

Marco
Berrettini
An interview
with
Loïc Touzé

Since the late 1990s in France, a debate on the training of professional dancers has been eliciting reactions from various groups: among them the *Signataires du 20 Août* (The Signatories of 20 August), founded in 1997 and comprising some fifty dancers, choreographers and theoreticians, and the *École* (School) group started by Loïc Touzé in 2000, have been discussing the parameters for new forms of dance education. For is not the quality of training a major factor for revitalisation? Even so, in focusing primarily on technique, teaching as it is still practised in today's establishments only skims over the history of dance. It fails to take sufficient account of discovering and sharing with other disciplines, and so no longer fits with the reality of the contemporary creative scene.

With a view to compensating for this shortfall, a number of artists have already devised and/or developed different training programmes: they include Mathilde Monnier at the Centre Chorégraphique National in Montpellier, Boris Charmatz during his residency at the Centre National de la Danse and Loïc Touzé at the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers. In their role as a locus for research and experimentation,

the Laboratoires introduced, in 2005, a combined theory/practice education programme offering young artists from all disciplines the chance to broaden their aesthetic, historical and technical horizons. Tested since 2002 in a summer school context, the programme is primarily aimed at generating circulation between the different artistic fields, so as to foster a dynamic of experimentation and production of new work.

Given that Marco Berrettini's career as a dancer has seen him involved with theory and technique, academic and popular dance, and classical and folk forms, it seemed a good idea to take advantage of his presence at the Laboratoires to look back over the stages of his initiation into dance and to discuss with him the possible outlines of a teaching method appropriate to the current artistic context.

M. D.

LOIC TOUZÉ

What can you tell us about the training of dancers and choreographers in France and in Europe?

MARCO BERRETTINI

I arrived in France in the late 80s, but during the 90s in Paris I didn't have much exchange with other artists regarding dance education and technique. My main influence was the Folkwangschule in Germany, where it's not easy to dissociate technique and choreography, the latter being based on a strong tradition in which the two go together. In the late 80s and early 90s dance education wasn't talked about much by dancer-choreographers—as if education and technique were not an integral part of their choreographic work. Discussion tended to be about new choreographic forms, but was often remote from concerns with training. The artists I mixed with belonged to choreographic circles working on aesthetic and critical projects that were calling the very fact of dancing into question. In these circles questions relating to technique were obviously not the big issue of the moment, since we were exploring the idea of dancing less on stage and even of not dancing at all any more. For most of us, thinking about technique seemed a contradiction in terms. At the same time we were engaged in a political struggle in which educational matters did get a brief mention.

In France there was the CNDC (Centre National de Danse Contemporaine) in Angers—the only school offering training for contemporary dancers—plus a few courses available in Paris.

LOIC TOUZÉ

What was your own training?

MARCO BERRETTINI

I began by dancing in discothèques. I won some competitions, then began teaching jazz and disco dancing in dance schools in Germany. I was given a job as choreographer for jazz dance education in Germany, working with groups of 25-30 people who danced at galas. At the same time I was taking jazz classes myself, to improve my technique. After graduating from secondary school I auditioned for Martha Graham's London School of Contemporary Dance, where I stayed for two years, then I finished my diploma at the Folkwangschule in Germany. After the diploma I was taken on for six months by Pina Bausch, but I stopped because I wanted to create

my own company, and I went back to my home town, Wiesbaden. At the same period I spent two seasons at the National Classical Theatre, before devoting myself entirely to choreography. Success didn't come at once, and I moved away from choreography for three years. After that I studied at the Academy in Frankfurt and took classical classes with Forsythe, and then I had the good fortune to be taken on by Bruno Agati's company in Paris. So I moved to Paris, where I also danced with Georges Appaix's company.

LOIC TOUZÉ

Does that mean that you see your training as simply this career as a dancer and your technical studies, or were there other things which contributed to your education as choreographer and dancer?

