

# LA SYMPHONIE PATHÉTIQUE

On "Frans Poelstra, His Dramaturge and Bach"

A text by  
Guillaume Désanges

The first thing that strikes you is the nudity. Shattering the precious melodic line of a Bach harpsichord variation played in the darkness, the dancer's naked body on stage creates the founding discrepancy. A fundamental opposition: the raw against the cooked. Standing, seen from the back, a muscular but no longer youthful body starts tensing and releasing in muscular stretching exercises that have a pronounced osteopathic feel. Denuded. Devoid. Untangled. This introductory phase places the performance by Frans Poelstra and Robert Steijn, *Frans Poelstra, His Dramaturge and Bach*, under the sign of "work"—in both the physical and intellectual senses, as we shall see later on. Even when not moving, a body is always working. Having greeted the audience upside down, his head between his legs, Frans Poelstra starts on what constitutes the show's line of force: an almost unbroken sequence of danced movements, tangled, unstructured, unstrung variations, permanently oscillating between grace and comedy. By furtively summoning identifiable motifs from various choreographic techniques and then immediately moving away from them, this dance—intuitive, indeterminate and varied ad absurdum, unfolds in a logic of exhaustiveness more than of virtuosity. Through these displaced gestures, the dancer manifests the essential ambiguities of nudity displayed—nudity having come to the fore again recently in dance shows—around the dual idea of the "pathetic". The question is: does nudity endow the dancer's expression with greater purity, gravity and profundity or does it displace it towards the comic and ridiculous? Both, in alternation. Paradoxically, that which might threaten dignity sometimes strengthens it. A body unclothed is both endangered and more powerful on

stage. With Poelstra, as always (see his earlier shows, *I am... in concert* and *What about Ida*), we have to accept that we will remain in this fundamental indeterminacy of register: this personal register of gratuitous and never totally effective gestures moves in the same flight from balance to imbalance, from affirmation to affectation, from the lyrical to the grotesque, from reserve to connivance, from mastery to awkwardness. From grace to idiocy. Semantico-gestural morphing. For a single movement, a thousand possible detours.

#### JOINING WORD AND ACTION

This behavioural polysemy is soon distanced, commented and turned into a script by the presence on stage, next to the dancer, of Robert Steijn, Poelstra's official "dramaturge". In the popular tradition of the fairground barker, this very voluble spokesman, sitting comfortably on his cushion, describes and provides live commentaries full of humour and self-mockery on the dancer's working methods, career developments and artistic questions, from which the performance we are seeing proceeds. At first exposed, Poelstra's body now becomes the subject of a verbal exposition. Show and tell. For, as Steijn argues in justification, the work of the choreographer "needs a little bit of explaining if it is to be more fully understood." Indeed. The poised, gentle and sympathetic voice of the narrator intervenes as if it were the moving body's incarnate consciousness, while the body itself continues unperturbably with its chaotic sequence. Stage *Spaltung*. An oral transmitter of what the gestures do not say. Permanent discadaly. Voice off. This reflexive device proposes a deconstruction of the conventions of theatre by dividing the elementary stage-auditorium tension into four poles: Bach's music, Poelstra's dance, Steijn's commentaries and the gaze of the public. It is in the direct confrontation of these four elements, by dealing with the consequences of bringing them to consciousness, that the show is constructed. These are conflictual, almost subversive interactions that break down the barriers allowed by the theatrical pact. For instead of a collective harmony in the service of illusion, the actors consistently disrupt this four-part interplay, teasing each other and transforming the stage into a field of gentle tension and joyous disorder. Poelstra straddles the frontier of the stage and climbs over the audience's seats, plays an electric guitar solo over the Bach sonata, while the dramaturge makes asides to the public or buttonholes the dancer, offering live commentaries on their mistakes and changing the records before our eyes. Nothing is hidden; we are told everything. This visible and self-referential mechanism adapts to every situation, placing each action by the protagonists outside and inside the show.

