

Current Dance Works 2017–2019

“Vicky setzt Segel”: Teresa Rotemberg

“You have to feel right in order to get fired up”

Teresa Rotemberg, we're meeting a few weeks after the presentation of the Swiss Dance Awards. What's happened since 17 October 2019 and what has changed as a result of the award?

The award has had a massive impact. As a Swiss Dance Award winner, I'm suddenly getting more recognition. It's mentioned in every article and every programme, and means I get noticeably more respect for my work and for myself as a person. Both from theatre managers and from the press and public. The award is official confirmation of the quality of my work. Women directors especially still seem to need an award like this in order to be recognised.

And what's happened professionally since then?

After the award ceremony, at the end of October, I first of all presented our “Miniaturen/Miniaturas” at the Tanzhaus Zürich; it's a piece about how children and young people in Argentina and Switzerland experience the world, which was created with two school classes in Buenos Aires and Zurich. At the end of October I flew to Cairo for the second part of a workshop for Egyptian dance practitioners about how to work on dance with young people. Right after that the preparations began for the revival of “La Bohème” at the Opéra Bastille in Paris, where I'm responsible for the choreography. And I've just come back from Freiburg, where I took over at short notice as director of Erich Wolfgang Korngold's comedy opera “Der Ring des Polykrates”. Next week (19 January 2020) is the première!

You work in many disciplines, but originally you were a dancer.

I don't draw any narrow boundaries between the performing arts; it's just that theatre gave me the place and the opportunity to express myself with all the means at my disposal. But yes, it all started when I was four years old and accompanied my big sister to her ballet lessons. From that moment on I wanted to dance. Later I trained in classical ballet with Olga Ferri at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires and did my diploma in Monte Carlo with Marika Besobrasova. That was followed by twelve exciting years in various German theatres at Giessen, Weimar and Meiningen, until I finally ended up with the “Movers” here in Switzerland. We toured worldwide. Zurich's dance scene in the 1990s, with all its independent companies, was like a dream for me; there was a real mood of change, a sense that you could develop. I carried on dancing in Germany for a while, but I'd found what I was looking for in Zurich.

During that period you got married and founded your own Company Mafalda. Was it a deliberate decision to switch sides?

Like many things in my life, it just happened. The move from dance to choreography came when I was an assistant with Daniela Kurz in Nuremberg, where I encountered many different choreographic signatures. In 2000 I took part in the Swiss International Choreography Course SiWiC in Zurich with Niels Christie, where we had to develop a number of short pieces in the space of a few hours. After that I'd lost any fear of choreographing. Or to put it another way, without the SiWiC I might never have had the confidence to do it. But afterwards I set up Mafalda and said yes to the opera offers.

And that was followed by the productions of major plays. How did you end up pursuing all these different avenues?

Even while I was still dancing, I was already delving into other realms, coaching actors and meeting directors and theatre managers who later asked me to create choreographies at the theatre. That led to interest in my choreographic expression that I was able to translate into my own directorial works, such as Sarah Kane's "Psychose 4.48" in Münster, and in "Verbrennungen" and "Mefisto forever". It certainly helped that I had no qualms about producing even large works for children on big stages.

What is the difference between theatre or opera productions and working with your dance company?

In the opera and plays, the text, content and melody are predefined. The singers and actors turn up for the first rehearsal knowing that dance needs to be worked on first. In dance you always start from zero and build everything up from scratch. I put together my own team and then give the dancers clear tasks. I work with what they bring to the table. It's not like they have to improvise for hours on end. But I know from my own time on stage that in order to really get fired up, you have to feel right. Your shoes and your costume have to fit too. There's nothing worse than when you don't feel right on stage. I'm generosity itself in rehearsals: I bring sweets for everyone or send people home when they have a cold. In dance they always say you have to suffer. Working with singers I've learnt that isn't true.

How has your choreographic work changed over the years?

Initially it was often about home: where do I belong, how do all the influences blend together in a life, a person or a society? For a long time it was all about me and my experiences. Even in the political pieces. Then I started to get bored with that preoccupation with myself. Now, with the children, things are quite different. Now it's about their stories, which I want to translate and pass on.

How did you and Mafalda get into children and young people's theatre?

I grew up in Argentina, in a society in which children have a different status. There was brilliant theatre for children! My mother dragged me around everywhere, to puppet theatre, pieces set to modern music, absurd theatre... It was chance that brought those memories back: we were rehearsing "peu à peu" at the Tanzhaus when a party of schoolchildren came in. We showed them what we did with the 6,000 balls that we used as props. It was really

complicated and I expected the kids to run out screaming. Instead they wanted to stay and see more.

And so you wanted to produce for a young audience?

I'd already produced fairy tales before that and, of course, tried to make people think. But it wasn't until after that experience that it occurred to me I could also do something for children with my own unique way of working. That led to "Zick Zack Puff", my first piece for children. It's still touring to this day.

How are things different when you're working for a young audience?

I allow myself to really have fun. That didn't go down so well with my pieces for adults. Adults often sit there and try to understand. Children don't try. They react honestly, naturally and directly. That allows me to play the clown.

I also try to make the pieces no longer than fifty minutes. Although I'm no longer entirely sure that's right. I don't think it's a bad thing for the performance to become a bit like a rock concert. Even if the kids are running around during the performance – something every theatre has a horror of – I actually think that's more appropriate than if they just sit still and watch.

Do you think the Dance Award is very significant for Switzerland?

The award means that the Swiss public take dance more seriously. That's hugely important. It opens doors. It's also an award for this city, Zurich, that has supported me and my productions for years. Dance needs that support. Partly because dance is a women's art form. Everywhere – in directing, the opera, theatre and on the conductor's stand – there's a lack of women.

My biggest hope would be for the Swiss Dance Award to strengthen ties between the different parts of the country. I'd like to perform in Lausanne and Geneva too. Isn't it absurd? It's easier for me to show my works in Germany or in South Africa, Egypt and India than in French-speaking Switzerland. And yet I speak perfect French.

Interview: Nina Scheu