aware of the need to actively seek out audiences, to pique their curiosity. “I go into school classrooms and offer introductions to contemporary dance,” she explains. “We also organise a one-day workshop with each class, which ends with a three- or four-minute performance that we film.” Before the festival, a stand is set up at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne to promote contemporary dance among students, who also receive invitations. This year, for the first time, the programme includes a show for youngsters, entitled *Nos Amours Bêtes*. A regular workshop for parents and children has been created, as well as playgroups in which youngsters can take part in a movement workshop on Sundays. Last but not least,

the theatre offers dancing lessons for amateurs and semi-professionals throughout the year in the 320 square metre space of its rehearsal room, Annexe 36.

**The future.** “Our dream come true would be to create a season, with more regular get-togethers,” says Philippe Saire enthusiastically. “And to have the means to welcome international artists in residence, which would involve putting them up. And to schedule performances of more consistent scale which would be shown at the Opéra or the Salle Métropole.” While keen to preserve its identity and size, Sévelin 36 aims to grow by exploiting synergies, especially with the neighbouring Théâtre de l’Arsenic. “In Switzerland, private cultural initiatives are welcomed. They are allowed to get going. But the time comes when they need to be helped to develop and grow, rather than being trapped beneath a glass ceiling.” Winning the first Special Dance Award is a step towards achieving this – and helping the truly “electrifying” Sévelin 36 to continue enchanting and revitalising audiences in French-speaking Switzerland.

Interview conducted by Julien Burri