

Current Dance Works 2015–2017

**“Hate me, tender”:** Teresa Vitucci

**“It all starts with the body”**

*Teresa, receiving the Swiss Dance Award is surely an important moment in your career. When did you realise that you wanted to be a dancer?*

I've wanted to dance for as long as I've been able to think. When I was three years old I was already shutting myself in the living room and dancing. I started out on the classic route: music school, preparatory class for the conservatory. But from the very beginning I sensed a strong resistance to my body. I was told that I was very talented, but with this body, no way.

*So how did you manage to overcome that?*

At first I was so deeply hurt by my teacher's insults that I stopped dancing. It wasn't until I was a teenager that it suddenly hit me that dancing was what I really wanted to do. Although there was no way to catch up on everything I'd missed out on in the years when I didn't dance, I was allowed to join in training at the Vienna Conservatory. I ended up in the same class as the girls I'd been with in the preparatory school. And while I was already in the middle of puberty, those girls, who were the same age, were much more childlike. They had bodies that had been rigorously selected and were constantly being checked for weight and stage of puberty. I tried with all my might to get my childhood body back – it was a constant battle with my own body. I was eager to learn and more disciplined than the others, but being the fattest girl in the class meant I was totally overlooked.

*How do you come to terms with that time today?*

In summer 2019, shortly before the première of “Hate me, tender” at ImPulsTanz in Vienna, a young girl came into the theatre. She told me that she loved dancing, especially ballet, but had a really bad teacher who accused her of being a “clumsy elephant”. It was obvious to me that this kid had experienced the same kind of body shaming as I had – twenty years on, and from the same teacher. Then the girl told me she had moved to another school and was now enjoying dancing again. The teacher has since retired and can't damage anyone any more. That was one of those moments when my past made its peace with my present. It was also a special moment because after all those years of resistance, my work was finally being produced at ImPulsTanz.

*Did you have role models who gave you strength and encouraged you?*

I had a serious lack of role models, especially female ones. Looking at it from today's perspective, of course, the very fact that the school admitted me counts as support. But all the time I was there, people kept telling me: “Teresa, you'll never be a dancer”. In the ballet world, the fat dancer is always assumed to be the worst. It wasn't until my early twenties, when I saw a Meg Stuart piece with Anja Müller, that everything clicked. Anja Müller has a

similar body to mine – and she was the best on the stage. Later I saw Doris Uhlich's "*Mehr als genug*". That's when I realised that I really could do it!

*My impression is that your works are profoundly shaped by those experiences.*

At some point I understood that what I'd gone through there wasn't a singular experience but a collective one: the experience of being a woman in this world. Forcing you to accept that you are a lesser person and denying you a voice in dance are ultimately tools of oppression that mainly impact female bodies. The emancipation of my body as a dancer went hand in hand with a political awakening. Because I understood that it's not about me as an individual fighting with my body but about a system that has a vested interest in making people feel incomplete.

*Given your history, it's surprising how little you dance in your works...*

I see my works as choreographies that operate with a variety of languages, of which dance is one. For me, dancing is a bit like being with someone you were always unhappily in love with – and by the time that person gets round to deciding they are interested, you've long since moved on. But even if it not everything looks like dance at first sight, for me the starting point is always the body. The appropriation of space, the dramaturgical rhythm, the comic timing, even the text – all of that has a strong bodily component and is choreographed. In private, by the way, my favourite form of dance at the moment is very minimal. When I go dancing, it's mostly to hard techno.

*What is your life like when you aren't on stage?*

Right now I'm mostly on the road, and it's very important for me to have rituals. Before every performance I always do the same warm-up. At home in Zurich I retreat into my nest. After being extroverted all the time on tour I become very introverted, and I just want to be at home repotting my plants. I also need rituals for my artistic practice, which is always present: flowers in the studio, a camera for experiments. To keep my body in shape I go to the gym. Such places are almost sacred to me – my church, so to speak.

*What do you need from your team in order to work well?*

Most of all, a framework that gives me complete freedom to play around. I need to have a great deal of trust in my team, plus a lot of flexibility and patience until I understand where the work actually wants to go. I think that isn't always easy for my team. Most pieces often don't develop fully until the day of the première, and I'm constantly working even on pieces that are already running. For me they are never finished. So it's vital that we have absolute trust in each other. I certainly do with my set designer Jasmin Wiesli, who's actually far more than that: she's my counterpart, my conversation partner.

*How would you describe your relationship to the audience?*

Actually my pieces aren't solos because the audience is always involved too. I work a lot on addressing them directly and comedy plays a big role in everything I do. It's always a back-and-forth with the audience. Like with stand-up comedy, you always need the audience's

reaction. I hope that what I have to say and show works with the audience, and at some point they are encouraged or awakened.

*You've received a Swiss Dance Award 2019 for "Hate me, tender". Does that give you a feeling of satisfaction?*

The Dance Award is a great encouragement and affirmation. I've only been in Switzerland for a few years and again and again I see how much I'm encouraged and supported here. That means a great deal to me. Of course, the award is also a kind of riposte to those who didn't believe in me. And then there's the financial aspect. You're always working under precarious conditions, constantly afraid of breaking a leg and ending up in poverty, so this kind of support is very important.

*What do you see as the significance of this award for the dance sector?*

First of all it makes a statement for Swiss dance, for example when it goes to someone like La Ribot or me. I think it's important to have this award for dance; it makes Swiss dance visible. I also think it's important to adopt a broad definition of what dance is. Dance is constantly renewing itself, and unlike the German-language theatre tradition, for example, it's also open to that renewal.

*What are your hopes for the Swiss dance scene?*

I'd like to see a community in which established choreographers aren't just friendly with younger ones but actually work with them. Vienna has totally opened up to that over the last ten years, not least thanks to the Raw Matters platform. I'd like to build a similar platform in Zurich. Otherwise, I'd like to see more and more different bodies on the stage, not just as an exception but as something that's taken for granted.

Interview: Andrea Heinz