



## Contemporary technique(s)

Classical ballet technique is based on a precise vocabulary, even when it allows room for various other methods. On the other hand, in contemporary dance, if the work of the body is extremely important, it does not correspond to a unified and codified technique. Any movement can become dance and the technical aspect consists of offering the body a great availability rather than the acquisition of a vocabulary. But, for all that, is there still no technique in contemporary dance?

In contemporary dance, the dancer is trained in order to develop his know-how and to supplement it. He generally acquires knowledge of several techniques, which may not all be in the field of dance. He can train at various schools, like P.A.R.T.S in Brussels, the CNDC in Angers, ex.e.r.ce master in Montpellier or the Conservatoire national supérieur in Paris or in Lyon. He can also follow his own career path which he then enhances by attending training courses and regular classes of his choice. He will certainly take “contemporary dance” classes, but also classes in classical ballet, jazz, somatic techniques, improvisation, yoga etc. Everything that relates to the capacities of the body can be useful for him. Lastly, in addition to the purely physical dimension, he values the quality of the movement and is invited to adapt it rather than to reproduce forms.

All in all, in contemporary dance, if there is a technique, it consists of several practices. And even– to use the words of the choreographer Boris Charmatz once again<sup>1</sup> - “if every gesture is connected to the way in which one perceives the world, symbolic activity and a critical mind consequently fall within this type of training called “technique””.

This thema in the form of a question is searching for the technique(s) revealed by various contemporary dance shows and also aims to give an idea of the training methods or technical training of contemporary dancers.

### 1. Which technique(s) in contemporary dance?

#### ***EEEXEEECUUUUTIOOOOONS !!!***

In ***EEEXEEECUUUUTIOOOOONS !!!***, the vocabulary used most is that of classical ballet, perfectly mastered by the dancers of the **Ballet de Lorraine**. One notices in particular grand jetés, entrechats, piqués and ronds de jambe. But the construction in space (use of each point of the stage and diversity of the orientations of the dancers), the apparent jumble of the trajectories, the repetition of the same motif (taken up a total of eight hundred and forty times during the piece) and the continuous laughter which seizes the dancers are far from the referents of classical ballet. Here, **Maria La Ribot**'s approach is a critical one which questions the production process, artistic as well as economic, including the use and the distortion of classical technique. “The laughter in

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<sup>1</sup> Boris Charmatz, Isabelle Launay, *Entretenir, à propos d'une danse contemporaine*, Centre national de la danse – Les Presses du réel, 2003, p. 62



**EEEXEECUUUTIOOOONS !!!** involves a perverse contradiction: how can these tortuous physical exercises apparently inspire such an irrepressible pleasure? (...) The piece reinforces a long tradition of associating modernist rationalism and capitalistic production with Sade-inspired violence.”<sup>2</sup>

### ***Roaratorio***

In modern and contemporary dance, some choreographers have developed a specific technical approach which is then taught and forms part of dancers' training. **Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, José Limon** and **Alwin Nikolais** for example, have developed a manner of working with the body according to determining principles by them.

**Merce Cunningham** developed a training programme for the body allowing his dancers to master the complex dance sequences he created as well as possible. The “Cunningham technique” makes extensive use of classical technique for working the lower half of the body, but it is based on another use of the back and the spinal column. Merce Cunningham spoke about it as follows: “Right from the beginning I looked at how to make the back and the legs, the chest and the legs work together (...). All my work with the torso starts from the trunk, from the part of the waist closest to the hips. From there, you can swing the body or twist it in all directions.”<sup>3</sup> The aim for Merce Cunningham was to develop or modify the technique “not in aesthetic terms, but simply in terms of what the body can do”<sup>4</sup>.

### ***Waxtaan***

Founded in Senegal in 1996 by the artist and teacher **Germaine Acogny**, the **École des Sables** is involved in the development of an African contemporary dance anchored in and connected to its roots. This school seeks to maintain or build bridges between the traditional dances and the dances of today. It is this same concern which is at the origin of the show **Waxtaan**, created in 2007. Germaine and **Patrick Acogny** used traditional dances from several African countries, in particular Mali, Guinea, Benin, Senegal and Burkina Faso to create this piece. The choreography is created using a contemporary approach and the initial style is transformed, but the techniques of the body used make reference to many traditional African dances with regard to, for example, the relationship to the ground, the use of the rhythm, the coordination of the movements, the footwork and the use of a basic step.

### ***Kagemi***

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<sup>2</sup> Description of the piece – [www.laribot.com/work](http://www.laribot.com/work)

<sup>3</sup> Merce Cunningham, *Le danseur et la danse – entretiens avec Jacqueline Lesschaeve*, trans. J. Lesschaeve, 1980, p. 69. 73 (*The Dancer and the Dance – Merce Cunningham in conversation with Jacqueline Lesschaeve*)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76



At the beginning of the 1980s, the young French choreographers were influenced by Japanese creators (but also North American and German), whose shows they were able to see. These artists also offered them practical workshops which enabled them to become familiar with new processes.

