



## INTERVIEW: CECILIA LISA ELICECHE - ON 'UNISON' - HER FIRST LONDON PERFORMANCES

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**Brussels-based Argentine choreographer Cecilia Lisa Eliceche comes to London for the first time with a new creation since her choreographic debut in 2011. In *Unison* she focuses on one of the most familiar concepts in dance: the simultaneous execution of the same movement by several people. We asked her to tell us more about it...**

### What was your starting point for *Unison*?

I wanted to work with a group of dancers, together in dialogue, with the history and protocols of dance. The most obvious group formation in dance seemed to be unison. I wanted to investigate what it would mean to do unison from a feminist perspective. I actively refused the perspective of the male gaze, which would have probably made the 'feminism' aspect more explicit in predictable uninteresting ways. I was very inspired by the thinking of **Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter***, **Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive***, **Sadie Plant's *Zeros and Ones***, **Gertrude Stein's *Composition as Explanation***, **Monique Wittig's *Les Guerilleres***, **Chantal Mouffe's *On the Political***, **Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto***. However, I am not interested in representing theories, or trying to explain or embody discourse. My question was how I could construct/compose unison dance where feminist logics would rule the underlying patterns of composition and attention. For me, feminism is about intersectionality, interdependence, complex webs of interrelation, embodiment, interdependence, weaving, eroticism and sensuality, witchcraft, empathy, heterogeneity, agonism [Greek: struggle], Pachamama [fertility Goddess of the Andes], writing as invention, rejecting monopolies of thought and reason, etc. I didn't want to give one answer or possibility.

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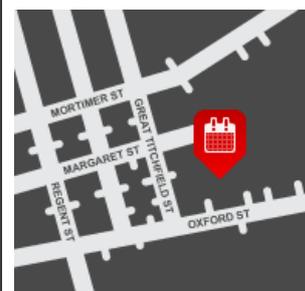
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I tried to work through these ideas in dialogue with choreographers that inspired me, such as **Trisha Brown, Merce Cunningham, George Balanchine**, but also social dances, touching practices and invocations of rituals and entities.

The piece offers limited but different experiments on what a feminist unison can be/ look like/ feel like. The fundamental thread running through all these notions of unison are actions of weaving, touching and embodying spirits of nature.

Recently I became acquainted with the work of the quilters of **Gee Bend** in Alabama. In their quilt making practice there is someone that 'pieces' (places the individual pieces), making a geometrical/symbolic design, and then the whole group quilts, stitching the pieces together into a whole while singing. I have observed that many quilters conceive of their practice as a form of meditation. I see Unison as a pluridimensional version of quilting without a thread. Through its own form of meditation, the quartet weaves an invisible energetic voluminous fabric. It's also a sort of a 'akelarre' (Basque: witches Sabbath) with Cunningham unitards.

### **What do you think lies at the heart of the power engendered through people moving in unison?**

I am not so sure about unison, that's why in *Unison* we never really are in unison. But I certainly think moving together in dissensus and with differences, has deep political implications. Capitalism and neoliberal ideologies promote individualism and selfishness. Even when it comes to the writing of history, particular individuals are depicted as heroes, like **Dr Martin Luther King Jr., Rigoberta Menchu, Che Guevara, Patrice Lumumba, Touissant L'Ouverture, Estela de Carloto**, etc. For me it's important to underscore grassroots social movements, to acknowledge the bottom up nature of major civil revolutions and the continuity of struggle. The ultimate triumph of capitalism comes through when we feel hopeless and without agency, which is why I always try to find my way back to notions of collective power and grassroots activism.

Most recently I have been inspired by **State of the Arts** and **Hart Boven Hard** in Belgium, as well as the **Mario Woods/ Alex Nieto/ Amilcar Perez** coalition from San Francisco. **Angela Davis's** last book on the foundations of a movement, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* seems key for our present times.

### **How much of your exploration of unison relates to the professional skill of the dancer to synchronize movement, versus it's symbolism as a socio-political tool of joint action?**

I am so glad you ask this because I would not be able to do this work without the incredibly skilful, refined, intelligent dancers that form the cast of *Unison* today: **Michael Helland, Eveline Van Bauwel** and **Manon Santkin**, who originally served as our outside eye during the creation. I must also credit **Tarek Halaby**, who was so important for shaping the choreography.

