



Dance in Quebec

Together in movement

This Course introduces several extracts of works by contemporary Quebecois choreographers, situating them in an anthropological perspective. Through their choreographic work, artists introduced offer a unique form of togetherness expressed through dance. These works are suffused with influences as diverse as line dancing, traditional and native dance to form a mosaic of the multiple identities of Quebecois dance.

In today's multicultural Quebec, the concept of identity is complex, delicate and changing. It is not defined by the linearity of relationships of blood or origin but by a belonging to a common land, one inhabited by the First Nations before becoming home to the French who came for commercial exploitation, followed by the English who finished the process of colonisation. This land inhabits the imagination and is evoked by several choreographies. Through group movement, whereby time and space are given their fair share, the choreographers cast their artist eyes on our ways of being together and negotiating our common spaces.

Through his choreographies Jean-Pierre Perreault has attempted to bring alive the beings who populate these lands, these wide open spaces that either swallow up or carry the dancers and reveal their vulnerability. Harold Réhaume, who has performed for Perreault, also questions in his own way the theme of the individual's position within society. At the dawn of the new millennium, this individual appears as a fluid, mobile entity.

In Quebec, the need for consensus inherited from native peoples imbues lifestyles and relationships. Negotiation is prioritised over authority, and the dancing bodies are extensions of expression. The Inuit people among whom the choreographer lived when she spent time in the Far North inspire Marie Chouinard's *Les Trous du ciel*. The work represents an incursion into a tribal and visceral world where voice and movement are in symbiosis, illustrating the organic nature of links between Man and nature.

With the quest for identity as its backdrop, the intermixing and hybridity that had already appeared in so-called traditional dances mark the history of Quebec. The first imported dances were modelled on those of the 17th century French courts. Then came the line *contredanses* in vogue in England, followed by Irish, Scottish and American jigs in the early 20th century. The Zogma collective brings new life to tradition by bringing jigs up to date to give them a contemporary expression. In *Rapailé*, the dance is paced by the vibrant and engaged poetry of Gaston Miron, first published in 1970.



Several contemporary dances echo this pooling of territory and the identity quest that goes along with it. Group dances with shared rhythm, collective movements and carriers of a reinvented togetherness represent ephemeral micro societies. The Congolese-born, Montreal-based choreographer Zab Maboungou describes the rhythm of *Mozongi* as "more of a persistence than a recurrence"¹. In this incantatory group piece, weight and breathing articulate the movements and suggest a here and now that is constantly being renewed. With both Frédéric Gravel and Sylvain Émard, the tribe is bedecked with festive colours. It may take the form of a tightly woven group that wanders around the stage in a provocative yet comical way, proudly demonstrating its belonging to the cultural melting pot of the 21st century. It may also become the opportunity for a fun and inclusive form of togetherness, as in Sylvain Émard's *Grand Continental*. Here, the choreographer nods to the line dances of his childhood, in which the identity quest is dissolved into the joyful pleasure of dancing.

1. Small societies

***Nuit*, Jean-Pierre Perreault (1986)**

The theme of the group as a micro society is one of Jean-Pierre Perreault's leitmotifs. In *Joe* (1984) as well as *Nuit* and his later works, we find often anonymous yet endearing beings that win their freedom at the expense of a separation from the group. Duets, solos and ensembles are alternated to form a mosaic of the multiple individual aspirations within a collective. "Within a gathering, the *I* refrains from existence. Alone, among others, he or she discovers common stagnation and collective frenzy and turbulence."² Perreault's stage spaces replace people in both their humility and their grandeur within this territorial immensity. Time is collective, cadenced by the simplicity of the steps. "Perreault works on the traces of a collective memory modulated by the more intimate one of each spectator."³ It should be no surprise that he makes an allusion to traditional percussive dances. Today, *Joe*, his key work, is being performed again with guests invited, for a period of a few days, to "*Vivre Joe*" or "experience Joe" in the continuity of a lively transmission of choreographic heritage.

***Fluide*, Harold Rhéaume (2012)**

According to Jewish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, the 2000s are the years of "liquid modernity", whereby network connections have replaced the overly stable concept of structure.⁴ This fluidity, which enables connection as much as disconnection, is explored

¹ <http://www.nyata-nyata.org/oeuvres/repertoire-mozongi/>

² MARTINEAU, Sylviane, "Le paradoxe d'être" *Jean-Pierre Perreault, Choreographe*, Les Herbes rouges /essais, 1991, p.41.

³ FEBVRE, Michèle "Les paradoxes de la danse-théâtre" *La danse au défi*. Montreal: Parachute, 1987, p. 83.

⁴ BAUMAN, Zygmunt, *La vie liquide*, Éditions du Rouergue, 2006.



in the choreography of Rhéaume. The social metaphor returns the focus to the individual. It is not so much the place of the individual within the collective that is explored, but rather society built as a flexible and mobile network between individuals.

