

Current Dance Works, 2013-2015 season

“bits C 128Hz”: miR Compagnie / Béatrice Goetz

“I’m a group person”

Where does your love of dance and movement come from?

I have a very clear picture in my mind. I see myself as a small child. As soon as music began to play somewhere – whatever kind of music, it could be anything from pop to jazz – I would immediately start dancing to it. Once someone presented me with a single that had pictures of the kozachok dance on the sleeve complete with instructions, and I taught myself step by step.

At home, were you encouraged to dance?

Dancing professionally wasn’t up for discussion. For my generation – I was born in 1959 – and my class, dance meant either ballet or sport. Ballet was too tough for me to get into. It wasn’t an option for me because I was the kind of girl who was into sport. I would run around in trousers and liked playing football with the boys.

But you ended up becoming a dancer. How did you reach that point?

It was a long process. I used to dance whenever I had the opportunity, even during sports lessons. I loved doing a simple folk dance – I would blossom like a flower. I didn’t start training seriously until after I left school. I started out studying sport in order to earn enough to support myself. As the eldest child, I knew I had to make it in the outside world as soon as possible. I knew whatever I did I would have to pay for it myself. I began giving gym lessons after just one year. At the same time I was training every day at Marianne Forster’s dance studio in Basel. Once my studies were complete I started giving nine lessons a week. That still left up to 30 hours for training.

Did you ever consider going abroad to train as a dancer?

I could have worked full-on for a year or two and then gone abroad, as many of my generation did. But somehow that was never something I considered. I did a three-year gymnastics training in Basel. That was the closest I could get to dance and it was something I could afford. Later on it led to a teaching post in sports teacher training, in what’s now called the Department of Sport and Sports Science.

You were hired by the Maja Lex dance group in Cologne. How did that come about?

That was down to Marianne Forster; she knew Maja Lex personally. Marianne always brought lots of people together and invited them to the legendary summer courses in Switzerland. These were serious professionals, mainly from the US, from whom I learnt a great deal. I also met Koni Hanft, who taught elemental dance in its purest form. It's a type of dance based on improvisation, where I also see parallels with breakdance.

So you got on well from the start?

Koni Hanft is someone who's very open, chaotic and daring. When you meet a person like that you're just swept along with them. The Maja Lex group happened to be looking for a dancer at the time and I immediately said "count me in!" Elemental dance has its roots in German expressive dance, which in turn comes from gymnastics, the movement theory of Rudolf von Laban. He once said everybody is a dancer. That taught me that even if you are a late starter and don't have an academic training you can still be a dancer.

How did you balance your dance commitments with your teaching in Basel?

I spent four days a week rehearsing in Cologne and one working at the university in Basel. I travelled back to Basel on Sunday evenings. I'd already got married there by that stage. There are 24 hours in a day and 7 days in a week, and I packed in as much as I could. I did that for five years, up until 1994. It was also when I was with the Maja Lex dance group that I choreographed for the first time.

In 2002 you set up your own company, miR Cie., and it was there that you were the first choreographer in Switzerland to put contemporary dance and urban dance on the stage together. Was breakdance a way for you to further expand your artistic horizons?

Absolutely. Urban dance is based on the idea that every dancer is an individual who can't be pigeonholed. From a philosophical point of view anyone can do hip hop or breakdance, though of course with differing levels of skill.

I did my earliest work – this was in the days before miR Cie. – with Basel City Attack, four fantastic breakdancers who've been Swiss champions on a number of occasions. But while "Airtrack" was a huge success, working with them was hard going. After many years working together they had drifted apart and no longer saw eye to eye.

So you had to look for new dancers?

Yes, we just couldn't carry on like that. The breakdance scene in Basel is male dominated and in some cases very homophobic. I began to wonder where the women breakdancers were. I found them in Zurich. The first production with miR Cie. was called "Lila" and it was a flop. But failures are the experiences you learn most from. Three years later, through another dancer, I met Björn Meier, alias Buz, and I've been working with him ever since.

Later, hip hop came along too. Did you train for that yourself?

I did hip hop training twice a week for more than three years with the dancer Viet Dang in Basel. With breakdance, I learnt the footwork from my dancers; at my age you can't do all the power moves. To be able to choreograph, my body needs to be familiar with the different qualities of movement.

You've won a Swiss Dance Award with the 2013 piece "bits C 128Hz". What's it about?

It's about music – the beat, and the heartbeat. I always wanted to work with a live musician. With Christoph Dangel, a classical cellist, I came into contact with the Basel Chamber Orchestra through a number of outreach projects. I brought him together with the DJ Janiv Oron and the two immediately hit it off. In the piece, the warm sounds from the cello's wooden resonance chamber meet the multiple facets of electronica. The sounds, from Vivaldi via all kinds of electronic music to rap, create the images. The question for me was what happens to the dancers when they hear those sounds.

How do you select your dancers? Is there a thread underlying the various works?

I meet people and they provoke something in me: an idea, a spark. That's how I operate – it's very emotional. In "Lila", I tried to combine dance and theatre. The piece was based on a work of literature. Ultimately I was trying to achieve too much. After that, I realised I had to go back to dance. The next piece, "Transit", was like an awakening. I searched for forms that could link contemporary dance to hip hop. Hip hop dancers have adopted contemporary movements, and vice versa.

In 2006 you set up mini-miR, a dance project for primary schoolchildren. Where does your commitment to teaching come from?

I think teaching is part of who I am. I am very grateful to our state system, which has a social foundation, and I feel a sense of responsibility. Although I come from the working class, it was taken for granted that I could go to grammar school. That feeling that all avenues are open is something I have always carried within me.

Your company is called miR Cie. and not Béatrice Goetz-Cie. Why is that?

I think it would be presumptuous to name my company after me. I see myself as a group person. I'm very conscious of my team. Every person I work with brings something new and unique: it really is an MIR, which stands for something like "Motion in Relation". The name reflects an attitude to what we do. MIR was also the name of the Russian orbiting space station. I'm just a part of the space ship, even if I'm the "mastermind" behind it. I'm responsible for the project concept, the choreography, the administration and, ultimately, the result.

Interview: Maya Künzler