MARCO BERRETTINI

There were influences and inspirations as well. I've always been inspired by anything to do with sociology and history, but I'm also particularly drawn to musical comedy, especially since I worked with the jazz group in Germany. We put on numbers from *West Side Story*, *Chorus Line* and *Hello Dolly*, simplifying the steps because at the time we were only amateurs. So very early on I was looking at musical comedies so I could copy the scenes and work with the music. That taught me how to transpose choreography tableaux from film to the stage. The influences that come through in my pieces come from the different cultures I've been exposed to: I'm of Italian extraction, I've lived in Germany and there's been a big American influence, and all this is mixed in with a taste for popular music.

LOIC TOUZÉ

Does your interest in images—the cinema and TV—spring from your taste for musical comedies?

MARCO BERRETTINI

For many years I wanted my choreographies to copy filmmakers I admired and the same goes for music. Back when we did *Multi(s)me* with Manuel Coursin we were also writing lots of songs—we even made a 45 with Antoine Lengo! I personally wanted these compositions to be in the style of Robert Wyatt; I even wanted people to have the impression it was his work! In my choreographies I took inspiration from filmmakers I liked for their composition and editing:

how does the dynamic of a film work, how are the flashbacks and cross-cuts done, how are the scenes cut? All these ideas came to me because I wanted to copy filmmakers I loved. Afterwards, as the years pass, you think less about these influences because they're things you've integrated.

LOIC TOUZÉ

During the 90s in Paris you were working in a collective.¹ Did this sharing mode also contribute to your training?

MARCO BERRETTINI

Yes, absolutely. I can't draw a line here. The collective work involved numerous meetings during which we learned to listen to each other and the role of sole choreographer was challenged. Challenging the work of someone who tells the dancers what to do from start to finish inevitably involves calling the construction of the choreography into question: what's the quality of a work based on, and what is an aesthetic signature based on? Is such a signature necessary for us to say the work is a sound artistic product? These questions inevitably arise if you opt for working collectively, and they have an enormous influence on what you do. The steps involved in approaching the subject of a performance are no longer the same. For example, it often happened that I put forward an idea—since it was also often me who then went out looking for the money to put the show on—and very quickly everybody else would appropriate that idea. Working collectively shapes you because it radically changes the way an initial idea is carried through. You try to find a good choreography, but at the same time you're trying to make the human relationships evolve within the collective.

LOIC TOUZÉ

Do you think finding production money should be part of a choreographer's training?

MARCO BERRETTINI

Lots of talented people of my generation didn't get to present their work because they didn't

¹ In the mid-1990s Marco Berrettini joined the collective *Les Signaux de l'île*. Collectives organise work sessions that bring together artists from different disciplines with a view to sharing and exchanging ideas about

contemporary creative output. These sessions give rise to discussion, experimentation and improvisations of which each participant becomes the co-author, even though the intention is not the creation of a given production.

know how to find the money their productions needed. As independent choreographers with no connections with the national theatres, we very quickly had to learn how to find ways of putting our work on. You have to learn to convince people and to manage communication with state bodies, theatres and other potential partners. We're choreographers and producers at the same time.

LOIC TOUZÉ

Did you yourself learn how to find money for your projects?

MARCO BERRETTINI

No, I think there are people with a real talent for that. You just learn the things it's best not to say if you want the minimum necessary for your project. But getting across what people want to hear in order to obtain money calls for the kind of training given to salesmen.

LOIC TOUZÉ

In your opinion what sort of training should choreographers receive now?

MARCO BERRETTINI

It should be depolarised: on the one hand it needs to be much more technically demanding than it has been over the last few years and on the other hand it needs to be completely dissociated from dance as it's being taught academically.

LOIC TOUZÉ

But what would take the place of this academic teaching?

MARCO BERRETTINI

Nothing, that's the point! During the first two years with Martha Graham the pupils have on average nine or ten hours of classes every day. I don't like this obsession with technique, especially as my personal experience of that school was really negative. I learnt more about technique in six months at the Folkwangschule than in two years at the Graham school, even though there were a lot fewer hours of technical classes. There has to be a reason for that. The dance academies inflict far too many classes on young dancers, on the grounds that this is when the body is being shaped. But these schools should be worrying more about the quality of their teaching, and prove that they're actually doing what they claim.