The fact is that in *Unison* we are actually never in 'unison' as it is classically conceived, so the difficulty for the dancers in this work is not in synchronisation, the ability to do the exact same thing at the exact same time, with the exact same form and direction. Rather than the capacity to perfectly synchronise identical movements, the challenge of the work lies in the rhythm of interrelations and interconnectedness between the dancers. The work, which can be seen as an embodied experiment in joint action, a sort of self-renewing socio-political-ecologically-inspired movement practice, indeed requires great technical skill. It requires creative virtuosity from the dancers, in terms of intelligence, endurance, generosity, discipline, and a willingness to let go of the 'performer as individual' in order to serve the greater structure of the choreography, working in direct interdependence in a structure that demands the constant negotiation of time and space alongside one another. The dancers' skills are integral, since this 'construction of an alternative community' is embodied, it is physical, it is dance and not theory.

**Can you expand on your philosophy that dance offers a site to experiment and rethink notions such as 'democracy', 'community' and 'the political'?**

Indeed, I conceive of dance and the human body as a site of experimentation. Some people argue that the essence of the dance medium is that it is ephemeral, it only exists in the moment. I think it differently. I think dance, like perhaps all art, has a generative quality, it lives beyond the performance moment. Dance, the studio, the theatre, to me these are places to research, question, and experiment in an embodied way, laboratories for trying stuff out through movement. It's a place to refine sensitivities, rehearse possible ways of being together, and dream potential utopias. Grounded in the body and physicality, we make these utopias concrete and material, bringing them into flesh. Even temporary alternative worlds can create permanent ruptures in the heteronormative oppressive capitalist status quo, allowing us to reconfigure notions of democracy, community and the political. I don't think dance has a direct impact on political affairs, I would say I am mostly focused on craft, but I strongly believe in micro acts of resistance, and life beyond the moment of performance: effects, memories, thoughts, processes.

**How has your training at PARTS in Brussels influenced your choreographic practice?**

It has influenced me greatly. The time at PARTS really formed my choreographic mind and my approach to movement experimentation. Obviously the work of **Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker**, as the director, has been very influential. Most specially, I was inspired by the minimalism of her early works and the 'back to basics/ less is more' aesthetic of her later works. Also the opportunity to work with choreographers and makers such as **David Zambrano**, **Thomas Howard**, **Jonathan Burrows**, **Jan Ritsema**\*... **ho! So many white men! Maybe that's why PARTS education tends to miss some butt winding, spine rippling and floor stomping... In any case, being in contact with these people, as well as the work of \*William Forsythe** and most importantly **Trisha Brown**, was very formative in my approach to movement research and the exploration of the body's possibilities. Teachers like **Janet Panetta** and **Rudi Laermans** were and still are very important to me. The people I worked with as a professional that I met thanks to PARTS have greatly influenced me: **Eleanor Bauer**, **Claire Croize**, **Etienne Guilloteau**, **Manon Santkin** and **Tarek Halaby**. All these humans transmitted their passionate love and critical approach to choreography, dance, movement and the body.

**What did you take away from your time at Movement Research in New York?**

It was my first trip to NYC, a place that is now very close to my heart and work. I stayed with my friend **Sarah Beth Percival** in a lesbian loft in Bushwick with all these fierce feminist ladies that read poetry and make music together. This was very refreshing coming from Belgium where people seem so uncomfortable with even the mention of the word feminism, discourses on gender, queer, race, etc. As a counterpoint, this made the experience of being in New York especially rich. The most important part was meeting **DD Dorvillier** and **Heather Kravas**.

Two beautiful woman choreographers with whom I've been working since, and have taught me greatly about choreography, performance and friendship. My mentor was **Irene Hultman** who at the time was the Artistic Director of the Trisha Brown Company, so I got to attend rehearsals with her and be close to Trisha's master works that I so much admire. During that time Movement Research also organised a festival curated by **Steve Paxton**, it was wonderful to be around him and his processes. I discovered the work of **Trajal Harell**, **Luciana Achugar** and **Beth Gill**, three artists whom I love and find very inspiring.

