

Current Dance Works, 2013-2015 season

## **“Requiem”: Tanzcompagnie Konzert Theater Bern / Nanine Linning**

### **Taking the dancers seriously**

*Estefania Miranda, Tanzcompagnie Konzert Theater Bern loves to tell stories. Where does that passion come from?*

The love of telling stories is undoubtedly linked to my artistic background. I never wanted to do ballet or become a ballerina: I studied dance theatre in the Netherlands. I worked as a dancer for a number of years and then switched to theatre. I just felt I wanted to use my head a bit more. It seemed to me that dance often lacked that. I think dance should be able to reflect our reality – something that’s long been a given in other disciplines.

*These days you’re tackling more stories from the past. You’re currently working on “Romeo and Juliet”; before it was “The Castle” after Kafka, “Othello”, “Frankenstein”...*

The good thing about all those stories is that the audience knows them, which means it’s much easier to go into them in depth than it would be with unfamiliar material. You can assume the audience know the basics, which means you don’t have to spend too long at the narrative level. That allows you to tease out certain nuances, the choreographer’s own perspective or an alternative reading much more precisely.

*Doesn’t modern theatre work in a similar way, increasingly offering associative spaces rather than narrative patterns?*

Absolutely. I like that a lot. But there’s a fundamental difference between dance and theatre. Dance has far more resources at its disposal than just language. That means it can also touch areas of understanding which theatre cannot reach.

*With the help of music, for instance?*

That too. Perhaps my way of working with music is a bit unusual, because in rehearsals I start out very much from the tempi that the dancers themselves propose in the individual sequences. They know their figures, they know the theme, they bring their own associations to the substance we create material from. Initially and intuitively, that opens up a physical space that I leave to the dancers and can now shape through composition. The process is conducted either entirely without music or just using rehearsal music. Jeroen Strijbos & Rob van Rijswijk, the duo of composers I’ve worked with a lot over recent years, only come in once that stage has been completed, and then they literally write the music on the bodies of the dancers and the

choreography. The music emerges from the material of the dance rather than the other way round; it doesn't dictate to the dance in any way.

*So the company stands at the centre, and indeed that's one reason why the Swiss Dance Award goes to all 19 dancers.*

Well, there aren't normally quite as many dancers as that. We had that number in the last season, when we produced Nanine Linning's "Requiem". Actually we have twelve on firm contracts, and they are joined by four to five pupils and occasionally guests. That line-up gives us a full complement. When I started two years ago I had so much drive and motivation and so many ideas I wanted to realise, and now there I was with the chance to try out a whole range of formats which then communicated with the audience in as many different ways. We went into museums, for example. We established the "Laboratoire Suisse de la danse" (LSD) impro series that takes place four to six times a year. There's the Tanzplattform Bern, a festival that was partly created for the young choreographers in our company. Of course that's a lot, and it's why I want to cut my hours down a little, because you can't really sustain that long-term.

*Because of exhaustion, or because the audience doesn't always go along with you?*

Our audience has responded to us very well. Attendance figures are excellent, though the Tanzplattform Bern is undoubtedly still the format with the greatest development potential. It is one place you can really see the strong bond that the people of Bern feel with their own ensemble: they follow our dancers' development into young choreographers with great interest. And that in turn gives us the scope to present guest companies more often.

*Bern offers a remarkably large amount of space for other choreographers, such as Nanine Linning and Felix Landerer. Why not a bit more Estefania Miranda?*

This is my first post as director of a dance company. Before I came here I thought about what is important to me, especially given my experience as a dancer. All I did was take seriously the view I had back then. As a dancer I've always asked myself: why should I follow just one choreographer or one style? If I'm a member of an ensemble, can't I also choreograph or contribute in another way? I chose Bern because here, as well as working as a choreographer, I have the opportunity to build an infrastructure, to establish creative spaces and a working environment in which as many as possible of the artists I find exciting can be given room to produce their best work and develop artistically. I'm talking not just about choreographers that I invite but also the dancers, who can evolve as performers and artists up the point where they create their own choreographies.

*You were director of the Weimar dance festival in 2011 and 2012. How much of a role has that experience played?*

Being artistic director and production director in Weimar is of course an experience that's come in extremely useful here; especially as I set up the festival in Weimar myself, which meant I first had to make it structurally and financially possible. That gives me the courage to devise new structures here too.

*In Weimar there were choreographers such as Ismael Ivo and directing demigods like George Tabori. Given that urge to go your own way, did you also rebel against the old masters?*

I'd been rebellious before I went to Weimar and joined Ismael Ivo's company. I never wanted to conform to the old structures, or shoehorn myself into categories such as modern dance or new dance, which were outdated even in my time; I wanted to do work that was socially and politically relevant. That was my main focus, and I was fortunate to be there at a time when the political element of theatre was still strong.

*Is it no longer possible to make political statements, then?*

Sure, naturally, of course. That is part of my responsibility. Not just in terms of how I go about expressing themes artistically, but also as regards the structures that I can help shape in order to enable art, including political art.

*As in the "next generation" format?*

Yes, because it's a format that arose out of this feeling of responsibility, to give dancers the opportunity to develop their own choreographic works. Of course something like that also exists in other companies. But my experience is that all too often, many of the "young choreographer" evenings that come out of the ensemble itself don't receive much guidance or professional support. Frequently the evenings are just set up because they don't generate any extra costs and because the dancers are so keen to create their own works that they are prepared to give up their leisure time and so don't disrupt the day-to-day operations of the theatre. I wanted to change that. Naturally we have criteria – the same criteria I use when selecting the artists we work with. There is only space for three or four productions in a season. The condition is that our dancers must be able to explain in advance what they want to do with their choreographies and why. Everything is then decided at the start of the season, along with all the details such as rehearsal plans and conceptual work; and it's all done during normal working hours and under professional employment conditions together with the set designers, costume designers and assistants that a theatre needs anyway to operate at a certain level. The result must always maintain a balance with the rest of what we are producing. That's what it's all about: taking the dancers seriously as choreographers, however little experience they've had.

Interview: Arnd Wesemann