



Ballet pushed to the edge

Aplomb, symmetry, bars, harmony, control: just a few of the terms typically used in ballet, whether we are talking about the “Belle Danse” of the 17th century, Romantic ballet that came along a century later or, to a lesser extent, neo-classical dance.

There is nothing really surprising in all of that if we bear in mind that the “ballet” genre became an artistic form established during the reign of a certain Louis XIV. The King did not like dance for dance’s sake, even though he was a fine dancer himself. No, the King loved power above all, a power of divine right that has nothing to do with men, with these nobles, with these parliamentarians who took up arms against him from 1648 to 1652. Four years of the Fronde, four years of revolts which deeply traumatized the young monarch and forced him to leave Paris temporarily, this seditious capital which he had his heart set on leaving permanently, a few years later, for Versailles. He had this palace built commensurate to French-style absolutism, an absolutism that was not accountable to his vassals or to his people but to God exclusively. Royal expenditure, which was disproportionate on the eve of the Fronde, would be even more so afterwards, and it was a nation that had been bled dry that Louis XIV passed on to his descendants. Bled dry, definitely, but above all brilliant, because the Sun King had ardently desired to stamp his mark on France and throughout Europe.

When we talk about “stamping his mark” we are also talking about inventing forms of representation best able to inform the world of the monarch’s power. The King, who ruled single-handed over a centralized, brilliant, domineering country, founded the Académie Royale de Danse in 1661. Like music, like theatre, its mission was to sing out his glory and it would be codified as such for this purpose. Aplomb, symmetry, bars, harmony were, therefore, the watchwords of an art which illustrated the triumph of reason. Only it, alone, was capable of restoring divine order on Earth. The King danced, he was gracious. The ballet masters placed him in the centre of the space and, whenever he was not on stage, they organized the choreography in line with his viewpoint. Rules relating to perspective and to hierarchy were applied on stage which offered a metaphorical understanding of the world. The King reigned over an art which, subjected to the strict rules of “etiquette”, to realistic perspectives and to geometry, aimed to “civilize” bodies around him, to liberate them from their passions, to nurture them.

Moderation in everything, therefore, grace and lightness, as illustrated in *L’Entrée d’Apollon (Apollo’s Entrance)* where Louis XIV demonstrated, first and foremost, his status as King. Right at the heart of the action, he organized the space around himself, presented himself frontally to his subjects and, as such, bestowed on the dance, this art of entertainment, his Royal Majesty.

This highly codified system of movement spanned the centuries and defied the turmoil



of history. Whilst Romantic ballet reintroduced passions to the very heart of its reasoning, whilst it also promoted pantomime, the technique that it established only furthered the rules of an art created by the Sun King's ballet masters. And, these rules, what are they except the rules of the established order, an immutable order founded during the age of absolute monarchy?

Yes, ballet is like a metaphor of the world and it is not the upheavals of history in the making that will overcome it. And yes again, *The Sylph*, *Giselle* and *Swan Lake* a few years later would teach us that, in spite of the hardships that the protagonists of these intrigues faced, order can never be undermined, that it connects us to God or to something beyond the human, whatever the case may be. Thus this value placed on the aplomb, on elevation. The male dancer, the female dancer probably even more so on pointe, can be considered as connected by a thread to distant heavens. Giselle faints? Odette collapses? They do it with grace and the world around them stands upright, always really upright, advocates of this aplomb which, alone, can illustrate the control that humankind intends to have over its destiny.

Is this architecture totally immutable? The organization of the corps de ballet, finalized in the second half of the nineteenth century with its quadrilles, coryphées, petits sujets, sujets, premiers danseurs and, ultimately, étoiles, would probably have reassured the Sun King in the vision he had of structuring the choreographic art on the eve of the creation of the Académie Royale de Danse. Louis XIV wrote at that time that the art of dance should be acknowledged as "one of the most honest and most necessary for training the body and for giving it the first and the most natural dispositions for all sorts of exercise including, amongst others, those with weapons". Two hundred years later, the corps de ballet was more structured than ever and really stemmed from academism in the sense that it referred to a doctrine or a teaching that was sanctified... military? Let's not go as far as confirming this.

The world and its history, yet again. The world and its conflicts, above all, beginning with the one of 1914-1918, the first planetary deflagration. How can one sing the praises of an immutable organization after such a cataclysm? The idea of progress in the way that Europe had conveyed it since the Age of Enlightenment was undermined on the old continent. It was on the other side of the Atlantic that it found a new lease of life, in the United States more precisely, in this country that constantly attracted migrants in search of fortune, in search of utopia, the utopia of humankind rid of the burden of history, oh yes, history rears its head again, a schizophrenic history that strives to be modernist but that is crystallized in conservatism. Europe was not dead and buried but its idea of progress was no longer highly topical, because how on earth can you even touch on this idea when you have ten million dead bodies and a field of ruins behind you?