Les Trous du ciel, Marie Chouinard (1991)

Inspired by the lives of native tribes in the Far North, *Les Trous du ciel* is the first piece by Marie Chouinard's group. It is a transitional work where voice and breathing, carried by diaphragmatic momentum, sculpt a fascinating organicity in the bodies. An ode to the human tribe and the wide open spaces of the North deployed under a celestial vault through which – according to an Inuit legend – the light of the stars reaches us through holes in the sky. The dance is performed in a series of timeless rituals embodied through undulating and jubilant movement.

2. "I remember"

Rapaillé, Frédérique-Annie Robitaille et Dominique Desrochers (2008)

With its very personal way of interlacing individual and collective destinies, Gaston Miron's *L'Homme rapaillé* is considered one of the most important Quebecois novels of the 20th century. The work "...remains an aesthetic response to the problematics of Quebecois culture. It confronts the linguistic alienation and humiliation of the colonised person and invades the national conscience."⁵ Like any language, dance relies on orality to remain alive. By setting their jig to the verses of Miron, the urban folklore collective Zogma literally puts the issue of identity in movement. Incarnated in the rhythms and bodies, the texts acquire a new sensuality. By incorporating the rhythms of language, dance becomes living memory and unleashes its entire range of meanings.

3. A place of belonging

Gravel Works, Frédéric Gravel, (2012-2013)

A series of small choreographic scenes woven together into a quilt. It also brings to mind photographs taken with a polaroid camera; snapshots which are not necessarily refined but which attest to slices of life that one might put together to make a memory album of our multiple identities. A "trashy" aesthetic, but without any heaviness. A nonchalant, postmodern community.

Mozongi, Zab Maboungou (1997-2014)

⁵ ROYER, Jean, "Gaston Miron, retour sur L'homme rapaillé", *Lettres québécoises : la revue de l'actualité littéraire*, n° 105, 2002, p. 17-18, <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/37317ac>



The piece *Mozongi* is Mabougou's response to the solo *Incantation* (1995). This powerful, deeply rooted group piece uses the technique of *loketto*, which allows the breath to travel through the body in order to generate a rhythmic and postural engagement in movement that gives new energy and dynamism to the weight of the body. This comfortable, shared relationship with weight underscores the expression of *Mozongi*, in which the group is experienced as a network of individual roots. Onstage, a dancer from different origins, reunited by the breathing of the drums, makes full use of the floor into which it anchors a communion between humans and territory.

Grand continental, Sylvain Émard (2009)

For Sylvain Émard, *Grand continental* is a means of getting back to basics and restore a sense of collectivity by breaking down the barriers between formal dance and popular dance⁶. By involving non-professionals in his festive choreographic gatherings, the boundary between audience and participants is blurred, and dance becomes a place for conviviality, shared identity and common territory. The two prior months of rehearsals has created a strong sense of belonging within the group. The aesthetic experience becomes a transformative one that allows the audience to be affected by the humanity of the performers. The creation of the first *Grand Continental* in 2009 for the Festival de Théâtre des Amériques (Festival TransAmériques) snowballed, leading to other stagings that have since taken place in Mexico, the United States and Korea.

The challenging of territory, identity and different ways of being are watermarked into the work of several Quebecois artists and choreographers. Today, discussions on the conservation and transmission of Quebecois choreographic heritage invite us to change our perspective of these challenges.

⁶Round table: "What makes crowds dance?" BANQ, 29 April 2014.



To go further :

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MABOUNGOU, Zab. *Heya. Danse ! historique, poétique et didactique de la danse africaine*. Montréal : Éditions du CIDIHCA, 2005. 110 p.

TEMBECK, Iro, *Danser à Montréal : germination d'une histoire chorégraphique*. Montréal : Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1991. 335 p.

CHARTRAND, Pierre. *La Gigue dans tous ses états* [en ligne]. Disponible sur : <http://www.bigico.ca/perspectives/perspective-pierre-chartrand-2013/>

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Espaces chorégraphiques 2 [en ligne]. Globalia, dernière mise à jour, 2017. Disponible sur : <http://www.fondation-jean-pierre-perreault.org/fr/>

Toile-mémoire de la danse au Québec (1895-2000) [en ligne]. Pixel Circus, dernière mise à jour 2017. Disponible sur : <http://www.quebecdanse.org/rqd/memoire>



Credits :

Selection of excerpts

Geneviève Dussault

Text and bibliography selection

Geneviève Dussault

Production

Maison de la Danse

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The «An overview of dance in Quebec: together in movement» Course was launched thanks to the support of General Secretariat of Ministries and Coordination of Cultural Policies for Innovation (SCPCI)