

Swiss Grand Award for Dance 2019

## La Ribot

**“Sometimes you just do what you can. Things pass us by, and we often don’t understand them until much later.”**

*This Swiss Grand Award for Dance honours, above all, many years of innovative creativity. Few artists keep a title going as long as your series of short “Piezas Distinguidas”, which you started in 1993, and “Laughing Hole” from 2006. They are almost like laboratories for encounters with the age, the audience, the sensibility of the era...*

Yes, it’s very rare. I’ve just revived “Laughing Hole”, which was an attack on Guantanamo. You can see how it resonates today with other forms of social violence. It’s noticeable the way the audience’s attention shifts, and how the slogans have a different take on life today. One critic recently said to me that “Panoramix”, the anthology of the first thirty-four “Pièces distinguées” is a totally different work today from what it was in 2003. The world has moved on, and I continue to do things I was doing twenty-seven years ago, because they still make sense to me.

When “Panoramix” was being created we were in the basement of Beaubourg, and dance wasn’t as important as the visual arts. Serge Laurent – the former director of performing arts at Pompidou – said to me: “One day we’ll make it to the sixth floor, where the visual artists are shown.” And now here we are! We put “Panoramix” on in Gallery 3. It was important to question the hierarchy, the constant tendency to separate things – dance over here, visual arts over there; it’s important for dance to exist everywhere. When you think horizontally, you see more and you see better.

In the performing arts, revivals encounter new realities but they start out from the same concerns, and allow us to see what’s around us differently. So yes, it’s like an observatory where you can go and see the world over time.

*Looking back at your career, it seems as if you are constantly stepping over the boundaries of one thought in search of another one, outside a format, outside a mode of production... You break out, and that’s a productive thing to do.*

The other day I was listening to the American actor Willem Dafoe explaining that when he is in a very experimental production, he dreams of slipping away into something more “Hollywood”. And vice versa. So as to have what he self-ironically called a “balanced diet”. He channels his vital energy into that back-and-forth. I understand that effort to achieve balance. But I also have the impression of continuing to do the same thing, because the quest is probably never-ending. What is the purpose of dance? What is presence, what is movement? What impact does art have on society? As artists, who are we? I carry on using a variety of approaches, disciplines, formats and working with different people: women, for example, or extras. That way I have the feeling I’m exploring the same questions. Most often I have the same way of tackling things. I’m pursuing the same critiques of society.

*What do you mean by “tackling things”?*

It depends on the project. There's a kind of backbone to my work which is the "Piezas Distinguidas". But they come in different formats and media: initially they were short choreographic pieces, like haikus, very performative and with just me. Then, exceptionally, one "Pièce distinguée" became a video. Later, in 2011, the "Pièces distinguées" ceased to be purely solos and I had them performed by other dancers or by extras, as in "PARAdistinguidas". Later, in 2016, I even created them for men, as in "Another distinguée". And in 2001 I did an installation video, "Despliegue", and so on. Through those transformations, the "Pièces distinguées" continue to grow, with their short format, by accumulation, through series and performances, with the passing years. I'm now up to *Pièce* no. 53, and the project is still expanding: there's a book, a film I made, a documentary by Luc Peter... Sometimes a long time passes before I pick up the thread again, because I need a sediment to base a new *distinguished* series on.

When I start a series I need an object, an idea, a process. Objects are often deictics. For example, at the moment I'm picking up on a hut in an old "Pièce distinguée" and reviving the idea of sewing. The question is: sewing what? Messages? Poetry? Sewing "fuck off" ceaselessly during show times? Right now, I don't know. Depending on what happens in the studio it'll be a new *distinguished* series or a standalone piece.

*It always seems that you are extremely good at handling time, durations, suspense, hype, whereas everything always appears to freewheel. There's one piece I like a lot, which is like a perfect meditation on time, and that's "Zurrutada". You drink a litre of water from a bottle without pausing and while moving from a vertical to a recumbent position in the time it takes to play a piece of music.*

My understanding of how the perception of time can vary wildly comes from observing the great works of Pina Bausch: the repetition of the movements, the motionlessness, the silences, the accelerations, the elasticity and flexibility of time, the way you can stretch it out to change the relationship to the world. Pina is magnificent and complex with it: she knows how to talk about life and humanity while working with time. Take "Laughing Hole", for instance: the structure of the piece is designed to give the impression of freewheeling, as you say, but the dancers gradually add extra minutes every time they hold the placards up in front of the audience: they're stretching out the time when the placards are displayed until it gets to six hours!

