

Swiss Grand Award for Dance 2015

**Gilles Jobin**

**'What I like about particle physics is that it's so abstract.'**

*Congratulations, Gilles Jobin, on winning the Swiss Grand Award for Dance. What does it mean to you?*

It's recognition of my artistic work for all those years I've been working. But maybe also of my general commitment to dance; as an activist fighting for better conditions for dance, making projects with countries from the South and promoting the idea of sharing resources.

*I understand that you were involved in the struggle to get dance recognised as a profession.*

Well, I've been around for a long time. When I started as a dancer, conditions were completely different. Back then there was no social security for dancers. In the Canton of Vaud, I was probably the first dancer to go on the dole. I had been trained at the Ecole Supérieure de Danse de Cannes Rosella Hightower and got a diploma from ASD (Association faîtière Suisse des professionnels de la danse). That made me eligible for unemployment benefit.

*Where does the award find you in your career?*

For me it's just the right moment. When you start as a young choreographer, you get all kinds of support, because you're young and new. By the time you're established, people have heard about you: you're not new anymore, but you're not a master either. So there's this phase in between where the prize is very useful, because it's an acknowledgement of me as a professional choreographer and at the same time reassurance to all the people that have supported me.

*How would you describe your career? What have been the most important steps?*

One of the milestones was the support from Arsenic Theatre in Lausanne. Its director back then, Thierry Spicher, saw my first solos and offered me a coproduction for a group production in 1997, *A+B=X*. Another one was *Braindance*, which won the ZKB Patronage Prize at the Zurich Theaterspektakel. This brought me onto the next level. I got access to big international festivals, such as Montpellier Danse in 1999, and was then invited by the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris for *Braindance* and the creation of *Moebius Strip*. Their programme goes everywhere – it's such a strong label.

*Are there any topics and themes that you have been following throughout your choreographic life?*

I'm dealing with basic existential questions, such as 'what does the world do to me?' or 'how do I position myself in the world?' I am interested in different aspects of the body, the manipulated body or the hospitalised body or the body in relation to matter or space. The French critic Laurent Goumarre described my work as an abstract figuration. I think he's quite right. Somehow, there is a concrete influence – probably from my father who was a geometrical painter. The body is not abstract. You can always relate to it, because we all have a body and we watch other bodies moving. That's where figuration comes in. I suggest ideas to the spectator through the body and this will in turn generate ideas. But I don't really underlay my choreography with meaning.

*You often work with Franz Treichler from the band The Young Gods, the winner of the Swiss Grand Award for Music 2014. How do you collaborate?*

I used his music in my first solos and in *A+B=X*. He made an original composition for *Braindance*. From then on we did seven or eight productions together. Then I thought it was time for a change, so I started working with Cristian Vogel, with whom I stayed for a long time. Now I have turned to Franz again for my new duo *FORÇA FORTE* and my 3D film *WOMB*.

*So, when you do work together, do you tell him what you want to do or does he just work on his own?*

When I met Franz, he could not understand why we didn't move to the rhythm of the music. Composing for contemporary dance was new to him. His function is more about giving texture: for instance, if a scene is very slow or dry, I ask him to help me lift the atmosphere or stretch time. In my first productions I had ideas about stretching time, trying to make the audience lose the sense of how long the performance was. We normally work in parallel but not as radically as Cunningham used to with his composers. But I always defend independence of music and dance and fight against illustration.

*In 2012 you were awarded the Collide@CERN Geneva prize in Dance and Performance that allowed you to work for three months in the world's largest particle physics laboratory. What did you do there?*

Basically, I was doing fundamental research. It was the first time I dedicated myself exclusively to research. This was another milestone for me – there is a before and after. I have realised how important it is to do fundamental research and I wish I could now promote that idea with young choreographers. Giving out research grants could be more

effective than much of the money which obliges choreographers to keep producing new works.

*So what research did you do?*

I wanted to find out about what I now call 'movement generators'. It's about finding rules to generate movements – like algorithms. An algorithm is a set of conditions that you put into a machine for it to act within those parameters. I developed this idea with the dancers to enable them to compose their own sequences. Choreographing is a very slow process – and I'm not that great at it anyway – so I'm better off using the dancer's imagination and skills. But if I want to have control over what they do I have to frame it. In *Moebius Strip*, I worked with organically organised movement by defining rules – 'walk on a line' or 'stop at every angle' – so that the space is organised. In *Spider Galaxies*, I started with this idea of movement generators. We used about a thousand photos. I provided the photos and gave rules on how to use them and the dancers provided the movements. I assumed that in particle physics there were also some hidden movement generators. I wanted to find out whether there were rules I could apply to dance. But very quickly I realised the enormous difference in scale – we're talking about the smallest of the smallest world. Eventually I found ways to talk to people and got instructions so that I could enable the dancers to produce their own material. Two physicists came to the studio and advised me on whether what we did was coherent with the rules of particle physics.

