



Dancing bodies

One of the issues in contemporary dance consists of seeing, approaching and working with the body differently than in the past. It's about encouraging an "exploration of the body as a sensitive and thinking material"¹.

This process echoes the transformations in the representations of the body in industrialised societies from the 1960s onwards. We now favour a body that is less constrained, able to engage in multiple experiences.

Contemporary choreographers and dancers seek to subvert an overly trained dancing body. They want to break away from the established ideals and to question what defines, but also limits, the "dancing body".

Moreover, the practice, the perception and the experimentation with the body are decisive factors in the work of the contemporary dancer. He seeks to cultivate his awareness of his own body, while the choreographer seeks to draw on the body's different competences. Depending on his style and his aesthetic concerns, he will not use the same bodies or thus the same performers.

This theme of "corps dansants" (dancing bodies) provides an opportunity to question the variety of bodies offered by contemporary dance, from the glorious bodies to the "ungainly" bodies, and the greater or lesser visibility of certain bodies. But it is also the way of showing a body that changes: from complete nudity to the completely hidden or covered body. It will also look at how the body *dances*, whether it is an "expert" or an amateur, and the forms of its *presence* on stage.

1. Challenging the ideal

d'Indicibles Violences

In *d'Indicibles Violences*, choreographed by **Claude Brumachon**, the body of the dancers is a virtuosic, sporty, agile body. It expresses a virile animality which, according to the choreographer, "travels to the interior of a volcano of extreme flesh"². This body also makes reference to Greek statuary; it is sculptural and falls within the criteria of "traditional" beauty. It is expert and admirable. It is a body ideal found in contemporary dance, but one from which other choreographers have wanted to emancipate themselves.

Sans titre

¹ Annie Suquet, "Le corps dansant, un laboratoire de la perception", in *Histoire du corps – Les mutations du regard, Le XX^e siècle*, Seuil, 2006, p. 413

² Claude Brumachon, description of the creation – www.ccn-brumachonlamarche.com



Raimund Hoghe wanted “to throw his body into the struggle”. He thinks that “physical handicaps shock people more than violence on stage” and suggests “an appeal for imperfection”³. Raimund Hoghe, the German choreographer and dancer, has a hunchback. His body subverts all the ideals attributed to the dancer's body. In *Sans titre*, his body communicates with that of the Congolese dancer **Faustin Linyekula**. This choreography, which brings Africa and the West face-to-face, involves bodies that contemporary dance has gradually accepted. Here, black skin and a white hunchback become an artistic and poetic medium.

Questioning representations of the body also concerns the South African choreographer **Robyn Orlin**. Orlin criticises the ideological use of physical criteria, in particular in *Daddy, I've seen this piece six times before and I still don't know why they're hurting each other...* In this piece, a dancer covers herself in flour to become an impeccable white swan – this unavoidable referent of the Western ballet culture. The ideal body of the dancer is thus put into perspective and questioned. Contemporary dance involves a diversity of dancing bodies, as Raimund Hoghe puts it: “I ask the question – to what extent and how, during the Third Reich, exclusion was possible, and to what extent and how it is possible today. What is happening with our bodies today?”

Olivier Dubois – La minute du spectateur

Contemporary dance thus uses atypical and varied bodies. The dancer and choreographer **Olivier Dubois** is himself “generously” proportioned. In his first creations, he confronts the exhibition of his body and what this means for his sense of privacy. Referring to his first choreography, he writes: “I'm mounting resistance. With *Pour tout l'or du monde...*, I wanted it to be like a chronicle of a martyr, a summary of war...” Olivier Dubois participates in a battle of bodies intending to conquer a place, and in particular on a stage. The choreographer has also performed the role of the Faun, in response to Nijinsky's legendary choreography *L'après-midi d'un faune (The Afternoon of a Faun)*, which is generally performed by much more conventionally beautiful dancers. In his proposals, the body of Dubois is no longer characterised by its physical aspects, but by the artistic setting which it expresses. Any body can thus become a medium, an ally and the main symbol of an aesthetic engagement.

Skull*Cut

In contemporary dance, the body of the dancer is sometimes also naked. Nudity is a means of restoring the dancing body to its original state. But the body can also be hidden. In *Con forts fleuve* created by **Boris Charmatz** in 1999, the bodies are completely covered, included the face which is masked by a pullover. In *Skull*Cut*,

³ *Jeter son corps dans la bataille* (Throwing his body into the struggle) – www.raimundhoghe.com



choreography by **Christian Rizzo**, the dancer and choreographer **Rachid Ouramdane** looks like a motorcyclist, from his (helmeted) head to his (booted) feet. He thus becomes a silhouette, both human and undefined. It is a recognisable body whose volumes and postures are emphasised more than if the face and skin were visible. The figure of the motorcyclist is an archetype; but as it is employed here, it changes the elements relating to the dancing body. It results in a strange impression where we are disturbed by a moving body we can perceive, but without really identifying the person we see.