Among the Americans, among these new men, Lincoln Kirstein, a rich intellectual from Boston, managed to convince George Balanchine to cross the ocean and to set up a corps



de ballet in New York with a clearly American identity. Balanchine was Russian, he had been trained in the school of Saint Petersburg, the temple of academism. Kirstein's choice may appear paradoxical but, in essence, it could not have been more appropriate. Ballet was lacking in theatres on this new continent but America was like a gigantic melting pot able of absorbing any culture and any technique. Balanchine accepted Kirstein's proposal and, with the means at hand, trained dancers who had been exercising their talents in Broadway cabarets. From this overlapping of bodies rooted in modernity and an academic technique *The American Ballet* came into being, a company whose style was immediately recognizable and profoundly different from the European style.

Agon, created in 1957, was unquestionably the prototype of this reinvented ballet which only talked about energy, rupture, breaking away, acceleration and imbalance. Balanchine presented bodies which expressed American identity. Posture angularity, broken ankles and wrists, pelvises projected frontwards, axes distorted, nothing seemed impossible for these athletes engaged in speed. It was this story that he told through his dance, an abstract story that did not need narration, this narration that had been popular in Europe for such a long time. America was on the move and it would invent itself through speed, through the extroverted energies that were to forge it. Yet, Balanchine did not undermine all the academic structure, and trios, pas de deux, galliards and sarabandes, inherited from French court dances, were still at the centre of his art. He did not totally call the foundations of ballet into question in his work.

Europe-United States, round trip: ballet would pursue its mutation on this side of the Atlantic and, once again, it would be an American, William Forsythe, who would complete its deconstruction. The year was 1984 and the young "Billy" took over as director of the Frankfurt Ballet. He brought a profoundly new style to this old institution, which had been the advocate of this tradition since the end of the 18th century. Very soon after he had arrived, the company presented bodies which unravelled the academic movement, accelerated it, disarticulated it, placed it in a state of urgency that was more in tune with the world in which we lived (and live) in. Moreover, Forsythe never missed an opportunity to point out that he lived in the age of the nuclear bomb, of pollution, in the era of stress, of violence and of computers. Dancers, stage design, music, lighting, everything conjured up the distortion of a world on the brink of tipping over, but into what? Probably into the "*immaîtrise*" (uncontrol), a term invented by the French philosopher and urbanist Paul Virilio. Uncontrol, yes: that is exactly what William Forsythe's art is about. The choreographer would stage bodies which, on the stage, were permanently on the verge of imbalance. The dance would become convulsive based on the sequences and a technique, "ghosting", where the dancers had to seek out the ghost of the academic movement by curling up like tendrils and then making it reappear more deconstructed than ever. Elevation, verticality were called into question (does this still make any sense?) until 2000, the year when Forsythe created *One Flat Thing Reproduced*. In this choreography, twenty tables cover the stage; they become the



dancers' horizon, "horizon" in the true sense of the term because it is the horizontal that stands in the way of the verticality of bodies in movement. The top, the bottom, the flattened, the raised...: the space, as a whole, is explored homogeneously by both performers and spectators, and the perspective that they provide on the stage is totally embraced, without any order of precedence. Like our world, it is devoid of a centre and becomes a web of sequenced movements, linked one to another.

William Forsythe is a true man of his times, of this 21st century open onto the perpetual split second of virtuality. As such, he is led to call into question and to challenge the notions of control, harmony and rhythmicity set out by academic dance. Yes, we are arrhythmic citizens, linked potentially one to another, twenty-four hours a day, and the tempo of the old world (of the old regime in our case) with its celebrations, its calendar liturgies and its codes has almost become totally alien to us now.

Yet, ballet fits in, ballet that has been fundamentally revisited, accelerated just like humankind, which will soon be "augmented". The form has been tinkered with from the inside, "pushed to the edge" we could say, and Forsythe is not the only who has been mishandling it brilliantly.

Another Anglo-Saxon choreographer has taken it on. His name, Edouard Lock. As of 1985, he invented the horizontal tendril for his favourite and, incidentally totally daredevil, dancer (Louise Lecavalier). With him lies the virtuosity of the vertical momentum, so dear to academic ballet. Yet, Lock does not rebuff pointes, quite the contrary, and in 1998 *Exaucé* set his art on a new footing. ***Amjad***, then ***Amélia*** were to follow, three choreographies marked by risk-taking. His feminine figures, on pointes, frequently distraught, seem to be encased in the sound, in the light, held together only by two firm arms that lead them through the irremediably accelerated, eruptive pas de deux. Lock gives us the impression that the performers are like mechanically wound-up dolls, wound up to the point of not being able to go on. When the upper part of the body gives in, it is as if the history of posture, of control, has been shattered, this history, this intrinsic part of ballet, is explicitly pushed to the edge, and Lock makes sure and certain it is so. Beyond this limit, the body becomes panic-stricken. How on earth would it be possible to push the experience even further?



To go further :

BEAUSSANT, Philippe. *Louis XIV Artiste*. Paris : Payot, DL 1999, cop. 1999. 287 p. (Portraits intimes).

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