

Current Dance Works, 2015–2017 seasons

“iFeel3”: *MELK Prod./Marco Berrettini

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What does the “Current Dance Works” Swiss Dance Award for 2015–2017 mean to you?

When I heard the news, my first thought was of my daughter. It was nice to think she might be pleased with her dad. Then I thought of my father, who still lives in Italy. When I was young, he was very dubious about my decision to go into dance. I’m happy that he can be proud of his son. Dance can be a profession just like any other.

The Swiss Dance Awards presentation was in October 2017 at the Théâtre Équilibre in Fribourg. I’ve never experienced stage fright like it. On set I’ll happily do all manner of things, but at official ceremonies it’s a completely different matter. So there I am: I haven’t prepared a speech. Someone introduces me in Italian. I figure it could be interesting to start off speaking Italian too. But there are a lot of my French-speaking friends in the room, and a lot of German-speaking Swiss in Pro Helvetia and the FOC. I finish my speech in Italian by saying “I’d like to thank the FOC for the 25,000 euros”. Then I translate into French, but when it comes to the prize money, I don’t know what comes over me but I say 35,000 euros. I start again in German and now the prize has risen to 50,000 euros. Everyone in the room burst out laughing. You could see it as a commentary on the power imbalances between the three linguistic communities. In spite of myself I’d made a humorous speech that was highly political, though that wasn’t what I’d set out to do.

How would you describe your career as an artist? What have been the most important milestones?

I’d divide it into two periods. In the first I’m practising second-generation dance theatre. (Pina Bausch and Reinhild Hoffmann established the first generation.) It begins in 1988 and ends in 2006, so it lasts almost twenty years. I’m constantly questioning my chosen profession, but in a humorous way: what does it mean to be an artist, a dancer, in a contemporary dance company? *No Paraderan* (2004), for example, reprises *Parade*, the famous ballet of 1917 that was an idea by Jean Cocteau for the Ballets Russes, with choreography by Léonide Massine, music by Erik Satie, and sets and costumes by Pablo Picasso. The title can be translated as *They shall not parade*. What does the audience expect to see? Picasso had his procession of managers disguised as horses.

You created Emil Sturmwetter, who’s an important character for you. He appears in three works: “Je m’appelle Emil Sturmwetter” (1994), “Le procès d’Emil Sturmwetter” (1998), and “Emil Sturmwetter prépare l’an d’Emil” (1999). He doesn’t obviously seem to question the artist’s profession.

He's a total moron. He's seen things on television and he gets them mixed up. I'm critiquing the prevailing media culture. Initially, Sturmwetter wasn't conceived for theatres. It was a performance for a Paris discotheque as part of La soirée du meurtre, with around thirty invited artists. I wrote the text on the plane. I turned up with a synthesiser, read the text and at the end I danced, sharing the stage with a rock group. Two programme organisers asked me to do it in a theatre.

The second period is more difficult to describe. It's based more on movement. It's an attempt to blend European influences (Georges Appaix, Jérôme Bel and Dominique Bagouet from France, Hans van Manen from the Netherlands and Pina Bausch from Germany) with American (George Balanchine, Bob Fosse and Meredith Monk).

I take essays and then try to turn them into a performance. In "Si, Viaggiare" (2011), there are references to Georges Gurdjieff's "Meetings with Remarkable Men"; "iFeel" (2009) draws on "Rage and Time" by the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk; in "iFeel2" (2012) there's "Of Pandas and People" by Percival Davis and Dean H. Kenyon; "iFeel3" (2016) has Ayn Rand's "Atlas Shrugged" and "iFeel4" (2017) has "You Must Change Your Life" by Peter Sloterdijk. Other influences include the English writer Rupert Sheldrake, the American James Hillman and Jiddu Krishnamurti from India. For my most recent creation "My soul is my visa", which was presented this year, I used the "Red Book" by the psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung.

As well as popular and contemporary dance, you're also interested in classical. On the face of it, that seems astonishing.

It's a total mystery. I start off with disco dancing, where I win a few competitions, and ballroom dancing. I'm advised to improve my technique by doing jazz dance, since disco dancing isn't felt to be up to the job. My teacher recommends trying out modern and classical dance to develop my body. Quite by chance, it turns out that the classical dance school I've signed up to belongs to the ballet master of the Wiesbaden Ballet. I'm the only boy in the class. He asks me to join lessons with the troupe, which is made up of around forty dancers. At the time, Germany was employing a lot of American dancers. I discovered the work of John Cranko, John Neumeier and the Bolshoi Ballet. In the ballroom dancing school I've joined I organise choreographies for gala evenings for around thirty pupils. I discover American musical comedies on TV. I figure there are things I can take from classical dance: you can pinch choreographic forms from it and re-inject them into a jazz group.

Not the body states of classical dance?

No, the form. And after I left Pina Bausch I was a classical dancer for two years in Wiesbaden. I had to do something for a living. Classical dance is an aristocratic and political system that needs to be done away with. It's part of a bourgeois, elitist system. It's not about the dance as such but the thinking of a stratum of society.

What about your fascination with Balanchine (1904–1983) and the Ballet Cullberg (founded in 1967)?

When Balanchine died I asked myself how I could carry on. My journey has been much closer to Pina Bausch than Balanchine, but Balanchine feeds into my work more than Pina. That isn't to take anything away from Pina's genius. I'm constantly dipping into Balanchine's ballets: the way he organises the duration of the choreographic forms in relation to the music is amazing.

How do you mean?

In Robert Schumann's "Davidsbündlertänze" ("Dances of the League of David", 1980) choreographed by Balanchine to music by Schumann, there's so much skill in the detail, it's a real fount of inspiration. Even Pina, in my view, took things from the classics. She worked for a while in the United States. As I see it, she has far fewer hang-ups about classical dance than many choreographers. She did it with brilliance, nonchalance and discretion. There's an enormous heritage of classical dance in Pina and yet she was never really interviewed about it because she was the creator of the Tanztheater.

So you can take what you want from classical dance without the burden of its values?

That's an important question (*silence*). No. Inevitably there are values that come through. On the other hand, I find it easier to access the form in Balanchine than in Pina. You can take things from Pina, but because Balanchine offers a more abstract art you have the feeling that you can access it more directly. It's like designers revisiting a table or a chair created by a colleague in the 1940s because it's a classic object. For example, when I see Pina Bausch's "The Seven Deadly Sins" (1976) I'm immediately struck by the values: Brecht, Weimar Germany, socialism, Nazism. With Balanchine's "Diamonds" (1967) I don't think of capitalism, I don't think about what became of him in the United States after he left the USSR (in 1933). I don't think about the American dream. Watching the way bodies are organised in space to music by Tchaikovsky is like being slapped round the face.

Interview by Hervé Laval