2. The work and presence of the body

Collection particulière

The body is a strange entity that many choreographers transform to the point of making it unrecognisable. What matters to them is using the body to explore new possibilities or to concentrate on a physical element. In *Collection particulière*, **Maria Donata d'Urso** works with the plasticity of her body and creates astonishing images in which the contours of her body change radically. She particularly emphasises the role of the skin and the points of support. She questions "the concept of surface which she feels in the physical contact with the ground, but also in the visible space of the stage"⁴. According to the journalist Rosita Boisseau, *Collection particulière* is "a solo obsessed by the material of the body which carves the gestures directly from the carnal body"⁵. This body material becomes an abstract, moving sculpture that plays with asymmetry. Here the body is the subject of multiple metamorphoses which give it infinite outcomes.

Zombie Aporia

When he is on stage, the dancer combines a technical skill, a method of interpretation and a form of presence. However, the way in which the body is offered to the gaze of the audience varies according to the dancers and the style of the choreographers with whom they work. In *Zombie Aporia*, created by **Daniel Linehan** in 2011, the three dancers, through their performance, generate a direct and childlike relationship with the spectators. The dancers engage in the relationships between what you do, what you dance, what you say and what you hum, as if it's business as usual. This obviousness nevertheless ends up involving the spectators in much more complex stratagems, which gradually emerge from the piece. Indeed, "this apparently slight musical proves to be a manifesto against the conditioning of bodies and minds"⁶.

⁴ Quoted by Gwénola David, "Maria Donata d'Urso - L'interprète du corps", *Danser*, May 2005

⁵ "Collection particulière", Rosita Boisseau, *le Monde*, 5 June 2005

⁶ Presentation by Daniel Linehan, *Arte Journal*, 14 November 2011 – www.arte.tv



LEX

The perception of the performer depends on the expectations of the spectators on what a dancer is and the representations of the body that they associate with it. The body is the medium for multiple projections and affects, also within the choreographic field. Indeed, choreographers, programme creators and critics also refer to a certain image of the dancer and his body.

Geisha Fontaine and Pierre Cottreau conceived **LEX** while tackling the accepted expressions of choreographic criticism to refer to the body of the dancer. Would the best dancer be the most virtuosic, most moving, most beautiful etc.? The two choreographers connect the qualities of the “good” dancer and his place in the field of work and the laws which govern it. What criteria does a dancer need for a successful audition? How does he then demonstrate his artistic competences while working with the choreographer? On what is the value granted to him based? **LEX** takes on several assets given to the dancer and to recurring choreographic figures (slow motion, sequence, unison, canon, solo, duet, quartet) to question the function of the dancer-performer. “And what if, in spite of its experimental and subjective role, artistic creation was only one subset of “global society”, of the great commercial bazaar?”⁷

Jeu de société

The body of the dancer is right at the heart of creation in dance, but certain choreographers sometimes wish to create with “ordinary” bodies with no dance training. It is a means of treating movement and stage presence in a process which is significantly different to working with professionals. The formats of these achievements are multiple: shows, films, photographs. **Philippe Jamet**, for example, has directed many films with amateurs whom he met in various countries – his **Portraits dansés**. For **Jeu de société**, the choreographer **Stéphanie Aubin** joined the photographer **Arnaud Baumann** in order to create a dance made up of poses struck by the inhabitants of a city. Tall and not so tall, male and female, young and not so young, the bodies are multiple and “invent in front of the lens a common movement, each one based on the position of its predecessor and imagining the continuation of its momentum”⁸. One hundred inhabitants of Reims have participated in this project. It results in a pluralist choreography where the movement is built up and broken down simultaneously, a little in the manner of the photographer Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904) whose snapshots capture the various phases of the movement.

Jeu de société – Remix

⁷ Florence Marguerat, “Aveux d’une nouvelle Lex”, *Journal de l’ADC*, n° 34, September - December 2004.

⁸ Description of *Jeu de société* - www.manegedereims.com



Jeu de société - Remix takes up the movements from *Jeu de société* again. The dancer **Frédéric Seguet** adapts the choreography and proposes a charming version where he plays with the absent, their bodies and their expressions. The postures of the amateurs who were photographed and brought to life by the choreographer **Stéphanie Aubin** become the material for the dancer, who sometimes makes them more complex. He thus injects a jump with new momentum, sharpens the speed of a turn or amplifies a bend. *Jeu de société - Remix* reverses the more frequent situation where amateurs appropriate a proposal made by professionals.

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 Numeridanse collections.

The "Dancing Bodies" Course was created thanks to the support of the General Secretariat of the Ministry of Culture and Communication - Department for the Coordination of Cultural Policies and Innovation (SCPCI)