

Outstanding Male Dancer 2015

**Ioannis Mandaounis**

**“I’ll never be a choreographer in the usual sense”**

*Could Ioannis Mandaounis have devoted his life to anything other than dance? If so, what would it be?*

Cooking! Without a moment’s hesitation. I love it. I’ve done it before. During a festival at the Usine, I cooked every day for a hundred people. In Frankfurt, with Fabrice Mazliah, a café got us to design some concept menus with an artistic touch. And then there was that time at the Théâtre Sévelin in Lausanne when I cooked for the inauguration of an installation. It’s reassuring to know that if anything happened to make me stop dancing, I have an activity that suits me and where I’ve already shown what I can do.

*With a link to dance?*

With choreography. In cooking, you start out with an idea and then use your resources to bring it to life. You have to select different elements, combine them and devise arrangements. And then there’s the issue of timing: just as there’s a tension in dance, there’s a tension in cooking – you have to get the timing right. Everything has to come together at the right moment, stick to the right rhythm and be presented correctly but this time to a different audience: a table full of diners. Making that happen involves a great deal of preparation behind the scenes, which takes up more time than you need to appreciate the result.

*It seems that when you were young you were quite resistant to dance.*

Not exactly. My parents were dancers. I grew up in studios. Dance was my first hobby. I plunged into it without asking myself what I was doing. The resistance started later. I felt the need to question everything, to reassure myself that I was making the right choice. I attended psychoanalysis, where the same questions came up. I stopped dancing three times: once because I was injured, and the other times to try out different activities (such as cooking, as I mentioned). But I missed dance too much. And that was that. Since the age of twenty-five, I’ve never stopped.

*Is it possible to define what dance is?*

Dance is an experience, a tool for developing my awareness, working through my emotional states, locating myself. It’s not even about communicating something, or

especially to do with creating shows. That's just one side of it: the sharing, giving things shape. The essential element is elsewhere. Almost at the hormonal level. I can spend hours shut up alone in a studio, enjoying the pleasures of researching movement, over and over. Even if I stopped giving shows I would continue to dance. I'm constantly changing partners with each piece: again that's because I have a need to discover, to question things. In dance I put myself in a situation to understand what is going to happen. Like in martial arts: you figure out what's coming next and develop directions of movement in response to that. That's also where improvisation comes into its own. Bear in mind that in this view, dance is a separate notion from choreography. Choreography is never more than just one way of making dance.

*You started out in classical dance. Was that because there was no alternative, or were you genuinely drawn to it?*

It was a genuine choice. When I was twelve, I dreamt I was a prince wearing white tights. But when I was fifteen or sixteen I saw William Forsythe's company on stage and that was it: I just knew his dance was right for me.

*What did you see in the company, even before you joined it?*

I felt as though I wasn't watching a performance but people at work, people who were engaged in doing something under the influence of information received. That aspect of the work wasn't hidden, and it comes back to what I was just saying about experimentation. A Forsythe performance seemed to me like research being conducted live.

*What did you find in Forsythe once you began growing within his company?*

It all came as a shock. I was completely lost for a whole year; I had to rediscover my body from scratch, learn how to walk again. With Forsythe, the way the body worked made me question everything I'd learnt. The coordination is different. For example, there are reverse movements, in which you do the dance moves backwards. That upsets everything: your posture, your relationship to gravity. It's really hard work learning to re-articulate your limbs. The aim isn't even to dance, but to re-appropriate your body in a completely different way.

*Was it also something you enjoyed?*

It's very exciting to tell yourself that you can dismantle everything and then put it back together differently. It's a really interesting game and it starts again with each new piece. Unlike some others, who saw themselves as "Forsythe dancers", I considered myself to be in a school of choreography. I carried on regarding it as an experimental laboratory. And that's how it ended. Gradually I found I was learning less and in re-

turn I was bringing less to the company. The time had come to leave. I should also say that I was already choreographing while I was a performer in the company.

*What did the move from classical to contemporary mean to you?*

I don't separate the two. Dance is an entity, and techniques are just channels for it. As soon as I can I'm going to take ballet lessons, for pleasure. So I'll be back experimenting again. I love the precision of ballet, the intellectual demands of understanding the way the moves are put together. I'm still hooked on the challenge of technique. Classical dance gives me plenty of that.

*Since you've begun putting your name to your works, you've operated partly in a collective, sometimes with one other person and sometimes on your own. Why the instability?*

Except in junior ballet, I've never put my name to a piece myself. I've never worked solo either. I don't think I ever will. It doesn't interest me. Working with lots of other people is my way of developing. Two, three or four people is the right number to experiment, discover and learn from the others.

The company form is just an administrative shell. Institutions prefer to deal with a single person. But that doesn't change anything. I can find myself in the situation of being a performer, while the company that I nominally lead provides the framework. It's just a question of appointing someone to look after the production. The only thing that matters is the encounter that love at first sight for an idea someone suggests to me, for a new collaboration.

I don't think I'll ever be a choreographer writing in my own name, in the usual sense. Choreographing is a way of researching. It's not a solitary activity going on in the shadows, a way of getting others to execute my visions. Choreographing is about wanting to share your quest with others. I've never yet felt the kind of distance where it would make sense to put my own name to a work.

*In your works, we see a body that is segmented, with movements that are paradoxical, incongruous and experimental all at once. Are you setting out to amuse? Or does the slightly stiff side reflect the imprint of classical dance?*

Sometimes people laugh when they see my works. I'm more amazed than anyone when that happens. I don't set out to produce humorous pieces. I take the study of arrangements very seriously, and some combinations can be painful. But overall I love what I am doing, and maybe the audience senses that too. The laughter is probably due to the bizarreness, the unfamiliarity of some of the forms we produce. As for vestiges of the classical: if they are at work, then I'm not aware of it.

*Does Switzerland, and especially Geneva, offer you a good environment?*

I didn't come to Geneva to work, but because my mother is originally from the city, and I'd lived there, and after seven years working for Forsythe in Frankfurt I felt the need for somewhere to call home. Here, there is an insistence that you work in the locality, that you involve yourself in the community. That's not necessarily a bad thing, inasmuch as I've never been put under pressure, for example because I only work with "foreigners" (non-Swiss people). I am free to create as I wish, the atmosphere is quite open. In Geneva, interestingly enough, a reference to Paris works. My solid experience of Germany and the fact that I can speak the two languages means I can also connect to audiences in German-speaking cantons. That's not so common. It's one of my aims, to encourage the spread of curiosity throughout Switzerland, in all its diversity.

Interview: Gérard Mayen