

June Johnson Dance Prize 2019

Marion Zurbach (Bern dance collective Unplush)

“Dance gave my life a meaning”

You've been awarded the June Johnson Dance Prize 2019 as artistic director of the dance collective Unplush. Has the award changed your life in any way?

Yes, very much so! One outcome of the award is that, for example, “Les Promises”, the piece I'm working on at the moment, has been signed up by various theatres even though it isn't yet finished. That's never happened before. I've also been contacted by lots of dancers wanting to work with Unplush.

What, in your view, makes a good dancer?

That's something the amateurs I work with always want to know too. I tell them it makes no difference whether someone can do amazing things technically. Virtuosity and being able to jump high have nothing to do with being “good”.

So what does?

Dancers should be able to sense their own bodies and combine their body awareness with concentration and imagination. I've sometimes felt it's a real shame that, unlike actors, dancers aren't taught how to concentrate or bring out emotions from deep inside themselves. Body position has nothing to do with concentration! I remember when I was a child, my mind was always on other things during ballet lessons. My body was on autopilot. I just assumed that was how things were. I had no idea at the time that you can work on your concentration and focus as a dancer.

You came to dance via ballet?

My mother had a dance school...

...Your mother was a dancer?

Not professionally. She grew up after the Second World War in a family with many children in a suburb of Marseille and attended a college for sports teachers. It was the same training as dance teachers did. She never worked in a dance company. The dance school she opened in the 1980s taught the Cunningham technique.

And that's where you took your first steps in dance?

Exactly. But she never forced us into ballet. My sister, who was fourteen years older, and my younger brother both had other hobbies. I found my place in the studio. I felt amazingly good there. My mother says I beamed with happiness when I touched the bar. I couldn't

understand why anyone would want to do anything in life other than dance. As a child, I had a few operations on my feet, but that didn't stop me dancing. Dance gave my life a meaning.

When did you decide you wanted to dance professionally?

When I was nine, I left my family and lived in Marseille near Roland Petit's Ballet de Marseille, where I attended classes for professionals. That was a hard time. I didn't have a childhood. But I had my imagination, where I could do anything I wanted.

Later you danced with Frédéric Flamand, in Maurice Béjart's Ecole Rudra and in the Bern:Ballett under Cathy Marston. What was the most formative period?

My student years. Rudra was an important time. It taught us to see ballet in relation to other arts. That was something completely new for me. It was also where I met Vittorio Bertoli, who is now with Unplush. I did our first piece, "The show must go", with Vittorio as a homage to Jérôme Bel.

Is he a role model of yours?

Yes, but Boris Charmatz was important for me too. And Maguy Marin. She was my childhood heroine. I would love to meet her.

What was it like moving from a subsidised venue to the uncertainty of the independent scene?

Vittorio left Bern:Ballett a year before me. I was fretting about giving up a permanent job. He told me to just do it. So I took the plunge, and I've never regretted it. It was only looking back that I realised how I hadn't been in control of my life up to then. As a dancer in a permanent ensemble I'd never taken responsibility for myself. Everything was planned, it was all organised for me. Sooner or later, your life becomes redundant. I'm convinced that's one reason why many dancers change jobs when they hit thirty or so. Your body would still be perfectly capable of touring. But there comes a point where, as a dancer, you want to take responsibility for yourself.

Bern is still the centre of your life. You work here with Unplush, you live here, even though you don't speak German. Why is that?

That's true, Bern is our place. Despite the fact that we don't even have a fixed room to rehearse in. Having a studio of our own would be a luxury. But it's right for us, because all the members of Unplush are working on other projects around the world. I love the cultural life in Bern and I'm a fan of the Reitschule autonomous cultural centre. I'm inspired by the musicians and artists who go in and out of there. I often work with them. That's my artistic vision: I want to construct a horizontal network that's free from power and hierarchies.

But aren't you exercising power when you select people in auditions?

I never do auditions and I never will. I know from experience how it feels: terrible. Plus, in an audition you never get to know anyone. I prefer to take the risk of getting it wrong occasionally.

Do you still dance yourself?

Sometimes. But I never demonstrate. I also never say a movement is right or wrong. I'm interested in the dancers' personalities and what they bring with them. That's why we also work without mirrors. Because that way you're not fixated on the aesthetics when you're exploring movements.

What do your dancers expect from you?

We make our creations together. We're bound together by curiosity, the desire to discover new things and develop ourselves. And we want to feel we are a team. It's like a substitute family: the sense of security it gives us is important because we all had to leave our families at a young age to go off and train as dancers.

How do you find topics to tackle in a dance piece?

They come from the moment, from everyday life. I'm interested in social policy issues. But for me, how we do things is always more important than what we do. "Posh" was about our relationship to rich people. In "Flipper", the focus was on the suffering of animals. For "Les Promises" I'm working with underprivileged girls aged between twelve and nineteen from the suburbs of Marseille.

You did a Master's in Expanded Theater at the Bern University of the Arts (HKB) in 2018. What did you get out of that?

I'd always been fascinated by theatre and performance, but didn't know anything about it. Everything I did was based on experience; I worked intuitively and had the feeling that everything I did for the stage was magical. When I started the course it was a real shock to the system, because we analysed everything we did at the HKB in detail, questioned it, picked it apart. The analysis destroyed all the mystery and the magic – at least that's how I felt at the time. Today I'm grateful for everything I learnt. And with the background knowledge I have now, I can consciously create magic on the stage.

What do you still wish for?

Two things. I'd like to get my driving licence. And I'd like a dog. One from a home. I'm fascinated by animals and their behaviour. Two years ago I spent a number of months filming dogs waiting in front of supermarkets. Their reactions when they are left there and collected afterwards are incredible. They're real drama queens.

Can you put your fascination with dance into words?

Dancing is a paradoxical state. You're in two places at once. You slip out of your daily existence into another skin, and at the same time you're totally present within yourself. Your

body, mind and soul are linked together. If you start learning that when you are still small, dance becomes a home in which there's always something new to discover. I feel that hunger which means I always want more. For me, dance is a path that never ends and that you never travel alone.

Interview: Marianne Mühlemann