



Meeting with literature

The relationship between dance and literature is not the least among the various artistic hybrids which have nourished choreographic creation across history. The subject matter of a ballet which explains the narrative programme of a work of dance is already a type of link between writing and choreography and, in the 19th century, the novelist, poet and art critic Théophile Gautier was the author of important ballet libretti, literary works in themselves, including that of *Giselle*.

Contemporary dance presents various interactions between choreographic art and literature. Certain contemporary choreographers, like François Verret, draw their inspiration from what they read or summon the literary imagination of an author in their creation. It is sometimes an emblematic literary character who becomes the central figure of shows, like Don Quixote, who is often summoned on contemporary dance stages, as Romeo and Juliet have been in other stylistic registers. Or it can be a set of themes which is transposed from literature to the choreographic field.

But the meeting between dance and text is not only in the design of the shows: it also occurs and appears on stage. In many dance shows, contrary to what one might expect, many words are spoken, and often drawn from literary texts. Sometimes a text is read or recited at the same time as the dance. An author can also be present on the stage: becoming a performer in a choreographic spectacle, he then changes status and his text is suddenly heard differently.

As this theme shows, the collaboration between a choreographer and a writer on a show reveals multiple combinations. Sometimes, it is no longer even the choreographer who sets the text of an author to dance – it is the writer who takes the dance as the subject or material of his text. Lastly, and it is a trend which is currently developing – for example with the Concordance festival – dance and literature sometimes access the space of creation on a purely equal basis to propose a common artistic act and atypical performances, between literary event and choreographic show.

1. Literary inspirations

La Danse de l'épervier (The dance of the hawk)

Some choreographers created works using writers as their main source of inspiration, for example **François Verret** who was inspired in his creations by authors like **Franz Kafka**, **Herman Melville** and **Robert Musil**. The Japanese choreographer **Hideyuki Yano** has also often been inspired by literary texts, those of **Georges Bataille** for example. The theatrical dimension was also important for him, as the name of the company, which he created in 1976 shows: “Ma - danse rituel theatre”. At this time, Yano



used literary texts as his inspiration and, later, in 1983, he created *Le Puits de l'épervier* (The Hawk's Well) on the text of the Irish poet **William Butler Yeats**. This text, which the author had conceived like a piece of Noh, was first staged in April 1916. For Yeats, "there is only one art"¹. As for Yano, he combines dance, music and narrative in his creation; it is thus connected to Yeats and also to Japanese traditional arts which are multidisciplinary.

Le Puits de l'épervier, "is the story of an old man who wants to drink the water from a well that is supposed to give immortality, but a guardian protects the well and prevents the old man from drinking. In this piece, Yano seeks to simultaneously show the same character at various ages of his life."² The choreographer adapts the story written by Yeats to question this relationship with time and with death which haunts and stimulates him all at once. He thus creates a personal form of storytelling, like he does in several of his choreographies (*Ciné-fiction n°1*, *Ishtar et Tammuz*, *duo d'amour* and *Salomé, parabole du désir*).

A few words about Don Quixotte

Jean-Claude Gallotta created *Presque Don Quichotte* in 1999. The choreographer did not want to deal with the actual character, but wanted the dancers to adapt "the idea of Don Quixote". The character created by **Miguel de Cervantes** seduces with his ardour and his ingeniousness; he is a highly choreographic figure who has a go, insists and engages his body.

"Don Quixote fought well and worked hard. For three hundred years, his silhouette of picaro and Picasso has not ceased to send plenty of gestural messages. His adventures are a veritable semaphoric opera, and dance couldn't fail to find material there. Consequently, Jean-Claude Gallotta and his eight dancers do not illustrate the fable, do not adapt it, do not tell it. They discover in themselves the same vital madness as this old mythical child who was full of audacity, and are filled with wonder. With him, they share the desire to grab reality in order to feel alive. They could borrow a number of his aphorisms, like this one for example: The foolishest thing a man can do in this life is to let himself die."³

Don Quichotte, solo provisoire

The character of Don Quixote has inspired many artists. In addition to **Jean-Claude Gallotta**, there have notably been **Marius Petipa** (*Don Quichotte*, in 1869), **José Montalvo** (*Don Quichotte du Trocadéro*, in 2013), **Alexandre Théry** (*Le Projet Don Quichotte*, in 2011) and **Dominique Boivin** (*Don Quichotte! solo provisoire*, in 2009).