#### ON BODY AND MIND

Is dance a *cosa mentale*? One could certainly think so when listening to Steijn evoking with scathing humour the theo-

retico-analytical bases of Poelstra's actions. "The hand is the extension of the mind", said Alberto Guerrero, piano teacher to Glenn Gould, whom we hear playing Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, that complex piece of music made up countless bewitching variations, with no beginning or end, as free as the association of ideas. But while Poelstra's movements sometimes seem to illustrate the more or less imaginary story told by Steijn, most of the time the relation goes off the rails, showing up the limits of the narrative virtues of a moving body. Generally, the piece perfectly illustrates the irreducible gulf that exists between images and words, between the history being told and the dance being performed, between Poelstra and Steijn. In other words, the reduplication of the ontological mismatch between body and mind. This distance is reduced only when the dramaturge himself ends up stripping off and joins the dancer in a hilarious duo that flirts with tenderness, puerility and scabrousness. United finally in silence, Poelstra and Steijn perform pathetic acrobatics with extreme clumsiness but great determination, in a grotesque and moving physical communion. But pending this temporary "dénouement", the comical effect of the piece comes as much from the dramaturge's causticity as from this almost permanent disjunction between his discourse and the dancer's gestures. From this point on, the agreements of meaning, those precarious moments of understanding between word and action, are usually fortuitous, accidental or in the eye of the beholder. For if, as Steijn's voice affirms, Poelstra really does want to "go beyond my instinctive way of moving", then he seems utterly incapable of doing so. The choreographer Martha Graham expressed both the difficulty and the power of her art by saying, "The body never lies". In return, Poelstra reminds us above all that dance remains irreducibly and irrevocably beyond control.

#### WORDS AND THINGS

In the second half of the show, the two protagonists, who are now dressed again, engage in a new artistic undertaking: testing the dramaturgical possibilities of the object on stage by treating it as an equal, as a professional partner. Starting with a fundamental question—"How does one play with objects without controlling them?"—Poelstra improvises unlikely actions with various props (a food processor, kitchen paper, a balloon, etc.). This acted typology of the conceivable physical and spiritual relations between bodies endowed with spatial extent (the performer's and the object's) was backed up by several philosophical questions revolving around fetishistic attraction-repulsion and object anthropomorphism, envisaged under the aegis of an aporetic desire for fusion with the object. If this has its source in a phenomenological philosophy à la Merleau-Ponty (the body as "expressive space", capable of bestowing meaning on things and on words in the world), this quasi-literary investigation, full of curiosity but always disappointed in the end, also recalls the jovial naivety and fragile intellectual victories of Bouvard and Pécuchet.

**BACKS TO HISTORY**

On a deeper level, the dramatisation of this conflictual and unresolved relation to the order of objects could well represent the echo of Poelstra's fundamental relation to his own practice. And Poelstra places himself in a similarly indeterminate relation—between an amorous kind of doggedness and patent failure (or in any case, a perpetual delay of possession)—to dance. In this respect, the programme announced by Steijn: “How do you manage when you fall in love with several objects at the same time?” is emblematic of a polymorphous and unfaithful connection to the choreographic field. Unfaithful but not resigning: non-chance here is the expression of an infinite love for all kinds of movement. Indeed, during his long solo, Poelstra revisits the history of dance, in a conglomeration of multiple choreographic motifs, between homage and parody. From classical ballet (the positioning of the feet, chasses, central equilibrium) to the post-disco of video clips. In its general tendency not to hide his efforts, to integrate the representation of doubt in the striving for movement, his approach seems to be very strongly informed by the issues of modernist and postmodern theories of dance. And in their seeming improvisations, Steijn and Poelstra point up the gimmicks in such practices. Not respectfully, but with love. And so, in Poelstra's actions, and in the very structure of the show, we find nods to the alternation of free and controlled flows in the Labanian manner, to the bases of free dance in Isadora Duncan or to Martha Graham's analytic dance, to the improvisation techniques of Cunningham and, above all, to the fundamental lessons of the experimental work done at the Judson Dance Theater in New York, and to its way of demystifying the choreographic process by combining awkwardness and confusion with grace and assurance. But with Steijn and Poelstra, these orientations are taken with an intent that is more joyous and festive than really critical, as they originally were in relation to academicism. The use of speech in dance, following on from the discovery of semiotic theories in the 1980s, is revisited here, for example, in the form of a hilarious pop song with guitar backing, paying homage to words in a jumble of quotes from Deleuze, Zizek and Foucault. In the same way, the acrobatic duo formed by the two naked protagonists farcically updates the fundamental issues in Steve Paxton's *Contact-Improvisation* (Poelstra has in fact worked with Paxton) by revealing its formal correspondences with burlesque in terms of the transfers of forces, energy, the falling of bodies and, also, predictable failure. More generally, in the determination to break down dualist systems, Poelstra deliberately chooses not to choose between the exploitation of modernist weight and the evanescent lightness of the classical, between the earthly and the spiritual, between immanence and transcendence.