It was in 1980 for example, that the company **Sankai Juku**, created in 1975 by **Ushio Amagatsu**, came to France for the first time. This company is part of the Butoh dance movement, which sought to create new forms in the Japan of the 1960s, while making reference in particular to the European avant-garde movement. Since its appearance, Butoh has taken on multiple forms, but preserves certain aspects of Noh or Japanese traditional dances; it takes on their slowness, the economy of movement (even if this movement can have a strong expressive role) and an important relationship to the ground which lowers the dancer's centre of gravity (the work of the points of support is particularly important in Butoh dance). It is also through the role assigned to the body that the technical work is distinguished from the role required by other styles of dance. Indeed, according to **Tatsumi Hijikata**, one of the founders of Butoh, "the dance did not reside in a linear composition of movements but rather in the exploration of the depth of the body itself". It is this exploration of the body and its expressive possibilities that constituted the practice of this dance, which has been particularly appreciated in France for more than thirty years.

### ***À bras le corps***

The techniques adapted by the choreographers infiltrate their creations, sometimes in spite of themselves. The dancer and choreographer **Boris Charmatz** trained initially in classical ballet and, even if he works in a radically contemporary spirit, his experience as a dancer is also marked by this initial training. It is abundantly discernible in ***À bras le corps***, a piece which he created in 1983 with **Dimitri Chamblas**. The diversity of the techniques used by the two dancers is quite visible here and their physical propositions bring together their extensive knowledge and expertise. The creation is imbued with these questions: "What is the difference between being a man and dancing?" and "What affirms or does not affirm?"<sup>5</sup>, but also by the use that the choreographer-dancer makes of his body on a stage. The aptitude for virtuosity, the use of the ground, the power of falling and the work of the breath, for example, testify here to the various practices that many contemporary dancers use in working with their body.

## **2. Technical training in contemporary dance**

### **The factors of movement according to Laban**

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<sup>5</sup> Boris Charmatz, Isabelle Launay, *Entretenir*, Centre national de la danse – Les presses du réel, Pantin, p. 51.



French contemporary dance owes a great deal to the research into movement which marked the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century. Elaborate concepts by **Rudolf Laban** from the 1920s for example are today being rediscovered and implemented in the technical work of many dancers. This video documentary presents the four “factors” of movement according to Laban, which are combined in the concept of *Effort*: Flow, Weight, Space and Time.

Based on the opposition between two broad categories of movement, the danced gesture and the everyday gesture, here the teacher **Trisha Bauman** shows how each one of these factors of movement is distributed according to two opposite polarities.

Situations, temperaments and environment will lead everyone to adapt these factors of movement differently and to produce “their” dance. It is the way in which everyone articulates, varies and combines Weight, Time, Space and Flow that gives their singular quality to a phrase of movement.

### ***Grande leçon de Murray Louis - The Nikolaïs Technique***

**Alwin Nikolaïs** developed his technique from the approach to movement of the teacher **Hanya Holm**, herself influenced by **Rudolf Laban**. Nikolaïs distinguished the four following factors of movement: “motion” (the flow of the movement), time, space and form. In his school, the daily class, lasting three hours, was broken down into two hours of technique and one hour of improvisation. A weekly composition session supplemented the dancer's practical work. The technical part started with a long, quite dynamic, warm-up on the ground, continued with standing work and ended with movement around the floor; the latter based each time on a precise set of themes that referred to one of the factors of movement. These themes were used again in the hour of improvisation which followed the technical class. At Nikolaïs' school, the approach to movement favours the dynamic aspects and their transformation in space as well as the “off-centring” of the body, which consists in giving an equal importance to each part of the body.

### **Training – Ex.e.r.ce**

The techniques and body practices taught, the openness to other artistic fields and the contribution of theoretical tools are major elements of the training of the contemporary dancer. Several types of training exist in France and are based on various teaching choices. In Montpellier, the “**ex.e.r.ce**” training was created in 1998, led by **Mathilde Monnier**, then choreographer and director of the Centre chorégraphique national de Montpellier Languedoc-Roussillon. Now “ex.e.r.ce master of choreographic studies: research and re-presentation”, this training is intended as “a space of research and practical and theoretical experimentation directly related to choreographic creation”<sup>6</sup>. Teaching “is largely centred there on the notion of “practice”, or “practices”, in its broadest dimension, namely: all of the material and intellectual activities which cause a

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<sup>6</sup> Description of ex.e.r.ce master – [www.mathildemonnier.com](http://www.mathildemonnier.com)



transformation of social reality and, although in a different way, physical reality”<sup>7</sup>. The training is also based on the invitation of many choreographers and artists, as this film extract by **Karim Zeriahen** testifies, *Ex.e.r.ce, un catalogue* (2004).

### **Credits:**

#### Extracts selection

Geisha Fontaine

#### Texts

Geisha Fontaine

#### Production

Maison de la Danse

### **Author's biography:**

Dancer and choreographer (company "Mille Plateaux associés", with Pierre Cottreau), but also researcher in dance and doctor in philosophy, Geisha Fontaine is notably the author of the book *Les Danses du temps* (CND, collection Recherches, 2004) and of the accompanying booklet of the teaching tool *La Danse contemporaine en questions* co-produced by the National Dance Center and the Institut français in 2014 and from which this Parcours was written in the Numeridance collections.

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<sup>7</sup> Mathilde Monnier, *Interview with Didier Plassard and Mathilde Monnier* – [www.mathildemonnier.com](http://www.mathildemonnier.com)