



## The contemporary Belgian dance

The 1980s were characterized by a revival of all the elements that had been rejected in modern dance over the previous decades. *Nouvelle danse (New dance)* included all the choreographic trends that appeared during this period. As such, expression became synonymous with contemporary dance and, first and foremost, denoted stylistic shifts and a new choreographic fabric which included influential figures who would forge sustainably ahead in the field of dance. Inspirational movements and prestigious companies developed throughout Europe and in North America, and Belgium was no exception to this choreographic movement, which was somewhere between dance and theatre, raw energy and perfectly-honed movements, gestures and transdisciplinarity. It is difficult to contemplate this country, which has been a federal state since 1980, as a whole. The nation is fragmented on cultural, economic and linguistic levels, and choreography is no exception: “Belgium is a combination of London, Germany, Holland and Paris, a mixture between Romanesque and Germanic cultures. All of this produces a type of no man’s land: in Belgium, everything is ‘between’” stated the Flemish choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker. And, this is what we are going to try and explain in this Parcours.

### 1. *Nouvelle danse* and Belgium

In *Nouvelle danse* (new dance), research on movement continues to be essential. As such, it has created a breakaway from the radical nature of the philosophy of reject advocated by the post-modern Americans, led by Yvonne Rainer. Yet, the other changes that have taken place have not been systematic or identical in every country where this dance has emerged. New dance reconnects with theatricality and appropriated performance (Maguy Marin), it tells stories readily (Lloyd Newson), it explores states of the world (Edouard Lock), it plays with humour (Jean-Claude Gallotta) and it highlights the richness and diversity of its performers (Philippe Decouflé); and, as such, they assert their belonging, their involvement in a secular world that is far removed from the ethereal world of classical dance. But here, we have just given a few examples, an introduction to the extraordinary eclecticism of this choreographic fabric. This “new dance” label does not really connote a close-knit generation but rather a nebula of choreographers-dancers who see themselves more as individualities with their own style rather than disciples of a given school, as their elders could have viewed themselves.

In Belgium, the situation is highly-particular. Béjart and his *Ballet du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle (Ballet of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century)* have enjoyed a certain hegemony since 1959 that is in part due to their status as residents of La Monnaie Opera. This quasi-monopoly suffers but little from competition from other (neo) classical ballets, which would lead us to believe that this style is an indispensable one. Yet, new dance does not seem to be united when



confronted with these prevailing aesthetics, because it is not only the native language that divides Flemish and French-speaking choreographers but also the prosperity gap and the artistic approach. In Wallonia, companies have modest financial resources and the majority develop in an autonomous way. Although Flanders, on the other hand, is progressively moving away from its state of rural-based lifestyle, its power is increasing at the same time as its strong claim of identity. In the 1980s, the artists, who were isolated and few and far between, were slowly but surely offered financial backing from foreign co-producers and also from their own community, which was intent on conveying a positive image of their province, without being hindered by the Dutch language. Supported by reviews, theatres and festivals became springboards for these young Flemish artists.

## 1. Wallons

The French-speakers created works that were stripped bare, formal, applying a style that was quite similar to that of new French dance choreographers. However, from the 1990s onwards, many of them would begin questioning intermediality. At the frontiers of dance and new technology, we should mention Michèle Noiret in the solo *Demain (Tomorrow)* (2009). Dreaming of a movement that is impossible to be represented, she obliges spectators to choose the itinerary that their gaze would be held by between dance, movement recording and video-dance. As for Nicole Mossoux and Patrick Bonté, many of their performances develop a “disturbing strangeness”, situated at the crossroads between choreography and theatre. Occasionally incorporating manipulation (objects, puppets, etc.), as can be seen in *Kefar Nahum* (2008), they create sombre images that trigger strong emotions. Frédéric Flamand, for his part, is influenced by theatre but also by visual arts. Constantly pursuing creations where his dancers would merge with video and multimedia tools, he is known for his spectacular productions. With his trilogy on cities (*Metapolis, Body/Work/Leisure* and *Silent Collisions*, 2000-2003), he sets out to understand how architecture and urban patterns influence our behaviour and weigh on our motivity, a reflection that is once again developed in *La Cité Radieuse (The Radiant City)* that he created and produced in Marseille.