I think it's better to take the same road as the Folkwangschule or the CDC (Centre de Développement Chorégraphique) in Toulouse, by which I mean not filling the students' days with different theoretical and technical classes, and instead leaving them some time for themselves. I consider choreography an artistic profession, and you can be a very great artist without having learnt technique. This happens and it has to happen. Technique is important, obviously, but it's possible to become a great dancer without ever having learnt a step. The two worlds have to coexist. Because if there was no place for artists who are talented in spite of having no training, being a dancer would become no more than a trade, and I'm against that. If young students spend all their time in schools or training centres, they'll come out after four years thinking that's all there is to dance.

LOIC TOUZÉ

Do you think that the way you were shaped via the cinema, TV and musical comedy represents a personal path and that it's therefore not absolutely vital to hand on this corpus?

MARCO BERRETTINI

I believe it could be interesting to teach those different cultures in the schools, but it's obviously easier to talk about than to do. There are so many parameters to be taken into account. You don't have to keep adding things to a training programme to point up the range of influences that can be present in choreography; if you did that you'd have to teach everything, including for example the possible relationship between choreography and gardening, choreography and advertising, etc. There'd be no end to it. The whole day would be taken up with that, and things would become impossible. You have to trust students. Understanding that there can be choreography in everything is something the student can work out for himself. Otherwise it's just subtle indoctrination. You have to give the student the essentials, but also leave him time to do other things. That's the only way he can find out if dance interests him or not. I was very naive when I started my own company in Germany. I was with Pina Bausch and since she had her own company I said, "Why not me?" I went to Wiesbaden and after eight months I was putting on my pieces at local events, for football clubs. Things became so unbearable that I decided to get away from dance and for three years I made

a living doing odd jobs. In the end this really paid off, because all that time I was thinking about dance, in spite of being remote from it.

LOIC TOUZÉ

What do you expect from your performers?

MARCO BERRETTINI

I'm most interested in people I know I can discuss with; so much the better if they have technical experience they know how to make use of. I've also taken on people with no practical background in dance, no training, even people from other walks of life; but inevitably, or unfortunately, the time always comes when because of their lack of technique I can no longer work productively with them.

LOIC TOUZÉ

There are also people you took on for other jobs and who became dancers.

MARCO BERRETTINI

That's not so simple... Take the example of Manuel Coursin. He had never danced, and he began taking part in my shows after we'd been working together for several years. He had more and more to say about my work and the time came when his presence as stage sound man was so marked that he made the leap to performing. The performer he became developed out of and through his own determination. He became a performer with a very strong presence, a voice that carried and the technical skills of a performance artist; and little by little he wanted to master the technique, and the warm-up process, which means knowing how to stand on stage, how to move and become more supple so as to be able to do more than just walk and stop. Manuel has kept going in that direction and you could even say he still is; he's fifty and you can't tell any more if he's an amateur or someone who's been through the academy.

LOIC TOUZÉ

Isn't it the case that working with dancers with lots of technique makes it harder to experiment?

MARCO BERRETTINI

I work with some people who have an impressive technical background, but who have been able to work on forgetting it: by this I mean they've realised that what counts most is not technique but what you want to say in performance.

I remember one piece for which I had a terrible struggle with myself to decide if I would include a classical variation. I had to think about it for almost four months before taking a decision, because this technical demonstration had to be meaningful within the scene.

LOIC TOUZÉ

What do you teach? And in what context?

MARCO BERRETTINI

As it happens I've worked twice with the CDC in Toulouse, teaching students aged between 17 and 28 and from very different backgrounds. They're chosen for their presence and their technical aptitude.

The days are divided up between two hours of highly technical classes in the morning and work on a project in the afternoon. The morning classes bother some of them because they're classical and the students don't see the usefulness of this kind of teaching in a contemporary dance centre. I'm an advocate of the Jooss/Leeder technique, which doesn't dispense with classical technique, but rather absorbs it while adding in certain things as part of a system that gets the most out of the human body without abusing or damaging it. The point is to develop the tool smoothly—its suppleness, dynamism, speed and force—without breaking it. I'm in total agreement with this form of dance, which brings great suppleness and develops the body technically.

