Current Dance Works, 2015–2017 seasons

“inaudible”: ZOO / Thomas Hauert

“I’d like to see us embrace complexity rather than constantly reducing the scope of what’s possible.”

What does this Dance Award mean to you and the company?

It’s obviously welcome recognition for what we do, and it’s also a sum of money that will come in very useful for ZOO, our company, which is still a small structure. At the same time, I can’t help being slightly sceptical about the idea of competition in the arts world. I wouldn’t want awards for certain sensibilities to obscure the idea that richness lies in diversity.

That idea of plurality comes through in your work, with each body affirming its own uniqueness and each performer seemingly free to interpret as they want.

Creative freedom for dancers is something I believe in deeply and insist on. It’s actually a political conviction that probably comes from my childhood. I grew up in the 1970s in Schnottwil, a small village in the canton of Solothurn, at a time when some “bohemian” types from the city were coming and setting up in the countryside. Two of those families moved in next door to us. One of our neighbours, a teacher, used to sing and paint. The other, who was a sculptor, introduced the village kids to pottery and made Super 8 films with us during our holidays. The joy of creation and the sense that art is accessible to everyone – and not just an elite – made a deep impression on me. Later, in the 1980s, when I was at college studying to be a teacher, I discovered the anti-authoritarian principles drawn from the Steiner school and the “new games” – games that were alternative and collaborative. That slightly anarchic spirit of working together was how I chose to construct myself.

Does that explain the playful aspect of your choreographic work?

Yes, absolutely, and my method of teaching is based on it too. I set the parameters for the dancers and allow them to enjoy being inventive: my work is based on principles rather than forms. It can seem like a game sometimes. In any event, the idea is to create freely rather than recreate forms that already exist.

How do you develop the vocabulary, the score of available movements to structure your improvisations?

The particular thing about our company is that we’ve already done a lot of exploring together. Over the years, what we’ve discovered – and what I teach – is a series of tools for getting rid of ingrained habits. Unless you compel it to look elsewhere, the body intuitively follows the patterns it knows. We tried to break away from that with our very first creation, “Cows in Space”. Sarah, Samantha, Mark and I had just left Rosas, and our bodies were full of the habits we’d picked up there. To avoid reproducing them, we invented ways of allowing the body to open up to its full potential. All articulations allow for a certain latitude of movement, so what you need to do is identify them and then the possibilities are limitless. We devoted a lot of effort

to inventing movements and then, as we progressed from one project to the next, we invented structures, and group composition systems, and so on. Our common history created our vocabulary and still invents it today.

So what your dancers do is create rather than just perform?

Yes, they're very much creators, and I've been pushing that idea since we started out, but programme organisers and journalists aren't particularly interested in getting the message across. People often prefer to reduce everything to a name. In our company, we've shared the copyrights ever since our first project. It's a symbolic gesture to underline that I'm not the sole author of our shows.

How did dance enter your life?

When I was five, my parents took my sister and me to see "Holiday on Ice" in Bern. I was completely blown away by it. From that day on, I started dancing on my own in the living room. Because I didn't want anyone to see me I closed all the doors and made it up as I went along. I carried on like that until I was a teenager.

Is that maybe where your taste for improvised dance comes from?

I think so, yes. Definitely. And it also influences my teaching. When I first started studying dance it was a big shock. Studying more formal and traditional dance was an unsettling experience; I suddenly felt as though I no longer knew how to do anything. I came round to it in the end but even now that isn't what dance means to me. That's why I allow the movements on stage to be improvised. The complexity and richness that emerges when every articulation can change at any moment is impossible to pin down. And when you try, not only is it boring but you start making choices and sacrificing complexity. I prefer to let it appear and exist. I don't object in principle to pinning things down, but you lose some of the subtlety and quality of the dance if you do.

What, in your view, makes for a quality dance?

It's more to do with sensations than words, but I'd say you have to experience a constant sensitivity and musicality in your body: an "order" that can be harmonious or discordant. In music there is a continuum of sounds, with an "order" and relationships between things, an artifice that makes it music rather than noise. It's similar in the body: there's the everyday movement and then there's another order that isn't functional but creates an aesthetic distinct from the routine. Dance is about awareness, or intuition, of the potential richness in variations of forms, textures, rhythms, the relationship with space, and so on. I think quality comes about when the balance between what the body in motion feels and expresses is right.

You've done a lot of teaching and since 2014 you've taught the Bachelor in contemporary dance at Manufacture in Lausanne. What do you think is important to get across to artists of the future?

Above all else, the pleasure of discovery and creativity. There are techniques and methods you can learn, but what matters is creativity. Idiosyncratic expression rather than the official historical canons of the dominant European art and culture. What I want to get across is confidence in that idiosyncratic creativity. And also a form of

sensitive sensuality. I'd like the dancers of the future to discover the pleasure of working with their bodies and be able to take ownership of their freedom to create their own area of activity, their own formats, without having to bend to the canons of contemporary dance. I hope that then they will find new audiences, new ways to communicate the pleasure of dance.

ZOO is celebrating its 20th birthday. What can we wish you for the next 20 years?

It'll sound corny and clichéd, but what I'd most like to see is more harmony in society. That's really what's bothering me at the moment. I'm profoundly affected by the meanness that comes from the endless search for profit and competition. At every level. That also applies to the world of art. I'd like this little world to become a bit more porous, to open up to the plurality of forms. I'm convinced, for example, that dance can help to change our relationships to the body and sexuality, which are still problematic in our society. The body can be such a vehicle for pleasure. I'd like it to be allowed its creativity and freedom, and not subjected to the standardisation that reduces everything, in the arts and elsewhere. I'd like to see us embrace complexity rather than constantly reducing the scope of what's possible.

Interview by François Gremaud