**You grew up in Argentina but base yourself in Belgium, a country which certainly punches above its weight in terms of artistic output (Rosas, les ballets c de la b, Royal Ballet of Flanders, Wim Vandekeybus, Damien Jalet...). Why do you think it is such a fertile breeding ground for dance artists? Where do you see your work sitting in this context?**

Those names and companies are important, and were the founding names of the Belgian dance scene after **Maurice Bejart**. They were the basis for the development of the rich heterogeneous dance landscape in Belgium. I think those names, and PARTS, attracted and welcomed a lot of dancers from all around the globe. This international ecotope works mostly in solidarity, cooperatively, sharing knowledge and practices, pollinating each other rather than promoting competition, creating social value. However, the most important reason why dance is so strong in Belgium is public subsidies. I can speak particularly for the Flanders region, which is where the companies you mention are based, and where I am based. The public subsidy system for dance, its resources and the social safety nets (the federal artist status regime, health care, retirement, etc.) make Belgium a healthy place for dancers to develop their craft and make independent, critical work that is not a captive subject to neoliberal standards of success, productivity or good art.

Unfortunately this precious system is being challenged right now by the rise of the right wing and budget cuts. I understand the austerity measures imposed by the EU don't affect the arts funding in Flanders directly, but they are doing great damage to the larger schemas of thinking about society. I also think the security paranoia result of the recent events will also do great damage to policy priorities.

On a positive note, I find the Belgian civil population, and particularly the cultural workers, incredibly critical, unpretentious and generous. As a whole, the Belgians have been so welcoming to international artists, and I am still hopeful that they will defend their incredible arts system with criticality and strength.

Where do I see my work in the context of these big names? I think I am from a different generation in terms of funding, and a different generation in general with different ambitions. I would say I have a very mobile position that is always in the process of forming. No matter the context, what is constant is experimentation.

**Your work also sits within a broader dance tradition, responding to influences like Merce Cunningham, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, George Balanchine. How does the work of these dance icons infuse your inspiration from other sources, like South American folklore and Basque witches?**

I conceive *Unison* and lately all my dances as an 'offering' – to the audience, the world, to nature, to spirits, especially to the wickedest Basque witch I knew: my grandma Mirentxu, who died right at the time *Unison* premiered.

Weaving was an important activity for Basque woman, for many female communities, and that is the basis for the composition of *Unison*. In terms of references I don't have hierarchies of value for the people and situations that influence me. So my fantasies of Cunningham are equally influential to my fantasies of **Candomble**, **George Balanchine**, **Lygia Clark**, **Voudum** and my experience of lifting heavy objects. Jamaican scholar **Stuart Hall** speaks of the triangulated presences in America, the African, the European and the 'native.'

I think these specific punk bastardized presences are manifest and cohabitant in *Unison*.

What I find in common between certain Latin American Creole practices and the pre-Christian Basque society is the relationship to nature, the surrounding landscape. They have in common a proliferation of spiritual manifestations that are present in the natural and social world and they are interconnected. There is something about the rooting in nature, its cycles and landscapes, but also rituals of remembering ancestors and stories in folk that are very important to me. And most importantly they are embodied practices and histories. I want to challenge the dichotomies western/exotic, civilized/primitive, orderly/wild from within dance. I am interested both in combining vocabularies that are seemingly disparate as well as challenging notions of exoticism in refined ways, a subtle reversal of the anthropological gaze. So for instance in the part that looks 'western and ordered' to me the composition is very primal, mathematical and crafty which I associate with folk art, and the section that is called 'folk' our indication is to improvise in the style of **Judson Church**. I also like to think of *Unison* as an orgy of traditions.

### Are you excited to be introducing your work to a London audience for the first time?

I lived in London when I was eight years old. It's a great honour to be showing my work in this legendary metropolis that is part of my childhood, to have people that have known me for so long finally see me dancing. It is overwhelmingly exciting and a bit scary to share the work with the audience of this city that has had such an important role in the arts and dance as a place of creation and intersection.

It is specifically an honour to perform at **Sadler's Wells**, a nest and crossroads for so many different dances and dancers. **Ninette de Valois, Merce Cunningham, Rex Nettleford's Jamaican National Dance Company, William Forsythe**. It's pretty exciting to dance in a theatre with all those spirits around!

**Cecilia Lisa Eliceche – *Unison***

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