## 2. Flemish

As regards Flemish choreographers, on the contrary, we talked about a “shock style” in so far as their dance instigated output and paroxysm, using everyday and relatively unsophisticated gestural registers where breathing is a capital constituent element. As such, in *Ashes* (2010), Koen Augustijnen created coexistence between the acoustic convolutions of a soprano and of a countertenor, who develop a dialogue through several love duets, and incorporated a terrestrial and acrobatic dance, which is shaken by spasms. Priority was no longer given to the elegance or gracefulness of a movement but to highlighting vibrancy, impulse and the animality of the bodies. Horizontality, speed, flying and risk were the new parameters of their dance. *Spiegel*, created by Wim



Vandekeybus in 2006, was created from extracts that he borrowed from his previous creations – and in particular from the first of them, dating back to 1987. This is, therefore, emblematic of his work. We can see how the choreographer opened the spectrum of formal and emotional possibilities of movement and, as such, brought the impulsive, the uncontrolled to the fore. By privileging instantaneity, acts surpass forms, bodies become combatants and respiration, which can no longer be contained, becomes a scenic rhythm. Before our very eyes, the *Ultima Vez* dancers fulfil for us our dreams of flying, fantasies of momentum, impulse and of sudden acceleration. The dancers, who have become targets or projectiles, free their energies when confronted with catastrophes that are narrowly missed. Extreme situations that also conjure up agitated visions of the world. Other choreographers focus on more narrative forms; Alain Platel illustrates this trend (*Pitié*, 2009), which is occasionally akin to theatre, where actors, dancers, musicians and visual artists mix together on stage. Together – by exploring the tale, the identity games and through the accumulations of scenic materials, they strive to express a reality that is both raw and poetic at the same time, and which offers even more polysemic possibilities for performing their shows.

### 3. Belgian Dance among the Arts

Belgium is a small country which is situated at the crossroads of a myriad of influences. Its institution (and its separation of disciplines) is less burdensome than in France. More curious, less concerned about delimiting artistic genres and more sensitive to body movements from the 60s and 70s, these artists also share a taste for transdisciplinarity and develop transversal practices, irrespective of their linguistic identity: let's mention Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker whose artistic choices cannot be resumed as merely those of a “musician” choreographer for whom music plays a fundamental and organizational role in her work, as can be seen in *Fase* (1982) and in *Rosas danst Rosas* (1983). Because we should not forget that she has never stopped – from her very first works – querying literature, opera, the theatre, and also the cinema (the film *Tippeke*, for example, was used in her performance *Woud* in 1996) and, more recently, shedding light, her new axis of questioning the world. As such, she turns her work into a real puzzle that perpetually queries the frontiers between the arts. Jan Fabre, visual artist but just as much a choreographer, creates works for the stage which form a total theatre, comprising extreme situations that conjure up agitated visions of the world (from 1987 with *Das Glas im Kopf wird vom Glas*). Combining dance, opera and visual images, far removed from “pretty” forms and “good” taste, the decompartmentalization of the arts that he imposes has led to violent controversy vis-à-vis himself. The solo *Quando l'Uomo principale e una donna* (2004), danced by Lisbeth Gruwetz, who performs naked in olive oil, enables us, through the radical bias that associates vision and olfaction, to answer the incredible question: “what does dance smell of?”. And, last but not least, let's mention Michèle Anne De Mey and Jako Van Dormael's *Kiss and Cry* (2012) which blends “nanodance” (or finger dance) and live-and-directly produced cinema. The dance is not dissimulated but is somewhat discreet: the two performers,



dressed in black and frequently appearing in the half-light, seem to remain at a distance from their respective arms which take centre stage for the camera. The object of the gaze is forever changing, between film, dance and choreography of cinema that is in the process of being created.

#### **4. The PARTS Reservoir**

In Belgium, at the same time as “new dance” became artistically successful, the need for dancers to be given access to professional training was evident from the moment the *Mudra* School closed, concomitant with Béjart’s departure for Lausanne in 1987. Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, who replaced Béjart at La Monnaie Opera, was responsible for creating a high-level contemporary dance school in Belgium. Four key elements inspired this project: De Keersmaeker, herself, had studied in schools (*Mudra* and then the *Tisch School of Arts* in New York); the restaging of *Fase* (1982), which influenced her reflection on the evolution in the way works were perceived; her confrontation with young dancers over the fifteen-year period of auditions for *Rosas* offered her the opportunity to assess needs; and finally, her admiration for other choreographers led her to think about specific training content. In 1995, she founded P.A.R.T.S. (for *Performing Arts Research and Training Studios*) which immediately attracted young dancers from around the world who wished to join the four-year training cycle. This course leads to a high level of skills in dance, in multimedia interpretation or in choreography after training, the latter is also ‘situated’ somewhere *between* disciplines as it also comprises (in addition to classical, modern and repertoires) musical training (voice, rhythm, musical analysis) and theoretical training (history of dance and theatre, philosophy, semiotics, sociology, etc.). Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, as such, succeeded Béjart for the second time and, at the same time, became part of the long tradition of pedagogues/ choreographers. The creation and success of this school resulted, in particular in France, in resurrecting the debate on training in modern dance, which is defined less through techniques and more through aesthetic (or stylistic) projects.



