

Current Dance Works, 2017–2019

Cindy Van Acker / Cie Greffe: “Speechless Voices”

“When it comes down to it that’s all there is: resistance, political engagement of the body and mind. Against convenience, commerce, convention and the conventional.”

What are your first memories of dance?

As a child I lived in Gistel, a small town near Ostend, and I started taking classical dance lessons when I was around six years old. They were held in a room hidden away in the basement of the Ostend Casino, facing the sea. I loved that place; it was a world of discovery, freedom and autonomy. For me, the memory of those lessons is also linked to arriving at the Casino via the sea wall, having to lean your body into the wind, and the smells of the sea.

In 2014, when I created “Anechoic” on that vast beach with fifty-three dancers from the Belgian school P.A.R.T.S. during the “Expeditie Dansand” festival, I was really happy to be somehow reconnecting with my very first sensations of dance.

And then when I was twelve I was encouraged to audition for the Royal Ballet School in Anvers. I found myself entering a boarding school that was presented as joining a convent. I think I was looking for something, a place, a breathing space that I didn’t find in everyday life, so that total commitment suited me.

There and then, the teachers told us: you only do contemporary dance when you don’t have the skills for classical. The contemporary came later on, in Geneva, when I left the Ballet du Grand Théâtre and immersed myself in the alternative scene. But it took me around seven years of research and deconstruction to begin to understand what dance and choreography could mean to me.

For many years now, you’ve been living away from your Flemish mother tongue. Is that difficult sometimes?

Every time I go to Belgium I bring books back with me, but they’re just for me to read. It’s been really tough not being able to share with my friends and people I work with. So I was really happy when Tom Lanoye’s “Kartonnen dozen” was finally translated! Not to mention the vast amount of Dutch-language thought on the arts, dance and theatre which is rarely published in French!

It was when I was exploring Nietzsche, on Castellucci’s “Parsifal”, that I realised just how hard the lack of sharing of my country’s literature was. Partly because I was reading the Dutch translation – I’m thinking especially of the magnificent introduction by the poet Hendrik Marsman to “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” – and partly because that philosophy opened up to me a whole dimension of speech that I’d been shielding myself from. Nietzsche freed me from the fear of language. It’s not just that he talks about everything, himself, his health, music, thought, but he also keeps everything constantly moving. I was swept up in his poetry and philosophy, and the physical and dancing power of his writing too, and so I created the solo “Ion”.

At one point in the process, “Ion” was called “De strijd”, which means “The Struggle” in Flemish. Whatever you’re doing – tackling a philosopher like Friedrich Nietzsche or a composer like Luigi Nono, or creating a homage to one of your collaborators who’s died, the musician Mika Vainio – that’s always what you’re aiming for, isn’t it?

When it comes down to it that’s all there is: resistance, political engagement of body and mind. Against convenience, commerce, convention and the conventional. Pasolini, Nono, Nietzsche and, closer to us, very demanding artists such as Mika Vainio: these are people who show you the way to go. Nono, who writes “Quando stanno morendo” in homage to the Polish resistance, or Pasolini battling... Yes, that’s a struggle. And it’s very powerful in Flemish, “De strijd”.

To mark thirty years of L’Usine in Geneva in 2019, you’ve just revived an extract from one of your very first pieces: “Subver-cité”. You had to repaint a “homage to capital” banner, rediscover the movements, the spirit and the composition of three decades ago...

It was really interesting going back there: revisiting one of my very earliest works, which were essentially denunciations of entertainment, seduction, virtuosity and consumption. I wanted to avoid giving the audience what they were expecting. “Subver-cité” is a project built around three homages: to Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker; to the Slovenian group Laibach, which plays with the limits of Fascist symbols; and to capitalism, where I calmly ate pears and then spat them out. I was struck by how free we were back then: free to explore, to work, to try things out on stage. Today we really need to rediscover what it’s like to have time and space, without having to submit a dossier, a budget and an impact assessment every time. That seems to me vital: for young people, of course, but in fact for every artist. When I created “Knusa-Insert Coins” in 2016, without any financial support, in an “underground” sort of way, together with photos by Christian Lutz, I reconnected with a real sense of freedom. And now, producing this solo, I find myself in a lot of untypical places.

... particularly alternative music programming venues. Is that important to you: the link to spaces where music is invented?

It’s essential. It’s one of my biggest sources of inspiration. For my next creation, “Without References”, I started out working with eleven soloists. I gathered together a mass of pieces from which everyone can choose the music they want. I found it very helpful to rummage through my computer, my memory and my record collection to draw up the list. Next season, in the new Pavillon de la danse at the Association pour la danse contemporaine (ADC), where I’m an associate artist, I’d like to set up listening rooms, a bit like “reading clubs”. People will be able to come in and sit comfortably in the room, maybe even on the stage, to enjoy the excellent sound quality and listen to music together. The idea is to strengthen the dialogue and exchange between the worlds of music and dance.

Did working with Romeo Castellucci on music scores such as “Parsifal” and the “Magic Flute” change your relationship to music?

I’ve choreographed five operas and several other pieces of music with Romeo, and my aim is always the same: to create a “here and now” of dance for itself, while operating within an

existing musical and scenic environment. Sometimes you can go along entirely with the score; sometimes you have to build a completely different tension. One thing is certain: it's never about obeying the music. Never. Pre-existing music makes me find a new freedom to compose. With Schönberg, for example, who is so complex, the movement allows you to bring out details, sound events that could go unnoticed. Dance hears them and makes them audible.

Stéphanie Bayle, a dancer who's heavily involved in your company, wants to start exploring how your choreographic practices are transmitted. How did that project come about?

When I was doing a workshop with three performers in Melbourne recently, I was really struck by how they were better equipped than me to convey how I do things. I work a lot with Stéphanie and she feels very close to the values of my dance, and very committed to the need to transmit them. The idea is to stage conversations and workshops; we're aiming to publish them, either on paper or digitally. It'll be a chance to delve into my archives, which are full of stuff but none of it classified.

I'm very touched by that impulse to research, just as I am to receive this Swiss Dance Award. Especially as it honours "Speechless Voices", which is a homage to Mika Vainio.

Interview: Michèle Pralong