When I did "Still Distinguished" in 2000, I was paying particular attention to my sensitivity for duration, because I wanted to put the audience in a shared space. They were no longer at a distance: they were in front of me, they could move and I brushed against them. The question was how to set up an event in a short time so that the people watching share responsibility for what happens. And so that it's tolerable and the tension is right.

"Zurrutada" is really an idea that came about through the object. I saw the bottle of water in the studio, I put on a track by Velma, a Swiss group from the 1990s, I started drinking and I began to fall, slowly. The end of the music coincided exactly with the end of the litre of water. There and then, I had *Zurrutada*. But how could I recreate that coincidence every time in front of an audience? Strangely I've never rehearsed that piece, never measured the music, I just prepare myself so I'm very focused. That piece goes where my concentration can take the audience, and me.

*Do you recall the moment when you realised you wanted to create?*

It was the day I realised that I was aware, that I was a person with thoughts. It's amazing. I remember it very well. I was nine years old. I said to myself: "That's what existing is." There was a window with some light. I said to myself: "I am Maria José Ribot and I am present at this scene, I see the light that is there. I am an individual." That's how it all began. I started to draw loads of things. I had an album of vinyl records of all the beginnings of operas and ballets. I used to put in on and draw dancers jumping, lots of dancers and lots of jumps. Lots of silhouettes, all a bit the same, a ball, a little head and some tutus jumping. That may have been my first creative act: a great outburst of drawing movement.

*You are classically trained. How much of that is still there in your current work?*

I still have the relationship to space, the organisation of my body in space: a geometric structure that gives me an awareness of my position in relation to the walls, the floor, and the diagonals of the place where I am. That classical perception is deep inside me. From contemporary dance I've kept the dynamism, which is more complex, and some forms too. I'm more conceptual, so the form follows the idea: ideas aren't concrete forms, you have to find them. I work with principles of movement and action. When I've understood the principles or the concept, the final form simply comes about through work. Those principles don't vary once they have been well understood and well established. What can change is the rules by which you apply them, which you make up as you go along to allow the work to evolve. It's either me as performer or the dancers who find the forms, by applying the rules I invent to make the concept evolve.

*Would you say you were an indisciplinarian?*

Indisciplinarian? Yes, that's a good word. It comes back to what Dafoe said: indisciplinarian because it allows for rebellion, it opens things up; but also because you do what you can, not always what you want. It has to be said: sometimes you just do what you can. Things pass us by, and we often don't understand them until much later. They're always experiments, and you're looking for balance.

*From that perspective, given how you're always playing with media and disciplines, muddying the tracks to avoid labelling, what does it mean to receive the Swiss Grand Award for Dance?*

Oh, it's lovely and very important to me. It's recognition for a battle I've fought with a degree of enjoyment all my life. I'm a contemporary artist, a dancer, a choreographer, who sometimes doesn't dance, who films the dance with a camera in her hand, who thinks that choreography is one and the same as visual art, and who tries to find relationships between disciplines, norms and people. I learnt a lot from my time in London in the late '90s, in that rich and stimulating period of *Live Art*. I like British *Live Art*, but I've always thought of things in terms of dance and as a choreographer. Profoundly so. When I make images or videos, I'm reflecting on dance – as I did with the film "Mariachi 17", or in "FILM NOIR": I start out wanting to describe how the extras play their parts in the cinema and they end up dancing to Bartók. When I started the "Pièces distinguées" in the early 1990s, people said to me "that

isn't dance". And I was thinking "how tiresome"! Then I went to London, and so on. It took me ages to gain broad recognition from the world of dance. At one point I almost gave up, but after the retrospective at *Tanz im August* in Berlin in 2017, things really started to change. When I received my National Dance Award in Spain in 2000, there were protests to the ministry. Purism and tradition reject difference and innovation, and that meant expulsion. Fine. So I made a virtue of that expulsion, of the fact that I didn't belong to dance, or to visual art, or to performance, or even to my mother tongue. And yet, even though I've always really liked being foreign, because deep down I like difference, it was difficult sometimes. I was tired of never belonging.

Honestly, the Swiss Grand Award for Dance has warmed my heart. It has given me roots I didn't know I had, and I'm very grateful to this country which has adopted me with such generosity.

*Is there one project in particular you'd like to tell us about?*

I'm in the process of writing a film. I write down everything that comes into my mind, every day, even though that's really not the way you make a film or write a screenplay. I've been thinking about it for two years and it's something very close to me. If I manage to complete it, it'll be a fiction film, something very accessible, but based on an experimental idea.  
HMMMMMM...

Interview: Michèle Pralong