



Dance in Quebec

Unreasonable bodies

This first overview of dance in Quebec will introduce you to the strange or provocative works that have marked the history of contemporary dance, principally in Montreal. The fruit of work by choreographers from different backgrounds, the extracts on show illustrate the body in all its states and bring out the diversity and vitality of Quebecois dance.

Terms that have often been used to characterise Quebecois dance include "rebellious", "free of tradition", "disobedient" and "eclectic". It is true that the dazzling development of a new rich and varied dance in the 80s is somewhat puzzling when we consider that theatrical dance was largely absent from Quebec before the second half of the 20th century. The clergy, with its presence in all areas of society, stigmatised any reference to the body, calling it the work of the devil. In this context, the "new dance" of the 80s is surprising for its inventiveness and unbridled physicality. Rather than drawing on academic foundations such as European dance, it was formed out of a series of upheavals, abandon and insolent provocations. The eruption of the Refus global (Total Refusal)¹ manifesto in 1948 in a society silenced by censure would open up a breach in monolithic mentality and provoke a radical surge towards modernity. In the text *La Danse et l'espoir* (Dance and Hope)² published along with the manifesto, Françoise Sullivan describes dance as "a spontaneous expression of intense emotions" and calls on dancers to "liberate the energies of their body" as "energy causes need and need dictates movements". This could be read as a prophetic definition of this thrilling dance which delivers us its unreasonable bodies powered by a thirst for movement and freedom.

Between the 70s and 80s, a few avant-garde dance companies including the Groupe Nouvelle Aire and the Groupe de la Place Royale became a breeding ground for a number of independent choreographers who felt an urgent need to develop their own forms of expression. The overblown emotions of Fortier and Léveillé's form of dance-theatre, the exploration of extremes of velocity in the work of Lock and Laurin, Bédard and Lachambre's search for unusual physicalities and the transgression of codes and genres in pieces by Saint- Pierre and Gaudet are among the different methods borrowed by these choreographers in order to find their own paths to freedom and ways with the body that had long been scorned. Solo and duet forms served as a laboratory for these

¹ *Refus global* is a manifesto published in 1948, written by the painter Paul-Émile Borduas and signed by fifteen other artists including painters, writers and dancers. Considered scandalous for the radical stances it took, it marked the beginning of modernity in Quebec art.

² SULLIVAN, Françoise, "La Danse et l'espoir", Text/Borduas, Montreal, Éditions Parti pris, 1974, p.1.



choreographer-performers to explore the subversive somatic potential of the body. These highly personal and subjective works thus redefined Quebec's choreographic history and founded this "tradition of no tradition"³, with the constant feature a high-risk face-off of the body, both on a physical and a symbolic level.

1. Automatist dance

Black and Tan, Françoise Sullivan (1948)

In 1948 Françoise Sullivan performed the first manifestations of a spontaneous form of dance that claimed an allegiance to the so-called automatist movement, which brought together artists from different backgrounds around the painter Paul-Émile Borduas. Sullivan had retained an anthropological and humanist approach from her time spent in New York with the dancer Francisca Boas, an approach that considers all dance as the manifestation of our individual and collective essence. When choreographing *Black and Tan*, Sullivan allowed herself to be guided by the music of Duke Ellington and began to take an interest in emerging movements. The dancer gave herself over to the bodily sensations that arose in the process, whether a rolling of the eyes or of the toes. The costumes, designed by fellow automatist Jean-Paul Mousseau, bring a timeless, shamanic aspect to the dance.

2. Overblown theatricality

Violence, Paul-André Fortier (1980)

Choreographed by Paul-André Fortier in 1980, *Violence* is part of a series of hard-hitting works produced during the decade. It is a fine illustration of the dance-theatre element of Quebecois dance. To emancipate himself from the formalism that characterised modern dance in Montreal, the choreographer uses an unsettling emotive register that explores the sexual and relational tensions of a neurotic couple played by the choreographer and Michèle Febvre. The repetition of sequences of movements to saturation point, the emotional detachment of the characters against a backdrop of anodyne background music and the phallic use of a garden hose create the distance required for the harshness of the piece and bring to mind the work of Pina Bausch.

Un peu de tendresse bordel de merde!, Dave St-Pierre (2006)

This extract of *Un peu de tendresse bordel de merde!* (2006) revisits the theme of the couple. Dave St-Pierre choreographs with urgency, an urgent need to live and to tell. This sense of *carpe diem* is expressed through dance that is visceral, physical and raw.

³ TEMBECK, Iro, *Danser à Montréal*, Presses de l'Université du Québec, Montreal, 1991.



This time, indifference and detachment are no longer evoked by the lightness of the background music but by the silent and impassive presence of a row of dancers seated upstage. The choreographer's same cold and lucid approach is expressed in these heavy, shameless bodies caught up in an unceasing cycle of falls.

