



## Hand Dances

Why does hand dancing make us laugh or smile and why is it generally ever-so rhythmic and melodious?

Maybe because, all of a sudden, our hands become just like our feet, everything seems to be turned upside-down and becomes poetic, sensitive, fragile.

Do dancing hands take us back to childhood or to imaginary worlds, does personal fantasy make all stories possible?

Paws, fins, wings or hands... out of all the mammals on the Earth, only humans and primates have hands.

Thanks to their 5 fingers, 27 bones, umpteen muscles and lifelines, hands grasp, manipulate, count, pray, caress, accompany speech and even go as far as replacing it with sign language.

In the collective psyche, music is played by two hands and sometimes even four and feet dance.

Yet, hands are also highly capable of calling the tune, leading the dance and using tables as a floor.

### 1. Rhythm

#### ***Table music - Thierry De Mey***

For this creation, performed by 3 percussionists and their 6 hands playing on a table, facing the public, Thierry de Mey highlights an ambience of various figures that give rise to a variety of sounds thanks to the different ways the hands strike the table: flat-hand, backhand, hand-chop, fist-hit, finger-flick, hand-edge, fingertips, stone.

What surprises is the contrast between the performers' stoicism and the variation of their hands, which are incredibly precise. Here, hands become real instruments and create a dance of sounds and gestures.

Whether he takes on dance or music, Thierry de Mey pursues movement first and foremost.

Jean-Marc Adolphe talks about "movement-music" when he defines Thierry de Mey's work, but the term choreography-music is also used.

With his *Light music*, he centre stages an orchestra conductor without an orchestra, a percussionist without percussion... a percussionist who "triggers sounds and musical sequences [with his hands, who] manipulates them in time and space, loops them, rips them apart, makes them resonate". He showcases only the hands along with the white streaks that they produce on a gigantic screen set up behind the musician-dancer. The performer's movements vibrate to sounds and images.

#### ***Folk you - Up & Over it collective***



Suzanne Cleary and Peter Harding present themselves as “hand dancers”. Mind-blowing Irish dance performers, they decided to use their hands to symbolize this dance where, traditionally, only legs and feet are required. They have produced a series of hilarious films that propose a fresh, new look to their dance, a rather quirky Irish dance...

Through these films, they intend to move Irish dance away from the all-predictable, highly-formatted pigeon-hole of major galas and international championships and rediscover the pleasure, the mischievousness and quintessence of the original rhythm.

This traditional dance, which migrated to the United States in the suitcases of thousands of Irish women and men, played a great role in music-hall and musical comedy dances that developed throughout the 20th century, in particular tap dancing.

## **2. Childhood, nostalgia**

### **« The Roll dance » extract from *Gold Rush* – Charlie Chaplin**

No-one can resist this dance that Charlie performs, on the edge of a restaurant table with two forks and two rolls of bread. He becomes a puppet-master and a dancer at the same time, he plays on the contrast between his hands and his facial expressions. The moment the dance and the music kick off, the rolls of bread become ‘real’ characters and we, as spectators, are immediately filled with empathy, which is boosted even more so by that of the female spectators sitting around Charlie’s table, and which we observe.

Charlie dares to play like a child and finds himself believing in his little bread roll-dancers; he takes us on a journey into his personal fantasy, into his imaginary world.

### ***Agwa* – Mourad Merzouki**

Of course, it’s only normal... we’re still thinking about Charlie’s bread rolls.

The strength of the last scene of this choreography lies in the sensitiveness, gentleness and attention that these hip-hop dancers, who are generally on their feet working on speed and virtuosity, place on their hands.

The hands, in consonance with the water that this work takes its inspiration from, connect us with the poetry and fragility of the performers.

### ***Le P’tit bal* – Philippe Decouflé**

Philippe Decouflé has always been interested in signs, movements and sketches, which can instantaneously, when we just observe them, conjure up a memory or provoke an emotion. He has always been fascinated by images and their spin-offs.

Backed by a song by Bourvil, which is of course nostalgic, Philippe Decouflé and Pascale Houbin use their hands to make signs and accessories dance. Instead of offering us play on words, they propose hand-play, visual and gestural winks that overwhelm us with



poetry, that delight us through the exactness and precision of their performance, that make us smile thanks to their considerate impertinence.

A table set on the edge of a field of wheat, four hands and wind-swept hair, creating a simple yet marvellous universal backdrop.

When the question is asked: “What part of your body inspires you most and is the first to dance?”, he answers: “My hands”<sup>1</sup>.

### ***Kiss & cry* – Michèle Anne De Mey**

An entire show, performed by hands and their fingers accompanied by a ballet of technicians, cameras and accessories.

This was the challenge that the filmmaker Jaco Van Dormael and the choreographer Michèle Anne de Mey took on... they refer to it as “nanodances”. Like two children, they create and film a miniature world on sight, where the dancers’ hands and fingers narrate the stories, which are projected directly unto a big screen.

The hands love, dance, travel, curl up together, climb, roam around different worlds, reminisce on life.

It is a story of recollection, where memories reconstitute themselves to the delight of our child-like eyes and where the nano-world mirrors our own infinitely great yet infinitely small world.

### ***Namasya* – Shantala Shivalingappa**

In the different traditional Indian dances, hands play a highly-codified, frequently narrative role that is rooted in a sacred, ancestral art.

In the Odissi, one of these dances, the hands portray 67 different positions. Decorated in detail, they deliver the melody, just like feet deliver the rhythm.

Shantala Shivalingappa, a kuchipundi dancer, transposes her knowledge of traditional dance to contemporary dance.

In “*Namasya*” she proposes 4 solos, choreographed with the complicity of Ushio Amagatsu, Pina Bausch and her own mother Savitry Nair. In each solo, she becomes aware of the vital role of the hands and, as such, places emphasis on them as dance incentives. Determined, strong, serious, light, subtle and gracious, her hands lead the way and prompt the rest of her body to follow suit.

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<sup>1</sup> *Panorama de la danse contemporaine*, Rosita Boisseau, Textuel, 2008, page 160



### To go further :

PEJU, Pierre. *Enfance obscure*. Paris : Gallimard, impr. 2011. 371 p. (Haute enfance).

PLOUVIER, Jean-Luc (dir.), ADOLPHE, Jean-Marc, IMBAULT, Charlotte. « Thierry de Mey », in *Mouvement*, n°59, 2011, p. 8.

### Website

Up and Overt It / Suzanne Cleary & Peter Harding [en ligne]. Up and Overt It, dernière mise à jour 2017. Disponible sur : <http://upandoverit.com/>

### Credits :

After years in dance-studies, at the Conservatoire d'Avignon, then at the National Center of Contemporary Dance of Angers, Julie Charrier is moving towards the production of documentary films and live performances captations mainly centered around contemporary dance for many production companies. As a consultant, then editorialist, she participated in the birth and development of Numeridanse.tv. She coordinates for the ACCN and the Ministry of Culture, delegation to dance, the digitization of the French choreographic heritage and created the site [www.30ansdanse.fr](http://www.30ansdanse.fr). She is responsible for the artistic direction and production of the 360 "Histoires d'espaces" collection, which questions the new possibilities that virtual reality offers to live performance.

### Excerpts selection

Julie Charrier

### Text

Julie Charrier

### Production

Maison de la Danse

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