**THE CHILDHOOD OF ART**

In its way, this relation to the history of their art developed by Poelstra and Steijn sheds light on what Giorgio Agamben iden-

tifies in *Infancy and History* as the end of experience. Western modernity has witnessed a deterioration in our capacity to transform the real into a genuine experience, and this can be rediscovered only by going back to a state of childhood, understood as “the eternal guardian of what deserves to survive”. This evolution could be transposed to the history of forms. Mischievous and regressive, Poelstra and Steijn, who play at being acrobats and puppets, at dressing up and acting members of some fruitcake sect, seem in their way to aspire to a primitive state of this kind. With his dignified, autistic posture, the choreographer determines dance itself as the privileged territory of a return to infancy—meaning, etymologically, “before language”—by usually keeping mum in response to Steijn's discourse, expressing himself only with gestures, or reacting with simple mute nods. In doing this, he does not so much place himself in a tradition of performative idiocy (*à la* Peter Land or Paul McCarthy) as in a deliberately immature, experimental and immediate relation to things, in that combination of laughter and seriousness represented by the haptic-intellectual exploration of the universe. Learning through play. Is not dressing up a way of inhabiting matter and exploring the uncertain constitution of things? And does not synchronised dance—one facing the other—reactivate the Lacanian “mirror stage”? In perfect empathy, dancer and dramaturge constantly oscillate between edification through the rediscovery of the fundamental structures of the world (time, space, the names of things) and the juvenile delirium derived from these experiments that constitute personality, focused on a joyously repressed sexuality.

**EROICA SYMPHONY**

But these more or less comical and regressive circumvolutions are based on a fundamental concern with beauty and grace. In a transcending, vertical circulation (objects in the air, bottles of “Bravo” apple juice falling from the sky, a recreation of Eden), Steijn and Poelstra are reinventing a certain idea of grace within a terrestrial, pagan way of performing that is fundamentally in harmony with the immediacy of the world. The simplicity and effectiveness recall something of Mark Thompkins' choreographic gestures based on forms from popular culture (cabaret, the pop song, dressing up) or, to change artistic fields, the visual artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, in his capacity to formally reconcile opposites and reveal the emotion and desire present in the figures of entertainment and to infuse poetry into the rigour of modernist aesthetic doctrines. Striving for the absolute and the sacred within the kingdom of the immediate. This heavenly vision, looking down, dancing in the street to a mixture of hip-hop and modern jazz in the style of *Pop Star*, stolen images projected on a screen in the middle of the show, offers this kind of capture of grace and lightness within immanence and the everyday. We are definitely in reality (“It's real, so real” insists the dance song layered over this fortuitous choreography), and it is within reality that harmony and beauty are hidden.

In this perspective, while nothing is resolved, everything is, in the end, clarified: the simplicity of the set-up, the Bach variations, the nudity of the bodies, the almost amorous understanding of the dancer-dramaturge couple—all these experimental and intuitive conditions are put in place with a view to representing beauty, understood as the communion between spirit and nature, between body and reason, between humour and amour. In this fundamentally artistic quest, the show's striking final sign constitutes a provisional victory. Frans Poelstra and Robert Steijn, elegantly and subtly reprising the young girls' choreography to the music by Bach, place this epilogue under the sign of general reconciliation. In the end, the equilibrium is found by chance, appearing at a window open onto the world, that need only be interpreted with respect in order to signify tender power.