



Dance at the crossroad of the arts

For the American choreographer Merce Cunningham, “dance is an independent art.” But, he adds, other elements may come in and enrich it. As it turns out, since dance became a performance art in the West towards the end of the Renaissance, it is never really alone on stage! It is dressed in costumes which emphasize, amplify or constrain the dancer's gesture and add to its texture. Equally, it is surrounded by light, thanks to the magic of electricity, a new resource for the stage. Finally, it is tuned to the melodies and tempo of an orchestra devoted to its service. So, musicians, writers, painters but also designers and costumiers join the choreographer to contribute together, through their different skills, to the final work.

Beyond this first kind of collaboration, related to stage performance, dance went in search of other arts as sources of inspiration in order to renew its language. By interacting with architecture, music, circus or theatre, with which it shares the common ground of space, rhythm, virtuosity, narration... dance explores new possibilities and is ceaselessly reinventing itself. The eight sequences of this Theme illustrate this point. A panorama, which emphasizes the openings in which dance, as a living art, continually participates.

1. An idea of integral art

Parade

As producer and director of the Ballets Russes company, Serge Diaghilev saw ballet as the place where the arts could flow together: dance, music and painting contributed on an equal footing to the created work. “When I am producing a ballet, I never lose sight for a moment of each of these three factors,” he said. With the end of the First World War, Diaghilev aspired to make the Ballets Russes the avant-garde of European artistic creativity and brought together modernist painters, musicians and writers. The result was the ballet **Parade** premièred in May 1917 in Paris. It was Jean Cocteau who came up with its subject: an itinerant circus troupe parades in front of a big top and invites passers-by to come and watch their acts. The composer Erik Satie wrote the music for the ballet. He introduced a rag-time number: this was the first time that jazz had appeared on the stage. Pablo Picasso, for whom this was the first collaboration with the performing arts world, designed the sets and costumes. He worked closely with the choreographer, Léonide Massine. For the “manager” characters, he produced cubist constructions which turned them into real “set men”, whose choreography was dictated by the structure. The painter and the choreographer accomplished here, in the words of Apollinaire, “the marriage of painting and dance, of sculpture and facial expression, which is a clear sign of the birth of a more complete art.” (Ballets Russes programme, May 1917).



Crucible

It is this same desire to make all these components of a show work together that underpins the work of Alwin Nikolais. But this time, the choreographer himself keeps hold of all the strings. This comes as no surprise: this American artist, who could turn his hand to anything, started out as a puppeteer. For Nikolais, choreography is an art of totality in which movement, colour, form and sound play an equal part. Approaching the stage with the eye of a painter or sculptor, he was one of the first to find a dynamic role for lighting and image techniques. The luminous slide projections and optical effects, like here in **Crucible**, transform the dancers' bodies into a sort of mobile screen, which shows displays of colours and sketches glowing forms. By the combined action of dance and light, the whole stage space is set in motion to produce a theatre of abstraction, where each member of the audience can let his or her imagination run free. These visions, often magical, illustrate why their creator was called a magician!

2. The architecture of movement

Les 7 planches de la ruse / Terrain vague

In **Les 7 planches de la ruse**, Aurélien Bory revisits the principle of the Tangram, a traditional Chinese game consisting of 7 geometrical parts which can be combined in many different ways. On stage, the blocks – transformed into wooden giants – are moved, assembled and built into a mobile architecture which increases the dance's available spaces. This is the point where architecture and choreography meet: both address the issue of space, perspective and how the world is perceived. For the dancer, might not movement be compared to a living architecture shaped by the paths taken by the body? This was the thinking of the German theorist and choreographer Rudolph Laban in the 1930s, for whom “space is a hidden feature of movement and movement a visible aspect of space”.

So, in Aurélien Bory's giant Tangram, the geometric assemblies offer the dancers a range of lines, between horizontality and verticality, which prolong, reduce or suspend the gesture. Provoking an interplay of solids and voids, they divide up spaces in which the dancers can insert themselves, lean or risk instability. Similarly, in this sequence from **Terrain vague**, Mourad Merzouki's choreography displays the range of points of support that dance can make use of. Whether this is the ground, the true partner for the break dancer, or a mast that invites the defying of gravity, the dancer can vary the points of contact – feet, hands, head – with the support offered by the stage set. Free, then, to explore the celestial heights, the dancer turns into an acrobat or stunt pilot. Dance also likes its act to be a real performance from time to time!

3. When word joins with gesture



Tempus fugit / The Fox and the Crow

But what on earth are you saying? There's a question that one might well ask of dance. How can choreography “say” without starting with a text, without recourse to words, with the body and gesture as its only support? Does it have ambitions to retell a story? This was precisely the issue when modern dance wanted to distance itself from the theatrical model which ballet had moved towards in the eighteenth century, and to free itself from these conventional narratives. In the 1960s, Merce Cunningham expressed the notion that movement “is expressive beyond all intention”: it recounts nothing but itself and dance speaks of what it is to be alive. This concept, which makes a clean break with the codes of the choreographic genre and leads to a very formalised approach to movement, does not prevent today's choreographers turning back to theatricality and calling upon text where necessary, “saying” as much acting. In **Tempus Fugit**, by the Belgian choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, the dancer suddenly begins speaking. But her voice is soon swallowed up again by gesture. As if words are not enough – or as if they disturb – the other dancers come back rapidly to lend a hand, in a kind of half-invented sign language borrowed from Indian dance. But here the episode tips back over into dance, in a tongue-in-cheek fantasy reference to Bollywood musical cinema.

As for Dominique Hervieu, she borrows techniques from Georges Méliès' films, using special effects to stage the La Fontaine fable *The Fox and the Crow*. in her own fashion. Rather than illustrating this literary work, she prefers to turn to montage effects. First of all, the text is recited in several languages, and transformed into the sound material for the choreography. This is then superimposed on video projections, confronting the real with the imaginary, the living with the virtual, to create an unconventional reading with mixed accents of the original story.

4. Were you dancing? it's time to play !

Echoa / El Farruquo y su grupo

The four protagonists of **Echoa**, unveil a story without words for us in this show by Thomas Guerry and Camille Rocailleux. In embarking on a kind of pantomime, the performers involve the body equally in its musical and movement capacities. The breath, the chest, the mouth are transformed into a musical instrument and add their sound to the choreography. Here dancer and musician merge, become echoes of each other. The dance gives the impression of having always been inseparable from the music. And yet, during the twentieth century, dance freed itself progressively to the point of attaining total autonomy. From the 1950s, Merce Cunningham decided that the two arts on stage would have only an equal duration by way of link, each operating simultaneously but completely independently. The musicality of the dance unfolds according to strictly choreographic criteria. Even so, there are dances that maintain a narrow, even intensely close, rapport with the music. Flamenco is one of these. In this sequence, the young and



talented **Farruquito** links a fervent series of "taconéos" (stamped with the heels), defying the rhythm of the guitars and "palmas" (clapped accompaniment), to the enthusiastic encouragement of the musicians and singers. Here it is the dancer's foot, with its stamping, which becomes the percussion instrument and plays a full part in the musical performance.

To go further:

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