

June Johnson Dance Prize 2015

“Requiem for a piece of meat”: 3art3 / Daniel Hellmann

“Presence originates at the limits”

Would your primary school teacher be surprised if she knew you'd become a choreographer and performer?

She would probably be less surprised than people who knew me when I was 20. As a child I was very shy; when I was in the first year I often only spoke in whispers. Back then I was already writing poetry and putting on sketches in the school theatre. But my various artistic and philosophical interests have only really come together over the last six years. Before that, there was a long period when I was only interested in classical singing.

Starting with the Zurich Boys' Choir, which you joined without telling your parents.

Singing soon emerged as a central part of my life, because I became a soloist and we went on concert trips every year. It was also the first place I had friends. So it was an obvious choice for me to go on and study at the music school in Lausanne. But my relationship to classical music is complicated.

Why?

As a singer you are an interpreter. You sing works composed by other people. There came a point where I started to view that as a constraint and I was constantly taking issue with the directors. Plus the world views that opera deals with are often far removed from the issues that move me. Working with choreographers, I came to realise that this was what I wanted to do: influence the creative process, explore things in depth. Then I found out about the theatre and performance degree in Bern. I mostly attended courses in physical theatre and dance.

What do you remember learning from your studies?

One thing that made a particular impact on me was a course extending over several weeks with the Bernese artist Ralf Samens. In the first few days, all we did was place cups and plates in an empty space and watch what happened when someone changed the position of the handles, for example. It taught me how things come to be linked together, and how you can play with lines, forms and dynamics. It taught me to see.

Do your movements originate in your head or your body?

When I start out, I'm looking not so much for explicit movements as for a specific quality of movement. I want to create a cumulative state in space: it's all about mood, tempo, dynamism and temperature. Of course the performances are also shaped by the dancers and musicians I work with. I see myself more as a person who brings people together. It's the collective that creates the actual works.

You didn't train as a dancer. How do you remember sequences?

When a movement is very precise I often store it using sounds; I kind of set the movements to music in my mind. Improvisation is also important in my works. "Requiem for a piece of meat" is the first piece where I'm not on the stage myself. One of my strategies here is to overload the dancers with information and instructions. When you come up against your limits, that's when a whole new presence originates.

What distinguishes you from other choreographers?

I'm still not used to referring to myself as a choreographer. I would rather call myself a dance or theatre maker. I have few inhibitions, and my mixture of opera and trash seems to go down well. Quite simply, the dance world gives me the greatest freedom as regards forms of presentation and artistic resources.

And yet dance is a discipline in which technique plays a major role...

...as it does in music. It takes discipline, practice and accuracy. I like physical virtuosity. It's easy to seduce an audience if you have a good technique. But what interests me is how much of it to apply. I find it exciting when professional dancers come together with amateurs. In our first piece, "K.", for example, which I directed together with Quan Bui Ngoc, we had a pianist who at one point got up and danced. His arms really were hyper-flexible. The audience were quite taken aback – I like that. Fragility and individuality are what I want to show on the stage.

So, very much in line with Pina Bausch's philosophy?

It's just incredible the level of quality she achieved by working from the dancers' experiences and physical biographies. Her methods opened many doors in the process-oriented approach. That's since been developed further. It's important to me that different types of presence are possible, from the virtuoso showpiece to pure naturalness. But I don't feel my only debt is to dance; in fact my most recent solo

projects make do almost entirely without it. I want to deal with topics on a range of levels: ones that seem to me urgent, such as the refugee issue, sex work and our consumption of meat as in “Requiem for a piece of meat”. I’m aware of how privileged I am to be given the financial means to make such pieces a reality. So for that reason I feel a responsibility to make people engage with the topic. If I don’t do that, I’ve failed.

Are you the kind of artist who’s eternally looking for inspiration or do you sometimes concern yourself with things that have nothing to do with art?

I concern myself with lots of things. Ever since I was small, for example, I’ve regularly read the teletext, including the sports results. I’m always having ideas, wherever I am, including lots of bad ones, of course. When I’m in Zurich my diary is always very full, which is why I like spending time in Berlin so much. When I’m there I can just hang around my apartment for three days and read the newspaper. I also go out a lot. I love the club culture, that alternative world where there’s a freedom you don’t find elsewhere. I’m always looking for that in my work, too. What happens when you give people new options? How do they react? How is it unsettling?

When you compare the dance scene in Switzerland with Germany, what strikes you?

As everyone knows, there’s far less money in Berlin. You can make good art with limited resources, but the production conditions have a huge impact on the works produced. I find the Swiss dance scene very exciting: there are lots of interesting artists and good promotional support that we need to fight to maintain.

You received the June Johnson Dance Prize for the concept for “Requiem for a piece of meat”. What has that meant for you?

It’s a nice acknowledgement, but I’m not resting on my laurels – quite the opposite. Of course it means you get more attention from producers. And at the award ceremony you meet people from completely different areas of the dance world, such as classical ballet. Above all, it’s great to have the financial resources to start a production without so much risk – and be able to stage such a big production in the first place.

The piece is all about dead meat, naked bodies and rapid breathing. How does it fit in with your other works?

What links my works together is the fascination with bodies, but also the instrumentalisation of the body: the question of how we deal with bodies, what the body reflects in terms of power structures and the relationship with the self.

In one of your most recent solo projects, "Full Service", you did anything passers-by wanted – as long as the price was right. You're becoming more radical.

That's true. I deliberately choose topics that polarise. In "Traumboj", my solo piece about sex work, the difference between fiction and documentary isn't obvious – which my family found very unsettling. That's the price you pay for getting to the crux of the matter. Certain ideas scare me too. But when you are afraid of something, it's a sign that there's friction. Friction gives rise to irritation, and that's when you can start to re-imagine things. And that's the point I want to reach with my art.

Interview: Xymna Engel