*What does that mean?*

For instance, we use a lot of symmetry – in particle physics there are a lot of different symmetries. There's not just symmetrical/asymmetrical: there's gauge symmetry, mirror symmetry, reversal symmetry, etc. – so you give the rules to the dancers and they do it.

*Your production QUANTUM was the first one to come out after your CERN residency. In what way is it connected to what you learnt there?*

I think *QUANTUM* is a simple production, a basic production, because it doesn't go into very complex questions.

*But QUANTUM is very beautiful in its simplicity. Could this be one of the effects of your residency at CERN: learning about such complex matters allowed you to go back to simplicity?*

What I like about particle physics is that it's so abstract. It's almost like choosing abstraction as a subject. I was free of narration. Not that I am a narrative choreographer, but there had always been some ideas behind the work. *QUANTUM* is free from ideas. The object is as abstract as possible. It didn't have to make any sense, not even in connection to particle physics.

*In what way has working with physicists changed your style of dance? Has it enriched the repertoire of rules you give to the dancers?*

Yes, but more in terms of strategy. Theoretical physicists think and predict, and it will take many years until experimental physicists have built the machines to prove whether a theory is correct or not. Take the Higgs boson – I was at CERN when they made that world announcement – it took them almost fifty years from Peter Higgs' prediction in the 1960s. As a choreographer you put an idea forward and you can't say what will come of it, only the direction it should take. Being at CERN has also made me science-able. Before I thought myself science-disabled. I am more interested in existentialism. One of the questions about physicists that bothered me was: how can they know what they know and just live a normal life? Their knowledge of what we're made of is so advanced! A physicist explained to me that we have to look at things on their own scale. Knowing what wood is made of doesn't help you make good furniture. There's no relation between these two kinds of knowledge. Before I had this 'New Age' idea that everything is connected. I know now that things are not so connected. What goes on with a stone has nothing to do with what goes on with you, even though we are made of the same fundamental forces. The stone is matter, you are matter – when you look at it on that scale, we are the same. But when you look at it on an organic scale, stones are dead things with no life while we're alive and we're going to die. Actually we'll all die very soon compared to the lifetime of a stone.

*Now, you have a new production FORÇA FORTE – can you tell me about it?*

*FORÇA FORTE* means 'strong force', which is one of four fundamental forces in nature. It binds quarks together and therefore all matter in the universe. When quarks are very close, they are very loose but when they spread about, they become very tense. So it's a kind of counter-intuitive force. For a while I didn't know what to do with this knowledge. I couldn't find anything interesting to apply the idea to. Then suddenly an analogy occurred to me: a couple. When you're good with someone, you are very loose and the closer you are, the looser you are. But with distance things become tense. Quarks eventually break and reconstitute out of the void. It's similar to a relationship: it can be something that is very fluid and can become very tense and break and pop out of the void again.

*What are the things you're concerned with apart from dance productions?*

Well, I am a choreographer first and foremost. Many artists feel that they stand outside the normal world and yet they want to make a difference. I am not sure I can make a difference but at least there's the intention. That's who I am: someone who is engaged, who is connected to the world and who would like it to be different, to be more gentle,

friendly, more peaceful. But I cannot really bear the world as it is, so I have to get out of it – and art is a fine place for that.

*How are you and the company financed?*

I have regular funding now. It's a three-year contract with the City of Geneva, the Canton of Geneva and Pro Helvetia. It's been renewed a few times. The regularity of funding has completely changed the way I work. I can be much more organised and plan more in advance. I like the trust we get. Switzerland might have some downsides but it also has some qualities – one of them is proximity to the institutions we have and the belief these institutions have in us. It gives us a lot of freedom.

*Do you have a space you are connected to like you had with Théâtre Bonlieu in Annecy?*

No, not any more. I have my studio that the City of Geneva has given us but I'm stuck because it's too small. The kind of work I'm doing now would require double the space. Sure, it's very comfortable. It's a fantastic studio, situated in the heart of the city, so I'm very happy and comfortable there but I'm stuck, because I can't go anywhere else. Spaces are difficult to find. Somehow my evolution is limited, but I think it's OK. This is where I am now. My work is presented at a pretty high level on the touring dance scene. I'm the smallest of the big ones if you like.

*If you were to give a present to the Swiss dance scene – other than one of your wonderful works – what would it be?*

I'd give something to the dancers – to help them out. We have good training now, but there is not much ongoing training, to empower dancers, give them more space, more visibility and more work. I work with dancers like Susana Panadès Diaz – she performs in *FORÇA FORTE*. I've been working with her for eleven years now but I cannot offer her a permanent job. This uncertainty makes it very difficult to have a fixed group of dancers. Yet I think they are the most important contributors to what we do and the least supported of all. At the end of the day the choreographer gets some support and recognition – but what about the dancers?

Interview: Lilo Weber