

Current Dance Works, 2015–2017 seasons

“Le Récital des Postures”: Yasmine Hugonnet

“Organising porosity”

How did you start dancing?

I started dancing when I came back from Africa where I'd lived from the age of two to five and a half. I followed a very good friend of mine who was attending classes at the Les Sylphides dance school in Montreux with an amazing teacher, Ria Cheseaux. It quickly became somewhere I needed to be in order to work on myself, express myself and think. With Ria I trained in the classical Russian school, which is very muscular and expressive. She wasn't just interested in form and movement: she was very much concerned with expressive engagement, starting at the barre. You had to break free from yourself with a single bound. Then one day Ria told my mother she couldn't help me any more. I went to the Geneva Dance Center under David Allen and Claudine Kamoun, and then when I was thirteen I went to Paris and joined the Académie Chaptal where the forms were of a different hue: the classical French school, which is much more romantic and where everything was less colourful, less flamboyant, and it was all about suggestion and restraint.

At that time, what was it you liked about dance?

With Ria I loved the stage. She rented a theatre each year and from the age of seven I was involved in the process of creation and the big performance itself. Generally speaking, I liked the self-discipline that dance demanded and the feeling of making progress. Every day, at work, you change your body and you change what you can “express” by constantly refining your perception.

Were you already aware of the effects dance could produce within your body? Or were you more concerned with how you looked in the mirror?

The two go together. I don't see a contradiction between the mirror and what you see when you look inside yourself. We are creatures of vision. All the feedback you get, be it visual or aural, goes towards making up what you produce. The mirror is very much not a corrective. It can be a tool for making an inner film of your own dance and giving you immediate visual feedback. There's a moment where you notice an emotion there. Like with a flash, you don't know what it is, but once you've realised that nascent expression can come from within you, you'll start trying to cultivate it. Even today I still use the mirror as a way of understanding how you arrive at a certain colour, to watch the birth of the figures that emanate from a posture.

Are there teachers other than Ria who've influenced you?

Peter Goss is a name that springs to mind. I'm fifteen years old. I'm just about to join the CNR (Conservatoire National de Région) in Paris. And he's the first teacher who teaches me what contemporary dance means. It's really hard: I have to make my body re-learn simple postures such as placing my feet in parallel. A foot injury made

me realise I didn't want to subject my body to violence. I'd chosen to enter the world of contemporary dance which appealed to me ethically. I pretty much wanted to campaign for the freedom to be what you are, to respect the body, to work with natural and kinetic forces. Peter taught me precision of movement through very simple exercises that enable you to organise your attention. I was already working on the chronology of movement. Even today, almost twenty years on, I still come back to his teachings.

Can you tell us about Odile Rouquet, who teaches functional analysis of the body in dance movements? You met her when you joined the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse in Paris.

Odile is a mentor. I was fascinated by the way she incorporates anatomy, philosophy and creation into her approach. She opened my eyes to the way you can learn how to think about movement, and how the way we configure the body map can transform our movements. She has an eye of rare intelligence. It darts around and, when someone's moving, it pinpoints the source of movement somewhere entirely different from where it seems to come from. That's where you find the poetry of dance.

Your writing style is unique. How did it come about?

In layers. The encounter with Odile, then all those years in Taiwan with Maxime Iannarelli, after leaving school, where I arrived with contact dance in my baggage. We improvised and performed a lot, just about anywhere. When I came back to Europe I took a Master in choreography in the Netherlands, researching the notion of presences. I felt I needed to understand better what was going on in my work. It wasn't just about writing the movement, but more the perceptual organisation that creates a kind of presences and relationships to the world. I took modules with Peggy Hackney on analysing Laban's system, which meant I had to explore all the affects and possible qualities of movements. How do you arrive at a style? By refining your choices, your eye and your affects. There was something Peggy Hackney said that particularly interested me and tied in with her own relationship to psychoanalysis: "Let the outside in, let the outside out, let the inside in, let the inside out." As if you could organise your own porosity. After I finished the Master, I met Lisa Nelson in Slovenia. She taught me to understand what I wanted to look at and why. She gave me the strength to go looking for my own appetites and discover what they were.

Could you tell us something about your work today?

It doesn't change and yet, at the same time, it's constantly evolving. For about a decade now, my concerns and practices have been sufficiently well defined to become a river that embraces new tributaries and spreads out in streams. I gave a workshop in Geneva not long ago and for the first time I didn't start with the body or do any physical preparation, I started from the simplest and most essential element of my work: leaving part of yourself in a state of becoming and keeping another part in the present. The process of negotiating the composition of what changes and what doesn't is never-ending. I work on posture as a locus of expression, both as sculpture in space and a way of inhabiting a situation. I invite the audience to be attentive as readers so that, as they observe the language of the bodies, they can explore their own personal etymology of movement.

What activities not directly linked to the studio feed into your practice?

Meditation, discussions with friends, playing with my daughter, reading. At the moment I'm taking a pottery class. It's a dialogue with the clay as material and with movement. And then, when I'm on tour I always try to go for an hour or so's walk before performing. I put myself into a state of contemplation; there are living things, images, things that get inside me and it's important to do that before you end up in the black box that is the set. It's also an opportunity to prepare my voice or run through my texts again.

And music?

I value silence immensely but I also love hip-hop! I've listened to a lot of Debussy, his "Préludes" and the various "Études" that enriched "Le Récital" with their dreamlike and antique character.

Your solo "Le Récital des postures" (2014) has won you a Swiss Dance Award.

It's my first award! I'm delighted about it. I'm thirty-eight years old and I started devising projects when I was eighteen. I take it as a gift, a reward for my career and the work that has matured over many years.

How do you see this award in terms of recognition for choreography?

It's a step in the right direction! When I was young I had to go to France to study dance. Dance wasn't recognised as a profession in Switzerland back then, but recently it's started to find its place within the institutions. The creation of this Federal Award, the first colleges such as Manufacture in Lausanne and lots of other recent measures have allowed dance to really take off in Switzerland and Swiss culture to expand outside the country.

What is your desire for the future?

To find the right balance between the rhythms of my artistic and family commitments. To expand, deepen and anchor the company's work, both the administration and the technical and artistic team. To broaden my scope – I have a deep desire right now to work with other dancers.

Interview by Charlotte Imbault