¹ Quoted by Chantal Aubry, *Yano – un artiste japonais à Paris*, Centre national de la danse, Pantin, 2008, p. 255

² Geisha Fontaine, *Les danses du temps*, Centre national de la danse, Pantin, 2004, p. 153

³ Claude-Henri Buffard, description of *Presque Don Quichotte* – www.gallotta-danse.com/Presque-Don-Quichotte



As in the creation *Presque Don Quichotte* by Jean-Claude Gallotta, it is rather the legendary figure of Don Quixote who inspires the contemporary choreographers than the text itself. For José Montalvo, it is a question of giving life “to the knight-errant imagined by Cervantès by mixing theatre, classical ballet and contemporary dance, hip hop, flamenco...”⁴ in a quirky urban universe. Alexandre Théry “sets to image and movement the story of Don Quixote, haunted by the inexorable passage of time, eager to leave on an adventure, to conquest, crusade”⁵.

Dominique Boivin also chooses to pursue the character: “as an artist, dancer, performer, I wanted to embody Don Quixote like a bag of bones, to experience his thinness in an organic way, not to worry about narration, anecdotes, but to fully take on the destiny of this pathetic, obsolete, human “hero”.”⁶

O More

To create *O More*, the choreographer **Bernardo Montet** was inspired by *Othello* by **Shakespeare**. As it is often the case in dance, for example in multiple choreographic creations which refer to the character of Don Quixote, Bernardo Montet is interested more in the figure of Othello than in the intrigue of the piece.

But why choose *Othello*? The choreographer explains his choice as follows: “A very long time ago, when I saw *Othello* played by **Orson Welles**, something clicked; I was fascinated by the actor. It is also the only black figure who has this heroic status in theatrical literature, with the result that one cannot speak about the myth of Othello without completely integrating his colour.” The turnaround of the character at one moment in the drama is a key moment for the choreographer: “If I refer to Shakespeare's work, I start from this moment when Othello becomes detached from himself, becomes foreign to himself, and descends into fatal madness (...). At a given time, he knows that there will be blood.”⁷

The destiny of Othello returns the choreographer to the vacillating identity which he feels deeply: “When you start to no longer recognise yourself in any identifiable territory, the imaginary becomes your territory. This is what [Edouard] Glissant calls *créolité*. I feel happy among foreigners because there is a type of vagueness, of opacity which suits me, because then the concept of identity becomes less defined.”⁸ The figure of Othello allows the choreographer to simultaneously dance and stage the theatrical archetype and the autobiography.

⁴ Description of *Don Quichotte du Trocadéro* – theatre-chaillot.fr/danse/jose-montalvo/trocadero

⁵ Description of *Le projet Don Quichotte* in La Filature – www.info-culture.com

⁶ Description of *Don Quichotte ! solo provisoire* – www.ciebeaugeste.com

⁷ Interview with Bernardo Montet by Fabienne Arvers, “O.More ou Othello ressource par Bernardo Montet”, *Les Inrocks*, 4 February 2002 – www.lesinrocks.com

⁸ *Ibid.*



2. The text and/or the writer on the stage

A posteriori

From his early works, the choreographer **George Appaix** has combined words with movements. A founding piece of the repertoire of the company La Liseuse, created in 1985, *Antiquités* was "a psalmodic dance on the verses of **Homer**". This piece required the dancers to sing as a choir and to become both speakers and dancers. The text became thus a simultaneously narrative, musical and choreographic element.

Twenty years later, continuing this approach, George Appaix combined creation and repetition with *A posteriori*, a piece in which he introduced, in effect, extracts from *Antiquités*. *A posteriori* "is George Appaix's current take on the crossover of writing and improvisation, text and singing, on the fragmentation of the narrative, the risks of the meaning, the virtues of lightness"⁹.

For George Appaix, writing is the point of stability whereas the danced movement is that of transition: "The texts are written, borrowed from authors or written within the company, proposed by me or by the dancers but they are, in any case, very quickly made stable. The movement, on the other hand, and increasingly lately, often finds its form through the improvisation (...). It is also a manner of being between the things, the dance and the voice, the spoken language and the song, between dancing and not dancing."¹⁰

Meublé sommairement

In certain choreographic creations, a previously selected literary text is recited on stage in its entirety. Such is the case of *Meublé sommairement* created in 1989 by **Dominique Bagouet**.

The choice of the text was essential for the design of this piece and the choreographer explained this as follows: "The project of *Meublé sommairement* seems to me today the result of an accumulation of several desires. Some of them, on the side of choreography, performers and music, initially had no real goals, separated in theory by different motivations. It is the text by **Emmanuel Bove**, *Aftalion Alexandre*, which made everything hang together (...). The attraction to this text is no coincidence, there is the desire to hear it "in the company" of a dance, of a music, with its meaning not inevitably illustrated but rather felt, breathed, accompanied (...)." ¹¹

⁹ Description of *A posteriori* – www.laliseuse.org/-Le-repertoire-.html

¹⁰ "Le mouvement" - Georges Appaix – www.laliseuse.org/Le-mouvement.html

¹¹ Description of *Meublé sommairement* by Dominique Bagouet – www.lescarnetsbagouet.org



Dominique Bagouet also created two *narratives*; Bove's and a second narrative which the choreographer conceived for the dancers. "All work consists in keeping the distance between, the autonomy of the two narratives: dance and text, without these two things losing a kind of harmony."¹²

In *Meublé sommairement*, the dance and the literature are distinguishable, accompany and complement each other, each art developing its own logic to constitute the final work.

