



The committed artist

"I want to express the problems of our century!" This formula was used by the American Martha Graham, a leading figure in modern American dance, to state the intentions behind her choreographic work. By presenting primarily the body in movement, dance was able at last to depict the world and its agonies, to denounce the violence and failings of society, to lay bare the ordeals of human existence. Such are the ambitions of those committed choreographers who, whether over the course of a single work or longer term, choose to make their art both political and socially aware.

Here are eight of them. They come from the American, European and African continents. Their works offer a view at times raw, always without concession, of our time, our history, our humanity. Their ways of expressing this are sometimes reminiscent of other great modern dance works, in particular those of Pina Bausch. Beyond the message, the strength of their ideas comes from the physical involvement of their performers, completely devoted to their dance, straining to capture the essence of gesture. When it is necessary to take a stand, dance knows no half measures.

1. Disturbing public order

Un peu de tendresse bordel de merde /Ha ! Ha !

Un peu de tendresse bordel de merde seems to implore this young lady, hit by her unappeased desire and facing this male who scorns her need to hug. It is also the title of the Dave St Pierre show, enfant terrible of the quebec scene in which he exposes amorous behaviour and emotional demands. At the risk of being censured or prosecuted for indecent assault.

Evidenced by the opening sequence in which, barely seated, the audience suffers the assault of a battalion of dancers, all naked but wearing a blonde wig. With her comments funnily translated, the impudent mistress of ceremony bullies spectators, disturbs them from their comfortable seats and challenges their contributions." Funny? That might be going too far to describe the jokes or woolly-minded witticisms which follow thick and fast and have the seven performers of *Ha !Ha !*. laughing out loud. For hilarity becomes despicable when it veils indifference, when it dodges the world's serious issues. In this piece, Maguy Marin leaves choreographic elements aside in order to launch a more effective attack on this society of entertainment which consumes more than it acts, which enjoys itself rather than getting involved. There is nothing amusing here: it is the citizen's conscience of the onlooker, which is being forcefully addressed. And what if, in this parade of frivolous fun, the worrying threat of totalitarianism begins to rear its ugly head?



2. Dance as social comment

La mirada del Avestruz /Waxtaan

Oppression and violence are not the preserve of dictatorships. In the grip of a civil war, with the regular army set against guerrilla forces, Colombia lives in a climate of tension and fear which weighs heavily on its population. Tino Fernández wanted to bear witness to this with his company l'Explose. In *La Mirada del avestruz*, he brings together strong images which evoke memories of Pina Bausch's piece, "Café Muller". Here, the choreographer develops a furious dance, sculpted by exhaustion and resistance. Humiliating palpations, stifling yawns, harassing pursuits: the body struggles, suffers. He searches for the disappeared, symbolised by pairs of shoes scattered around the stage. Using his own force, he digs over the ground, into which the mortified flesh, after tearing itself apart, finally collapses.

Germaine and Patrick Acogny make use of satire to attack the leaders of the African continent. In this opening sequence of *Waxtaan*, the dancers parody politicians, the powerful men whose great speeches, with their profusion of gestures, provoke only the silence of inaction by way of echo – *Waxtaan* in Wolof means "endless talk". Beware of contention: only the dumb will find a place at their negotiating table! This scene is somewhat reminiscent of Kurt Jooss's "*The Green Table*" from 1932. The German choreographer was denouncing the destructive power of war and its absurdity. The opening tableau is set around a green table, a metaphor for billiards, around which decision makers, financiers, men of power, preoccupied with their own interests, are throwing world peace into jeopardy. This astonishingly premonitory work is considered to be one of the first great political ballets.

The second sequence of *Waxtaan* tackles the stereotypes in which western audiences often trap the African dancer, reduced to the image of the noble savage with rhythm in his blood. But it also allows a glimpse of a more interesting perspective. Prisoner of a blinkered view, the puppet picks up the strings of his destiny and weaves himself an identity in his own way, accommodating borrowings from outside, but remaining rooted in a tremendously rich cultural heritage.

3. Denouncing astracism and imperialism

Daddy, I've seen this piece.../Tempus Fugit

Clichés about Africa is a theme dear to South African choreographer Robyn Orlin. The same goes for racial discrimination, upon which the apartheid regime was founded. In "*Daddy, I've seen this piece six times and I still don't know why they are hurting each other*" (the artist is fond of particularly long titles), classical ballet, which has been exported the world over, is identified as an emblem of white supremacy. Consequence:



to have any hope of dancing in the indispensable “Swan Lake”, the ballerina has no choice but to hide her original colour. But in the end, in her desire to whiten herself, is she not “rolling herself in the flour”? (an untranslatable French idiom meaning “to con”). And it is with red, which of the blood shed by opponents of segregation, that the discrepancy in citizenship between Whites and Blacks is brought to an end. Nicknamed in her own country “a permanent irritation”, Robyn Orlin is not content with a univocal statement. Furthermore, for this show, she devised a device to provide different view-points: video capture looking down onto the stage, itself consisting of a set around which the audience as well as the performers can circulate and form their own opinion.