3. The intoxication of movement

Duo 1, Édouard Lock (1987)

In 1991, Solange Lévesque referenced the "glorious bodies"⁴ evoked by Saint-Paul to describe physicality in Quebecois dance. This term, which refers to supernatural powers and eternal happiness, is well suited to this intoxication of movement that transforms the dancer through their moments of abandon, with flowing freedom and kinetic euphoria. Édouard Lock and his muse Louise Lecavalier have galvanised the crowds with a form of gesture where risk and velocity grip us in a continual state of alert. Choreographed in a flash, *Duo 1* features an improbable couple. Here, the choreographer subverts the costume codes of the genre and the rules of classic *pas de deux*. The tutu-clad ballerina displays surprising strength when lifting her partner, and her horizontal pirouettes seem to be drawn towards the floor, destroying the utopia of flight with every movement. We catch ourselves wondering what fragility might be hiding behind all this strength.

Cartes Postales de chimère, Louise Bédard (1996)

As a woman travels, the route carved by her dance recounts this journey in space and time. Louise Bédard's copious movement in *Cartes postales de chimère* resembles a foreign language whose words we cannot understand but whose meaning and emotive inflections we are able to make out. Performed by the choreographer, who builds this idiosyncratic language with ease, *Cartes postales de chimère* recalls the freedom of automatist dance and its female roots.

The body, challenged

Quebecois choreographers in the 2000s have benefited from the freedom won by their predecessors. Although trained in contemporary dance schools and taught somatic approaches, their thirst for rebellion has not been quenched. The body has become the new field of investigation: how can the body be reinvented through dance? What body is dancing? What is the body?

⁴LÉVESQUE, Solange, "Les Corps Glorieux", *Les Vendredis du corps*, Cahiers de théâtre Jeu, Festival International de Nouvelle Danse, 1993.



Je suis un autre, Catherine Gaudet (2014)

The half-human, half-animal couple that Catherine Gaudet presents in *Je suis un autre* confounds expectations. Shifting between conflict and embrace, this androgynous couple evolves in fits and starts. The movement is impulsive, the dynamism heightened and the energy constant. Even when intertwined, the human forms take on plant-like appearances.

Snakeskin, Benoit Lachambre (2012)

Attention to sensations is at the heart of Benoit Lachambre's creative work which, through its meticulous study into perception, attempts to break down the barriers of the imagination and release the body from its preconceptions. Beyond the principle of transformation, the metamorphosis in *Snakeskin* implies the coexistence of several bodies, the joint presence of multiple states caused by different relationships to the space and the music, performed live. By adjusting his relationship to gravity through suspension or resilience, interacting with a network of horizontal wires, Lachambre plunges us into a multi-sensory somatic experience.

When Sullivan wrote in 1948 that "we need to reconsider Man organically and not be afraid to go as far as is necessary in the exploration of one's entire self,"⁵ she was unknowingly proclaiming the manifesto of unreasonable bodies in Quebecois dance.

⁵ SULLIVAN, Françoise, op. cit., p.1.



To go further :

LINDBERG, Allana. *From automatism to Modern Dance, Françoise Sullivan with Franziska Boas*. Toronto: Dance Collection Dance, 2003. 157 p.

MASSOUTRE, Guylaine. « L'affirmation du danseur : les solos de Paul-André Fortier », in WEBB, Brian, *Ode au corps : Une histoire de danse*, Canada, The Banff Centre Press, National Arts Centre, Canada Dance Festival, 2002. 119 p.

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

DAVIDA, Dena. « L'énergie brute; perspective esthétique de la jeune relève de la danse montréalaise », in *Actes du Colloque "Estivales 2000" Canadian Dancing Bodies Then and Now / Les corps dansants d'hier à aujourd'hui au Canada*, Toronto, Dance Collection Danse Press/es, 2000.

FEBVRE, Michèle, « Danse insoumise », in *Françoise Sullivan*, Montréal, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal, éd. Parachute, 2003, p. 68.

LEVESQUE, Solange. « Les corps glorieux », in GELINAS, Aline (dir.), *Les Vendredi du corps/Jeu*, Montréal, Cahiers de théâtre Jeu, 1993, p. 37-50.

MASSOUTRE, Guylaine, « La douloureuse beauté d'exister » in SAINT-PIERRE, Christian, *Cahiers de Théâtre Jeu*, n° 108, Cahier de théâtre Jeu inc., septembre 2003, p. 150-155.

Website

Toile-mémoire de la danse au Québec (1895-2000) [en ligne]. Québec Danse. 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

Author's biography :

Lecturer in the Department of Dance at the Université du Québec à Montréal since 1984, Geneviève Dussault teaches movement analysis, body rhythm and the history of dance. She has a master's degree in dance from York University, Toronto (1991), which deals with the comparative analysis of Baratha-Natyam and Baroque dance. She is also certified in movement analysis by the Laban / Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies. (1996). She has worked as a choreographer-performer in contemporary and baroque dance and has performed in Canada and Europe with the support of the Quebec Council of Arts and Letters.

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