

Special Dance Award 2017

## **AiEP Avventure in Elicottero Prodotti**

**“We try to go beyond the accepted rules.”**

*Ariella Vidach, how did you get into dance?*

I started out in dance in a fairly unconventional way at the end of the 1970s. I wasn't interested in choreography, and the dance shows I'd seen seemed anachronistic and uninteresting. On the other hand, I was very much drawn to cinema, literature and experimental theatre. My points of reference were Grotowski, Gordon Craig, Brook, Barba, Bene, and Barberio Corsetti who set up the Gaia Scienza group. What interested me about them was the way they developed a scenographic style that was innovative, non-narrative, free from any attempt at spectacular representation and that gave equal prominence to space, movement and the image. On the advice of Giorgio Barberio Corsetti I attended a dance seminar organised by Jeb Shawn, an American living in Rome who was a pupil of Steve Paxton. The dance was contact improvisation.

*Claudio Prati, you initially trained as a gymnast. What made you switch from the gym to dance?*

That's right, I took a diploma in gymnastics and sport at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. Then I studied sculpture at the Brera Academy of Fine Art and attended mime and performance classes at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan. I've always been interested in movement as a performative tool and the potential links between the arts. Between 1986 and 1988 I attended courses in video art and special project mixed media at the University of New York. I also took classes in contact improvisation at Movement Research and PS122. That's where I encountered the technique of Alwin Nikolais. And in New York, I danced in some performances by the choreographers Elisabeth Streb and Yoshiko Chuma.

*You both came to dance via contact improvisation. Claudio, which teachers influenced you?*

Daniel Lepkoff, David Zambrano and Nancy Stark Smith.

*And you, Ariella?*

I've been very much inspired by the teachings of Dana Reitz and Steve Paxton. But I also owe a lot to Joel Dabin, my classical tutor for seven years in New York.

*What did you get from that classical teaching?*

Joel Dabin taught me the fundamental principles of classical dance – principles that have been essential to all the other dance techniques which have come after them. I can never thank him enough! Sadly he died of AIDS in the late 1980s, like many other artists.

*Claudio, how did you two meet?*

We met during a contact improvisation jam at Eden's Expressway on Broadway in 1986.

*How do you complement each other in your work?*

Ariella has qualities that complement mine. She is pragmatic and finds ways to put our dreams into practice. Without her, our projects would be floating around somewhere in our imaginations. Over time, we've arrived at a sort of working routine. We think together about the company's artistic direction and the creations we're producing. When it comes to the performances, we develop the concept, direction and staging. I focus particularly on the scenographic aspects, while Ariella creates the choreography. We work together on the costumes. The audio material is created together with the composer or sound designer.

*When did you first work together?*

In New York in 1987 on the production of a dance video entitled "*DONT WALK WALK*". In 1988 we created our first live performance, "Remote Control". It was 50 minutes long, with the choreography and the video playing out simultaneously on the stage.

*Which artists are important to you?*

Lots of them, from all kinds of disciplines! Antonin Artaud, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Allan Kaprow, Joseph Beuys, Stelarc, Nam June Paik, Steina & Woody Vasulka, Trisha Brown, Laurie Anderson, Carole Armitage, Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, Matthew Barney, William Forsythe, Ryoji Ikeda... In terms of music, we mainly listen to experimental and radical improvisation: anything from Anthony Braxton to John Zorn, Fred Frith and Rhys Chatam.

*Where do you get your inspiration from?*

The first solos were motivated by a physical impulse which led to the construction of an evolving form. Over time, we explored the potential of technology. We had to find ways to overcome physical and technological limitations, and we found that challenge hugely stimulating! We were more interested in the process than the result; we worked our way around rules and obstacles to establish a relationship with our technological resources. It's a game that's amusing and fascinating, even experimental in terms of the interactive systems and relationships it sets up between human being and machine.

*Is there a thread linking your works together?*

Going beyond the accepted rules.

*What is the best environment for your work to develop?*

An open context that's receptive to experimenting with new ideas and allows for trial and error.

*Are there recurring themes in your work that are important to you?*

The intersections between art, science and technology, of course, and the dichotomies between natural and artificial, real and virtual. We explore all of that through the body.

*How do audiences in Ticino react to your works?*

In general, as in most of the countries where we present our work, the audience in Ticino that follows contemporary dance as a form of artistic experimentation is limited, but attentive and loyal. Our creations have always been well received. The critics are receptive to our innovative ideas with their combination of choreography and new technologies. There's been continuous interest from institutions and the media in Ticino.

*What role do you think your company plays in Ticino?*

We're pioneers. We've laid the groundwork for experimental artistic practices and professionalisation of the sector. But the municipal and cantonal institutions in Ticino don't allocate sufficient financial resources to push ahead with that professionalisation. The number of choreographers and artists in Ticino who can live from their art is far lower than the average for the other Swiss cantons. The reason for that is our municipal and cantonal culture policy, which seems incapable of sustaining agreements on support over a number of years, even for companies that have outreach potential.

*How important is this Special Dance Award to you?*

It's definitely important. It reflects a long period of exploration and experimentation devoted to a topic that's very specific and actually quite unusual but is marginalised and rather dismissed by dance purists. Our company's role now we've received this award will be to fight for the same working conditions in Ticino as the rest of Switzerland. Ticino has to be on a par with its counterparts in other Swiss regions. We also need to avoid a situation where those in Ticino with the most resources steal the limelight while the rest are neglected. In short, what we need is a "Ticino system" linked up to the rest of Switzerland.

*What does dance in Switzerland need most in order to develop?*

We need a soundly based system of promotion with the financial resources to allow artists to keep developing and offering audiences every possible form of choreography: pure and radical experimentation, tradition, entertainment, social or politically committed dance, virtual interactive dancers online. We have to open up multiple perspectives and non-standardised products, foster "biodiversity" in choreography and performance, and encourage intergenerational renewal.

Interview by Anne Davier