

Outstanding Female Dancer 2019

Marie-Caroline Hominal

“An award of this kind will push me to take more risks”

What does this Outstanding Dancer award mean to you?

It's a powerful acknowledgement of my work. I'm touched by it, but the title makes me smile. I mean, "Outstanding Dancer" doesn't sound very serious, does it? I bought a dress for the ceremony in Fribourg. While I was trying it on, I told the shop assistant that it was for an award. She thought I meant the Goncourt or a Nobel Prize! When I told her I was being honoured as an "outstanding dancer" she didn't believe me.

What does "outstanding performer" mean?

It's a dancer who can excel in a wide variety of styles and approaches to dance.

What does this award change?

It will encourage me to take more risks and push my experiments further. It gives me extra energy to think about ways of working with other creatives. At my age, there's something paradoxical about an award like this: at the Paris Opera ballerinas retire at forty-two, and I'm not far off that myself.

When did dance come into your life?

I was a child in Montreux. My mother took me to see a flamenco show with the amazing Antonio Gades. I was captivated and I wanted to dance myself. Aged ten, I was a pupil at the Swiss Professional Ballet School in Zurich. I went there twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays. By the age of twelve I was attending classes at the school full-time, in a sports studies stream. It was a very classical training.

Were you tempted by a classical career?

No. I didn't want to dance *Swan Lake*! What appealed to me was the world of Mats Ek and his creations with Ballet Cullberg. I was also influenced by the works of the Belgian Wim Vandekeybus. So I turned towards contemporary dance, at the Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance in London. That's where I joined the National Youth Dance Company.

Did you sense that you were gifted?

Not at all! I wasn't very talented. Making it as a dancer requires enormous discipline. And you have to meet the right people at the right time! It's always a matter of chance.

So chance has played a defining role in your career?

Yes. Let me give you an example. I was attending a course in Vienna under Joseph Nadj when I met Gisèle Vienne, who was taking part as well. In 2001 she suggested I perform in one of her first creations, “Showroom Dummies”, which she co-produced with Etienne Bidault-Rey and which was inspired by Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs*.

You’ve danced for choreographers such as Blanca Li, La Ribot and Gilles Jobin. What have you learnt from them?

With Blanca Li, I was fortunate enough to develop at the Opéra Garnier in Paris in “Les Indes galantes”. La Ribot and Gilles Jobin took me in completely different aesthetic directions. The interaction with a choreographer works both ways: I learnt from their way of working and conceiving movement; and I gave them my world, my skills as a performer.

What made you move into creating?

When I was working with Gisèle Vienne I was already making little videos: whimsical domestic pieces seven or eight minutes in length that I shot in my kitchen or living room. It was my way of responding to the ephemeral nature of a performance, something which has always frustrated me. I was attracted by things that are handmade, simple to create.

That taste for simplicity led you in 2013 to “Le Triomphe de la renommée”. You were hidden and you welcomed a member of the audience into a tiny dressing room. Then you talked to them via a recorded voice. It’s a very unsettling device: where did it come from?

It was born out of frustration. I felt as if I hadn’t made myself understood in the pieces I’d done before. In “Le Triomphe de la renommée”, I created the conditions for a face-to-face encounter with the audience member but with no way out.

Which creative figures have made an impact on you?

Without hesitation, I’d say the American film-maker John Waters, a great artist in my eyes: he’s an underground figure, trashy, disturbing, funny, obscene and offbeat. I love “Pink Flamingos” and “Hairspray”.

What have you gained with the passing of time?

Do people become better through experience? I’m not sure. My satisfaction comes through reaffirming confidence in my intuition. The ability to feel space, your body, the depths of your being is the basis, even the precondition for freedom.

You’ve now embarked on “Hominal/XXX series”, a suite of works in collaboration with choreographers. The first, which was staged at the Théâtre de Vidy in 2018, was titled “Hominal/Öhm”, and the second “Hominal/Xaba”. What are they about?

I’m trying to understand what it means to be the author of a piece. That meant I had to question the way I work. I didn’t want to make a show all by myself, but rather to confront the other. For this series I choose the artist and I sign off the concept.

And that's what gave rise to the startling "Hominal/Öhrn", where you appear as the living dead with the breasts of an ogress.

I'd talked to Vincent Baudriller, the director of the Théâtre de Vidy, about my desire to work with an artist. He introduced me to the actor and film-maker Vincent Macaigne, but the project never came to anything. Then he suggested I meet Markus Öhrn, and we immediately hit it off. I wanted someone to create for me, and he did that.

What part does your own imaginary play in the story of a woman who's been humiliated all her life by her husband?

Markus was inspired by his grandmother. It's his world, but fed by what I experienced during the rehearsals. It so happened that I'd become a mother shortly before and I had to express my milk. That's what gave rise to the birth scene in the show.

"Froufrou" came out of a long stay in Haiti. It depicts a voodoo ritual, with its age-old, magical movements. As a choreographer, are you looking for sacred gestuaries?

Symbolic and everyday gestures make up a writing system. The stage is my page, and I try to put them together in an original way.

What does it mean to take an artistic risk?

I set myself challenges with each new piece. When I put on "Silver", a concert performance in which I appear as a pop star, I face up to the reality that I'm not a musician! When I suggest to the South African choreographer Nelisiwe Xaba that we work together on the "Hominal/XXX" series again, I'm venturing into what for me is uncharted territory. We staged the piece at the last La Bâtie festival in Geneva and right now we're no longer talking about it. We realised that we weren't seeing eye to eye! Not that that will stop us putting the show on together again.

After a twenty-year career, does working come more easily?

Yes. I get more respect. Professionals and providers of subsidies trust me. For the last three years I've had a support agreement with the City of Geneva, the canton and Pro Helvetia. That's an amazing privilege! It allows me to work more calmly and have a studio for rehearsals, and it means I no longer have to sign on for unemployment benefit. That changes everything!

What does being Swiss mean to you?

I don't identify with a country. As a child I lived in Zurich; as an adolescent I lived in London. Today I'm at home in Geneva. Switzerland allows me to pursue my profession in the best possible way. And enjoy an exceptional natural environment, whenever I can. Cross-country skiing in the Jura is something I love.

Can you see yourself dancing for a long time yet?

You can dance all your life, but you need to have something to say. That's what matters!

Interview: Alexandre Demidoff