

Swiss Grand Award for Dance 2017

Noemi Lapzeson

“Dance is about thought, it’s about inventing freedom.”

As an artist, Noemi Lapzeson combined physical intelligence – a blend of intellect and sensuality – with a captivating theatricality. A brilliant teacher whose choreographic language has unquestionably influenced a wide audience, Noemi Lapzeson died in Geneva on 11 January 2018. Marcela San Pedro worked alongside her for twenty years, initially as a pupil, then as a dancer and choreographer. She answers questions from Esther Sutter, and recalls a poetic universe constantly shaped by a quest for excellence.

Marcela San Pedro, you’ve been part of Noemi Lapzeson’s explorations and reflections, as a dancer of course but also through your book “UN CORPS QUI PENSE, Noemi Lapzeson / transmettre en danse contemporaine”.

What was significant about her work? What makes her unique as an artist?

Everything about her life and work is significant. She never did anything by halves; she brought the same application and rigour to every aspect of her existence. I would say that for Noemi, there was almost no difference between form and content. To mention just one remarkable aspect of her career: she was one of the last representatives of a heritage that’s fundamental to and characteristic of the beginnings of contemporary dance, she was at once an outstanding performer, a major choreographer and a great teacher.

At the start of her career, in Argentina and New York, Noemi met some of the great names in dance history, both contemporary and classical, including Frederick Ashton, Alfredo Corvino and José Limon, and she learnt a great deal from them. She then spent twelve years as a dancer with Martha Graham, starting out in the corps de ballet and rising to the position of soloist. She very soon started teaching the Graham technique, though she moved away from it later. The personal poetic universe of her creations was like nothing else, and the same applies to her teaching and way of dancing. Noemi was involved in the three fundamental aspects of contemporary dance practice, which today are very often separated.

In the early 1980s, Noemi Lapzeson creates the independent contemporary dance scene in Geneva. She is behind the foundation of ADC in 1986 and remains a pioneering figure in contemporary dance in Geneva. What were the principal events in that story?

I wasn’t yet in Geneva when Noemi arrived. I can only say that she spoke of that initial period with enthusiasm; everything seemed welcoming, agreeable, possible. Geneva opened its doors to her, and she felt it was a place that could serve as a home base, where she could bring up her daughter Andrea and make a living for

herself doing the only thing she knew how: dancing, choreographing and teaching dance.

It wasn't until later, after she met a series of extraordinary people who one way or another stayed with her for the rest of her life – Carlo Brandt, Jacques Demierre, Philippe Albera, Vincent Barras and others – that she began to create performances, always innovative works for the small scene in Geneva. Later on it was her first pupils, especially Diane Decker and Armand Deladoey, who persuaded her to put on larger works and finally set up her company Vertical Danse.

You joined Vertical Danse in 1996. As a dancer, what artistic qualities do you believe were important to Noemi Lapzeson the choreographer and teacher?

I had my first experience of positive dance teaching with Noemi. I'd come from the Folkwang Academy in Essen, where the teaching method tended to focus on the negative aspects of the pupil. It was a marvellous school, with its heritage of Joss/Leeder and then Bausch, but it was also very tough. Noemi was the first to encourage me in a simple and clear way, without equivocation. Attending her dance classes – which were very well thought out, it seemed to me – over a long period helped my body to absorb things that were difficult to grasp and ultimately helped me to become a choreographer myself.

I was one of her performers: not the only one, I'm part of a group of dancers including Diane Decker, Vanessa Maffe, Romina Pedroli, Diana Lambert, Raphaële Teicher and Marthe Krummenacher who were fortunate enough to work and progress with Noemi and to be the bearers of her dance, which was often inspired by each of us.

Being a member of that group was remarkably good luck, because I learned works like "Un Instant" and "Traces" ("There is another shore, you know"), solos that are emblematic of Noemi, as well as "Amours Baroques", which I hadn't created. So I had to learn her signature style, the choreography she'd created and danced with her own body, which was inseparable from her soul.