In the afternoon things in the studio are far removed from these technical matters. It often happens that the first day, after the morning classes, the students turn up in dancing clothes, but I can't stand people getting themselves up like that to work on the piece. It puts pressure on me—as if I were supposed to get out in front of everybody and demonstrate steps.

LOIC TOUZÉ

You asked your students, on the first day of the workshop, to strip off. Why? And how did they take it?

MARCO BERRETTINI

The CDC commission called for the creation of a work for I had only a few weeks to prepare. I was faced with people I hadn't seen since the audition and I had no desire to work with them as if I were a grand master of choreography and they were to stay submissive students for four

weeks. So I wanted them to understand straight off the context in which I'd been invited to work at the CDC and also to emphasise that I would behave with them just as I would with my company. If the company and I had decided to perform a work in which nudity could be interesting, we stripped off as a matter of course, since the whole point was the work. I wanted to see how they would react to that. But for them it was a far bigger obstacle than I had imagined.

Before asking them to take off their clothes, I presented the few ideas I had. I wanted to work on *Old Movements for New Beds*, which meant making these young dancers' bodies perform movements borrowed from "old dances". And as I was interested in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, I also wanted the piece to include the roles of master and slave. As a way of suggesting the slave I'd thought of the disguise of the royal jester, the submissive man who is ready to do anything. And for the master I hadn't been able to come up with anything better than nudity: absolute power in the form of a body so immune to all illness that it no longer needs the protection of clothing.

About 80% of those present didn't understand what I was asking of them, especially as that morning I'd given them a classical class, but even so they were ready to follow my instructions. The other 20% were wondering how to get out of it and tried to convince me to give up the idea. Two of them began to cry and didn't want to do it. I reacted very quickly. As the room was divided up between those who were watching and those who were on stage, I suggested that everybody strip off including me. One girl undressed still crying, so I suggested she should hide behind someone else. I couldn't have someone arguing the point: it had to be everybody or nobody, otherwise I would have had other problems in the days to come.

If someone had explained to me, after working naked for a while, that in the final analysis the scene would lose none of its impact by being performed differently, I would have accepted; but I was not about to accept an immediate refusal, especially given the time pressure. To the extent that we had a piece to create, I preferred to impose the weight of my experience, with the pupils feeling obliged to change their way of doing things. The more I work, the more I like the idea that, after a week, the piece should be already thought out, with nothing left to do but run-throughs—even if the version at the

première is totally different from the first run-through.

If there had been continuing misgivings, I would eventually have allowed some of them to perform wearing transparent undergarments. This was my solution for Chiara Gallerani in *Multi(s)mes*: she didn't want to appear naked, so she wore a fishnet body stocking—which turned out to be even more pornographic! If some of them had preferred to do things that way I would have let them do so as long as the body remained completely visible. So I was ready to make concessions, but first off we had to work. Anyway, they were given no alternative. In my defence I must say there was a positive effect: after a few hours the students were on stage discussing the improvisation they'd just done, whereas just prior to that they'd still been covering their genitals with their hands.

There had been no intention on my part of causing any dissension. I'm so used to working with my company that I thought the students would go along with it at once. Even so, their refusal didn't make me angry, I'm too cynical for that. But I've got professional parameters to cope with. I'm no longer a super-tolerant young choreographer. I'd been entrusted with this commission and I only had four weeks to do it in; and Annie Bozzini had told me that if things went well the piece would tour a number of theatres in the region. In other words the CDC expected me to put on a real performance with the students, and not just a few studio exercises prettied up with a little music. And when I prepare a work, it's not a matter of doing just any old thing; it has to be something I believe in.

Marco Berrettini
is a dancer and
choreographer, associate
artist of the Laboratoires
d'Aubervilliers in 2003.
He lives in Geneva
(Switzerland).