Turba

De Rerum Natura [On the nature of things] by **Lucretius** inspired **Maguy Marin** and **Denis Mariotte** to develop *Turba*. The show uses several topics from the text in a form of opera, engaging the bodies, the positions, the movements, stage design, the music and the voice.

"The text by Lucretius on which *Turba* is based reminds us that Nature is an infinite sum which the elements do not add up to form a whole, a power in whose name things exist one by one, without the possibility of unification which would express it completely, an assertion of the multiple and the various as sources of joy."¹³

Extracts from *De Rerum Natura* are read on stage, in several languages (Latin, Ancient Greek, Italian, Spanish, Polish, German and French). This consolidates the dual status of the words: carriers of meaning and carriers of sound. These plays on various layers of the language, between materiality and significance, refer to materiality and the meaning of the other stage elements. The text simultaneously proposes a reading and disrupts it; reciprocally, the non-verbal elements liberate the words, but also supplement them and sometimes even join them. The spectator is invited to find his own way through the apparent confusion of what is happening on the stage. In *Turba*, "Lucretius thoughts would thus become the material for everything, even the dance"¹⁴.

À quoi tu penses?

Literary or philosophical texts have inspired many choreographers. This analysis led **Annie Sellem** to create an original project, *Les Fables à la Fontaine*. She asked choreographers from different backgrounds to create short pieces inspired freely by the *Fables* of **La Fontaine**. The choreographer **Béatrice Massin**, for example, adapted "The wolf and the lamb" in the style of baroque dance while **Herman Diephuis** created an off-the-wall sung version of "The ant and the grasshopper".

¹² Dominique Bagouet quoted by Isabelle Ginot, *Dominique Bagouet, un labyrinthe dansé*, Centre national de la danse, Pantin, 1999, p. 223, 224

¹³ Description of *Turba* – www.compagnie-maguy-marin.fr

¹⁴ Muriel Steinmetz, "La danse marque le pas, la philosophie s'avance", *L'Humanité*, 1 December 2007



But choreographers can also be inspired by texts by living authors. **Gisèle Vienne** tackled several of the writings of **Dennis Cooper** (in particular *I apologize, Une belle enfant blonde, Jerk*) and **Dominique Boivin** collaborated with **Marie Nimier** to create *À quoi tu penses?* For this piece, the writer imagined what goes on in the heads of the dancers during rehearsals and performances. Based on Nimier's text, Dominique Boivin created a series of portraits of dancers who reflect on what they do, on what surrounds them and on what their profession involves.

“Never know on which foot to dance – exactly” says a voice offstage during the duet between the choreographer and another performer. That's what being a dancer would be, suggests Marie Nimier.

Enjoy the Silence

Choreographers sometimes invite writers onto the stage. **Mathilde Monnier** talks with **Christine Angot** in *La Place du singe* (2005), a piece whose aim is “to experience what you can talk about on stage together”. The collaboration relates here to the whole process of creation. ““What you say, what I do”, that's sort of how it started” says Mathilde Monnier, as Christine Angot explains: “The origin of the text comes from the dialogue, from this verbal exchange between us and the text produces the dance. You could also say that the discussions have produced on one hand the text and on the other the movement.”¹⁵

The meeting and the dialogue between a choreographer and a writer are also the driving forces of the event “**Concordan(s)e**”, imagined by **Jean-François Munnier**. The first event took place in 2007 with each event bringing together four pairs of creators. In 2013, *Enjoy the Silence* reunited the author **Célia Houdart** and the dancer-choreographer **Mickaël Phelippeau**. They met several and “discovered that they like being quiet together”¹⁶. On stage, they dance together or for one another, read, remember and open themselves to the present moment.

¹⁵ "Interview with Christine Angot and Mathilde Monnier", by Irène Filiberti – www.theatre-contemporain.net

¹⁶ Description of *Enjoy the Silence* – www.concordanse.com



Credits:

Extracts selection

Geisha Fontaine

Texts

Geisha Fontaine

Production

Maison de la Danse

Author's biography:

Dancer and choreographer (company "Mille Plateaux associés", with Pierre Cottreau), but also researcher in dance and doctor in philosophy, Geisha Fontaine is notably the author of the book *Les Danses du temps* (CND, collection Recherches, 2004) and of the accompanying booklet of the teaching tool *La Danse contemporaine en questions* co-produced by the National Dance Center and the Institut français in 2014 and from which this Parcours was written in the Numeridance collections.

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