## To go further :

FRETARD, Dominique. *Danse contemporaine, danse et non-danse*, Paris : Cercle d'Art, 2004. 174 p. (Le cercle chorégraphique contemporain).

HRVATIN, Emil, ŽBONA, Moïka (trad.). *Jan Fabre. La discipline du chaos, le chaos de la discipline*, Paris : Armand Colin, 1994. 174 p. (Arts chorégraphiques : l'auteur dans l'œuvre).

LANZ, Isabella, Verstockt, Katie. *La Danse aux Pays-Bas et en Flandre aujourd'hui*. Rekkem : Stichting Ons Erfdeel, 2003. 128 p.

ADOLPHE, Jean-Marc. « La Belgique est-elle une œuvre d'art ? », in *Mouvement*, n° 4, mars - mai 1999, p. 28-33.

« Jan Fabre, une œuvre en marche », in *Alternative Théâtrale*, n° 86-87, 2005, p. 70- 104.

LACHAUD, Jean-Marc. « Richesse et éclectisme de la chorégraphie flamande », in *Cassandra*, n° 36-37, septembre-octobre 2000, p. 21-23.

LAERMANS, Rudi, GIELEN, Pascale. « Flanders. Constructing identities: the case of 'the Flemish dance wave' », in GRAU, Andrée, JORDAN, Stephanie (eds.), *Europe dancing. Perspectives on Theater Dance and Cultural Identity*, Londres, Routledge, 2000, p. 12-27.

LONGUET MARX, Anne (dir.). « La traversée secrète des mondes intérieurs de Nicole Mossoux et Patrick Bonté », in *Etudes théâtrales*, « Théâtre et danse », vol. 1, n° 47-48, 2010, p. 109- 112.

LONGUET MARX, Anne (dir.). « Alain Platel. La communauté en scène. Entretien avec Anne Longuet » in *Etudes théâtrales*, vol. 1, n° 47-48, 2010, p. 145-151.

UYTTERHOEVEN, Michel. « 14 moments de danse en Flandre », in *Nouvelles de danse*, n° 22, Bruxelles, Contredanse hiver 1995, p. 6-16.

VERSTOCKT, Katie. « La vague flamande : mythe ou réalité ? », in *Danser maintenant*, Bruxelles, CFC-éditions, 1990.

## Sites internet de compagnie de danse

*Rosas* [en ligne]. Disponible sur : [www.rosas.be](http://www.rosas.be)

*Les Ballets C de la B* [en ligne]. Disponible sur : [www.lesballetscdela.be](http://www.lesballetscdela.be)

*Ultima Vez* [en ligne]. Disponible sur : [www.ultimavez.com](http://www.ultimavez.com)



*Cie Mossoux-Bonté* [en ligne]. Disponible sur : <http://mossoux-bonte.be>

### **Credits :**

#### Selection of extracts

Philippe Guisgand

#### Texts and bibliographic selection

Philippe Guisgand

#### Production

Maison de la Danse

### **Author's biography :**

Philippe Guisgand is professor of dance universities at the University of Lille. He is a researcher at CEAC and leads the program "Dialogues between art and research". He is a designer of a choreographic analysis path for which he has developed an original kinesic bias ("Reception of the choreographic spectacle: from a functional description to aesthetic analysis", STAPS Review n ° 74, autumn 2006, 117 -130). He also works to better understand the means by which spectators give an account of their sensitive reception as well as the political consequences of aesthetic debates ("The workshops of the spectator, factories of the sensitive", Quaderni n ° 83, winter 2013-2014, 59 -71). Specialist of the work of Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker (The Sons of Endless Intertwining, Septentrion, 2007, Anne Teresa of Keersmaecker, L'Epos, 2009 and Intimate Chords, Dance and Music at De Keersmaecker, Septentrion 2017), Finally, he is interested in the dialogues of the arts ("Demands and addresses: dance and music by Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker" in Stephanie Schroedter (ed.), Zwischen Hören und Sehen, Würzburg, Koenigshausen & Neumann, 2012, 425-437) and to certain aspects of performativity ("About the notion of body condition" in Josette Féral (ed.), Performative Practices, Body Remix, Montreal / Rennes, University of Quebec Press / Rennes University Press, 2012, 223-239).

**The "Contemporary Belgian Dance" Course was born thanks to the support of the General Secretariat of the Ministry of Culture and Communication - Service of the Coordination of Cultural Policies and Innovation (SCPCI)**