A multi-coloured, multicultural society, without any hitches or flaw? This utopian bet seems a long way off being won! But it is what Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, the Moroccan-born Belgian choreographer, presents in his piece *Tempus Fugit*. In this cosmopolitan chorus, rallied around an apparently unifying song, “Le Temps des Cerises”, a paternalistic voice breaks in to disrupt the unison. The sentiment of superiority, which underpins colonial imperialism, rises inevitably to the surface. And the former colony reinvests its self-imposed civilising mission to point out, in professorial tone, the only acceptable style of pronunciation: its own! From paternalism to xenophobia, the choreographer tells us, there is often just a small step, which the character loses no time in taking.

4. Hand to hand with reality

Still /Here /Incarnat

“My own story is partly one of exploitation”, states Bill T. Jones. “My eroticism, my sensuality onstage is always coupled with a wild anger and belligerence.” Black, homosexual and HIV positive, the choreographer knows all about exclusion and ostracism. In these two pieces with militant overtones, he gives an account of his own condition and gives a voice to those whom society has sidelined. *Still/Here* was devised based on accounts from AIDS sufferers, collected by the artist during “word and movement” workshops, which he led in hospitals. How can you go on living normally when you know you are condemned? How do you face up to the idea of a timetabled death? These are the kind of questions exorcised by this piece, which mingles dance, video and text. Here the choreographer evokes the loneliness of the affected person, his state that swings between dejection and fighting spirit, between sinking and bouncing back. It speaks of the worry about the body, infected and carrier of difference, which, though it rages to prevail, is threatened with stiffness. Through a succession of duets, the piece also celebrates support, sharing and human warmth.

Première in 1994, when AIDS was ravaging the world of dance, *Still/Here* moved the Lyon audience at Biennale de la Danse very deeply. In contrast, in the USA it sparked off



a lively controversy in which the press labelled the piece “Victim Art”, obliging the audience to feel compassion.

Human flesh: a sensitive subject broached by Lia Rodrigues in *Incarnat*. The Brazilian choreographer, who danced for Maguy Marin during the 1980s, chose to show suffering, in all its bloody reality. Her initial investigation was into the subjectivity of pain, the degree of sensitivity that an individual feels when affected by a drama, a wound. Into the level of empathy felt when others are wounded in body or in soul. The gripping character of this scene comes as much from its ambivalence as from its rawness. At least two readings are possible. The battered body tortured and tossed aside like rubbish by the torturers who have stripped it of its humanity. But there is also the body being born, attracted by the light and who must suffer the trial of birth in order to see it. Nursed and cared for, the wounded being finds composure again at last.

The idea with which this sequence ends is part of a socially aware conception that Lia Rodrigues, as a choreographic artist, does not want to stray from. The proof is there: her involvement with underprivileged people in Brazil. Her company is based in the heart of the Favela de Maré and its creative work runs alongside teaching projects to counter violence. “I see art as an instrument of awareness,” she says, “and awareness is the first step on the road to change.”

To go further:

GAUTHIER, Brigitte. *Le langage chorégraphique de Pina Bausch*. Paris : L'Arche, impr. 2009, cop. 2008. 213 p.

GUILBERT, Laure. *Danser avec le III^e Reich : les danseurs modernes sous le nazisme*. Paris : éd. Complexe, 2000. 448 p. (Librairie de la danse).

HESPEL, Olivier. *Robyn Orlin : fantaisiste rebelle*. Toulouse : éd. de l'Attribut ; Pantin : Centre national de la danse, DL 2007. 112 p. (Empreintes).

JONES, Bill T., GILLEPSIE, Peggy (collab.), DUMAIS-LVOWSKI, Christian (trad.). *Last night of earth*. Arles : Actes Sud, DL 1996, cop. 1997. 310 p. (Librairie de la danse).

ROUSIER, Claire. *Etre ensemble : figures de la communauté en danse depuis le XX^e siècle*. Paris : Centre National de la Danse, 2003. 384 p. (Recherches).

DUPUY, Dominique, (dir.). *Danse et politique : démarche artistique et contexte historique, synthèse du séminaire organisé par le Centre national de la danse et le Mas de la danse les 8-12 décembre 2001*. Pantin : Centre National de la Danse, 2003. 64 p. (CND Hors Collection).



Credits:

Excerpts selection

Olivier Chervin

Text and bibliography selection

Anne Décoret-Ahiha

Production

Maison de la Danse

Author's biography:

Anne Décoret-Ahiha is an anthropologist of dance, doctor of Paris 8 University. Speaker, trainer and consultant, she develops proposals around dance as an educational resource and designs participatory processes mobilizing corporeality. She animates the "Warming up of the spectator" of the House of the Dance.

The "engaged artist" Parcours was launched thanks the support of General Secretariat of Ministries and Coordination of Cultural Policies for Innovation.