

Current Dance work Saison 2013-2015

«souffle»: Da Motus! / Brigitte Meuwly & Antonio Bühler

«An organic realm of the body and senses»

Esther Sutter: Your award-winning work is called “souffle”. It’s a piece for the stage. How did it come about, and what are the ideas behind it?

Brigitte Meuwly and Antonio Bühler: The Chamber Choir Zeugma asked us to develop a choreography that explores the tension between the song and choir tradition of Fribourg, with its spiritual roots, and contemporary dance, in which the physical dominates. What links the two together in the piece – the common denominator – is the breath (“souffle” in French). The spiritual and celestial character of song comes up against the sensual, earthly quality of dance.

How did you come to dance?

When we started out, we simply wanted to act artistically, to engage creatively with the themes that were important to us and touched us. And express our response to them in an unfettered way.

Did you have any role models – which teachers were important to you?

Someone who undoubtedly influenced us was Trisha Brown – the way she handled everyday movement, the choreographic strategies that she developed in the 1960s and 70s with the postmodern dance movement and New York’s Judson dance movement.

Simone Forti was also part of her circle. She was important to us as a teacher, as were Alwin Nikolais, Robert Small and Eiko and Koma.

What first motivated you when you started dancing?

We soon came to focus on the environment and ecology, not so much as political action but rather as artistic engagement, though undoubtedly still with political ideas behind it.

You’ve achieved lasting success worldwide with your site-specific choreographies. How do you develop a theme from a specific place? And how do you then adapt it to all the different places where you perform?

The key factors are always the history, architecture, construction elements, atmosphere and mood of a place.

But you keep coming back to nature for inspiration.

Yes, we derive a lot from the observation of nature. The living plasticity of the plant world, the watchful and focused movements of animals, and the subtle and delicate exchange in human interrelationships stimulate and influence the whole company's physical language.

What role do the experiences from your interventions in the public space play in the genesis of your stage works?

They give us a lot of ideas that are less able to germinate on a smooth stage surface in a closed, usually dark room. The irregularities and wide variety of conditions that pervade in all the different locations require presence, playful spontaneity, awareness – and of course intensity. We aim for the functional and avoid the decorative – and that applies to our stage performances too.

DA MOTUS! is part of the founding generation of contemporary dance in Switzerland. How were things back when you started in 1987?

It was basically a desert, with just a few strongholds of academic dance. We literally battled our way from one waterhole to the next on all fours.

What kept us going was a lot of motivation, enthusiasm, a strong passion and an unconditional desire to discover and explore what was different and new, a dose of youthful rebelliousness – and of course perseverance.

The Canton of Fribourg is especially committed to contemporary dance. How did it contribute to the development of your company and its audience?

The support came slowly but steadily; without backing from the Canton we couldn't have done things the way we did. We're very grateful for that. We would like to have seen more commitment over the last decade. Fribourg is a centre of music and theatre. Contemporary dance is still lagging some way behind.

What is a typical day like for you?

When we're working on a new production, we're on the go from early in the morning till late at night. Outside those periods, we do yoga and qi gong in the morning, then deal with company admin and, if the weather permits, we work in our garden – even there, though, we pay attention to sequences and quality of movement. Physical work in the garden also throws up ideas for choreography.

And what do you do when the working day is finished?

We don't separate work from leisure so rigidly.

We have a large fruit and vegetable garden that we enjoy looking after. It grounds us, and also allows us to enjoy what we grow ourselves – there's no comparison with what you buy in the shops.

How have the intercultural experiences from your extended foreign tours flowed into your work? You've already been to 44 countries.

The feedback we get from other cultures is constantly making us aware of things we'd known nothing about. In Beijing, for example, an elderly lady came up to us after our performance of "change" (which examines our relationship to transformation). She was agitated and crying and she told us how, throughout the performance, the various stages of her life and the many upheavals China has undergone had passed before her eyes. In Bogotá, younger audience members told us how the performance of "con tatto" had moved them and given them confidence and hope in a land plagued by violence.

I think we can fairly say that our tours have given us many unique experiences and sensations.

What importance do yoga and qi gong have in your choreographic research?

Awareness is a fundamental theme in both disciplines, and we try to develop that awareness in our productions as well. Above all, yoga has a spiritual side that affects the way we live and think, and that we want to flourish in our attitude to life.

Improvisation has been an important element of your work from the outset, and you've developed all kinds of criteria and strategies for it.

Improvisation allows us to get to the essence of movement. It awakens intensity and presence deep within our bodies. Free research gives our instinct, intuition and reflexes a chance to speak. When we develop an idea or theme together with the dancers, we restrict the improvisation criteria more and more until we arrive at what we are looking for. The difficult thing is reproducing those precious and intense moments afterwards and making them flow choreographically.

As choreographers, what do you expect of your dancers?

Our works are always collaborative efforts. So the interpersonal aspect has to be right too; it's not just down to technical skill. It's easier and more enjoyable to work with nice people who treat each other with respect. We look for technically accomplished dancers who are not "format-bound" but who can move in all kinds of ways – all-terrain, as it were. Ultimately, our dancers embody our ideas. It would be a waste not to take account of their creativity.

We also appreciate a degree of maturity.

To sum up then, what have been the most important waypoints on the journey of DA MOTUS!?

What does winning a Swiss dance award mean to you personally and your company?

We were over the moon. You often have doubts, and recognition gives you confidence...

And what do the Swiss Dance Awards mean for dance generally?

For a brief period, it means there is more coverage of dance in Switzerland. That is vital if artistic dance is really to take root in our society. It's important for the award-winning works to be shown more widely. The award presentation on its own isn't enough.

Looking to the future: where could and should the Swiss dance scene go from here? What specifically does the country need?

More performances and more venues would increase the visibility of dance. What we've noticed is that the organisers of the major dance centres are circumscribing their specific aesthetic ever more narrowly. Good dance should be shown in all its stylistic diversity. That would also appeal to a wider audience.

Dance is attracting increasing attention in Switzerland – is that true, do you sense that?

If we look back to where we started from, that's undoubtedly true.

Interview: Esther Sutter