

Outstanding Female Dancer 2017

**Tamara Bacci**

**“I need to put myself in danger.”**

*Tamara Bacci, you've been named “Outstanding Female Dancer”. What's your first reaction?*

I'm touched. All those years we spent fighting have finally paid off!

We?

I see myself more as someone who is in service of the works. Creativity is always a collective process. And my journey is also the journey of everyone who's been with me along the way and helped me to develop.

*This award comes at a special time for you: you're creating your first choreography, the solo “Sull'ultimo movimento”, which some are seeing as your farewell to dance.*

I've experienced many endings in my life: my collaboration with the choreographer and dancer Cindy Van Acker, the death of my mother, before that the death of my boyfriend. I've become interested in the idea of the final movement. I've started thinking about the end of my dancing career. My physical capacities aren't what they used to be. So I decided I wanted to embark on this final gesture and make it into something meaningful.

*Is it a way of bequeathing a final portrait of yourself to the public?*

No. I'm doing it for myself. I find it calming. And every ending opens the door to something else. I also wanted to tell people about the importance of endings and the need to anticipate and prepare for them.

*“Sull'ultimo movimento” brings together some key moments from your career. It also includes some very personal passages. Was it especially difficult to create and perform?*

It starts with the final beat of my mother's heart. She had a sudden heart attack. It's a final gesture, a final movement of her body. I realised that everything I'd danced during my career necessarily resonated with my life. In rehearsals it was difficult because I was delving into my emotions, into the past. It was almost like a kind of psychotherapy. As the performances went on, I learned to detach myself from it.

*You've said: “Choreographers have used me a lot for my technique and virtuosity. From now on I want a kind of freedom and tranquillity, I want to let go. I just want to enjoy dancing.”*

I like perfection; I don't like to fail. I put myself under a huge amount of pressure. When there were sections that were very difficult to dance, I used to let myself be afraid. That takes all the pleasure out of it. Today I tell myself that failing is fine too. You learn something from it.

*You teach dance at Manufacture and the Ballet Junior. What kind of teacher are you?*

I'm very demanding. I also teach my pupils to listen to themselves, not to put their bodies through too much suffering, not to overdo things in order to please their teacher or choreographer. I want them to be aware of the demands of their profession.

*That brings me to something else you said, back in 2007: "Dancers are exploited and never listened to."*

The way things are done is old-fashioned, with dancers making themselves totally available. Take an example from the opera: the orchestra stops rehearsing on the dot. Not the dancers. Never. It's your first part. You injure yourself. You keep your mouth shut and just carry on. Today in Switzerland, a contemporary dancer earns 5,500 francs gross a month at best. That's not much reward for the ten years of apprenticeship and the long working hours.

*The dancer and choreographer Noemi Lapzeson, who won the Grand Award for Dance in 2017, was in great pain. Rather than end her days paralysed, she chose to take her own life. What do you take from the fate of an artist who was a key figure in Swiss contemporary dance?*

We talked about the pain she was in and I found those discussions quite alarming, given how hard I like to push my body. Dance cannot be the only thing in your life. Even physically. If your body hurts you can't just put it down like a musical instrument.

*In 2015's "Duo" you actually speak on stage too. Like an actor.*

I need to put myself in danger, to express things through different art forms. It was the same in 2009 when I was working with the scenographer Pascal Rambert on his "Knockin' on Heaven's Door". During the first rehearsals I was completely at a loss. I was forced to find my vocabulary from somewhere else and I really liked that. In 2013 there was "Laissez-moi danser", which I devised with Marthe Krummenacher and Perrine Valli. There we asked ourselves what it means to be a dancer.

*And what was it like playing Pina Bausch on a theatre stage?*

It was fantastic! It took me right back to the start of my career. I always wanted to go to Pina Bausch. I was very touched by the invitation from the scenographer, Mathieu Bertholet. The most important thing in that project was to be sincere, to explore the truth of what you wanted to put across.

*You worked for eleven years with choreographer and dancer Cindy Van Acker in her Greffe company. Does that leave a permanent mark on your physique and language of movement?*

Even after I stopped working with Cindy, my work with other choreographers still bore the imprint of that geometry and sense of lines. I kept trying to cast off this garment but my body insisted on getting ahead of me. I'm very happy to have had that experience. Cindy is very demanding but she's also a very good listener. I'm proud of what I did. When I saw "Fractie" for the first time in the early 2000s I said to myself: that's what I want to do. That work is just so right!

*You talk about a garment. When you started working with Cindy Van Acker, you were wearing something very different: the outfit of the Linga company, which was set up by two former dancers of Maurice Béjart; and then you were part of the Béjart Ballet Lausanne in the late 1980s.*

Between Linga, which I left when I was 28, and Cindy Van Acker there was a four-year gap in my dancing. I came back to it through teaching, and then working with Thomas Lebrun, and doing neo-classical with Ken Ossola. Foofwa d'Immobilitéé gave me a radical introduction to contemporary, which appealed to me. I left my previous world completely behind, though once I managed to fail an audition with Gilles Jobin who felt I was still too neo-classical. I got together with him later, in 2007 for the revival of "Moebius Strip".

*What music do you listen to when you aren't dancing?*

Classical! It speaks to me deep down; I find it calming. And so does the complete opposite: experimental electronic music like Pan Sonic and Mika Vainio, who worked with Cindy Van Acker.

*Jumping back in time: when you push open the door of the Royal Academy of Dance in Geneva, you are seven years old. Out of convention or out of passion?*

My mother wanted me to look after myself and not hang around the streets. She loved classical dance but never imagined I'd make a career of it. I wasn't perfect, I took longer than the others to memorise the steps. Later on I discovered the pleasure of trying over and over again, being disciplined. Right up to the day when I opened the door of Béatriz Consuelo's dance school and the Ballet Junior. I was motivated by a love of dance and a desire to be with my friends.

*And what friends they were: Sarah Ludi, Anja Schmidt, Prisca Harsch, Gilles Jobin, Foofwa d'Immobilitéé, Ken Ossola, Patrice Delay – every single one made a career in dance. It's quite a list!*

We all helped to lift each other up. There was a great camaraderie. And then there was the iron discipline of Beatriz Consuelo.

*Then at seventeen you're at the Deutsche Oper Berlin...*

That decision was down to my teacher. She told me to go and audition in Berlin so off I went. I was very proud. In an opera company you don't just dance classical, and I began to figure out what I liked and what I didn't.

*Why did you come back to Switzerland and Maurice Béjart?*

I found a letter to my mother from back then where I wrote: "I'm dancing, I'm happy, but soon I'll come back here to start a family and take up a 'real' profession." When my boyfriend died suddenly in Israel while the Berlin Opera was on tour there, I didn't want to stay with that ballet any more. Maurice Béjart had brought the "Firebird" and the "Rite of Spring" to the Berlin Opera. Following that drama I contacted him again and stayed with him for two years, until the day I emerged from the fog of sadness.

*Can you dance well when you are sad?*

Yes. You have to channel all your mental tension through the body. You forget the sadness. It's actually soothing to dance like that.

*In 1999 you left Linga and went off to India.*

I'd had enough. I was exhausted and felt I was having to live up to an image that was foreign to me. I wanted to try out a real profession, to feel I was doing something useful. I did triathlon to make up for the dancing. For three years I gave dance a wide berth – and then it came back. Teaching it to amateurs helped me reconnect.

*Here we are in 2018. What's your view of dance now: is it a real profession?*

Yes.

Interview by Thierry Sartoretti