Then I also had the chance to share some very intense creative experiences within the company, some solos where it was almost like having a made-to-measure haute couture dress designed for you, or group works where Noemi invited us into her universe, which was sometimes very unfamiliar territory. It was with her that I learned to trust the creative artist. I learned to be a kind of instrument, but I know that she took a huge amount of inspiration from her dancers. For her, we were first and foremost people, with our own stories, backgrounds, strengths and weaknesses.

How would you describe the thread running through Noemi's choreographic work?

I'd say the main thread linking her works together is an exploration of her own inner self, which was always about the pursuit of excellence. Questions of meaning, both big and small, things that evade your grasp as soon as you try to pin them down, but that have an impact on us – that's poetry, isn't it?

Noemi was a great teacher who, apart from training virtually the entire first generation of dancers and dancer-choreographers in French-speaking Switzerland, also brought together a vast audience of dance lovers and converted them to contemporary dance. What was she setting out to do when she developed her lessons and her expectations?

During conversations we had for the book I was writing about her, we spoke a lot about teaching. I wanted to know the whys and wherefores of various things. Noemi's answer was always the same: "I taught because it was the only way I knew to earn a living and bring up my daughter." The thread throughout was extremely high expectations applied to every aspect of her life: teaching, choreographing, dancing, reading, the people she associated with, the places she went, the places she lived, what she ate.

The fact that she mixed professionals and amateurs in her classes wasn't design, it just happened that way. So you could argue that in a way she acted as a kind of mediator, drawing an audience towards contemporary dance. She helped a lot of young dancers turn professional or create works of their own.

What was the political and philosophical dimension of Noemi Lapzeson the choreographer and teacher?

I'd love to ask her that question! Sadly it's too late now. I can only offer my own personal interpretation, and I'd hazard a response that is very much to do with poetry: Noemi was never about pamphlets, there were never any provocative or crude statements. With her there's always an elevation to the poetic that people may or may not be sensitive to.

For me, opting for poetry is a political act without a campaign poster, a way of standing up to a world in which everything becomes a slogan, number or category. Noemi resisted that all her life.

Your book "UN CORPS QUI PENSE" is an important record of the artistic heritage of Noemi Lapzeson. How has it been received by dance institutions in Switzerland, schools of dance, universities and the Swiss Dance Collection?

I produced the book almost against Noemi's wishes; she couldn't see who would find it interesting. I wrote it because I felt it was necessary to collate the fragments of information I'd assembled over 20 years of working with her. For me, it was a way of keeping a record and sharing what I'd received. I also wanted to take an interest in her while she was still alive, rather than wait until she had passed away to say how important she was, not just to me but to a lot of dancers, both amateur and professional.

So far it hasn't led to any meetings, exchanges or indications of greater interest. That's a bit of a shame. I'd like Noemi to have been invited to talk about her experience at the dance universities, for example.

You also took part in Nicolas Wagnières' documentary on the teaching of Noemi Lapzeson, which comes out this year.

It's an archive film with the working title "A la recherche des pas trouvés". The aim is to create a really useful tool for anyone who's interested in contemporary dance teaching, a work of reference on what Noemi did to train and educate a "body that thinks".

The film was shot in September 2015 with Noemi; we filmed all the exercises and variations we managed to recover from our memories and bodies. We took particular care over the image and sound quality.

Noemi Lapzeson died on 11 January 2018. She often said "dance is about thought, it's about inventing freedom". How can that vital work of transmitting dance be continued, and how can we conserve that rich heritage?

Dance is a living experience. We'll keep and we'll certainly be able to watch films about Noemi, her conversations, the interpretations of her choreographies. We'll even be able to see her teaching in our film. But none of that will ever replace her presence, the living act of dancing for her or with her, seeing and hearing her or watching one of her works.

So what's left? Archives that play a humble but vital role in conserving evidence of the past in order to share it and bring it to life as far as possible, and make young dancers aware of the history of dance and the people who forged it.

The living, active testimony that all of us, her pupils, dancers, artistic collaborators and friends carry within us and can pass on.

The rest is silence.

Interview by Esther Sutter