

## Writing about dance

A personal blog of musings about dance and other related topics

### Existential ballet and popcorn

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*Noé Soulier, Freddie Opoku-Addaie and Frauke Requardt: Mixed Bill, Lilian Baylis Studio, May 29*

What else to expect from a dancer trained at the Paris Conservatoire, a graduate of PARTS (Performing Arts Research and Training Studios) in Brussels, with a master's in Philosophy from the Sorbonne but an existential guide to ballet?

Noé Soulier wanders on stage in practice clothes and explains what he is about to do. The piece is called *Le Royaume des Ombres* (*The Kingdom of the Shades*), commonly associated with the most famous scene in the ballet *La Bayadère*, but Soulier plays on the meaning for his proposal: what is generally unseen in the ballet lexicon, divided into five experiments. "In the first, I took all the ballet steps I could find and I put them in alphabetical order, from arabesque to waltz. The second sequence is based on a distinction you can make in ballet between preparation steps and the steps these preparations allow you to do, like jumps or pirouettes. The next sequence is based on the same principle, but I applied it to an existing variation, Solor's from *La Bayadère*. And then I took the same variation and changed the order of the steps. For the last sequence, I took excerpts from all the ballets of the 19th century that I could find and put them in chronological order, men's roles and women's roles mixed with some fabulous creatures."

His technique is clean and precise; it has to be to carry this off. It may be conceptual work, but his body is working hard. There is no musical accompaniment that corresponds to Soulier's balletic lexicon, so we feel as much in the lecture hall as in the theatre, and the silence heightens our attention. In between sequences he allows his ideas to sink into our consciousness, saying nothing but wandering to the side to take a drink of water. He evidently enjoys being provocative, combining a haughty intellectual rigour

with a mischievous sense of humour. He goes through the sequence of preparation steps like a dancer meticulously preparing a variation, stopping at just the place where the step is about to happen. One preparation then morphs incongruously into another. He adjusts his shoe elastics: every detail is intensified in this calm dissection of the classical vocabulary. For the Solor variation, and the concise synopsis of both male and female roles in all the 19th century ballets, Soulier nonchalantly sings the tunes under his breath, dancing with such panache that we believe in the absurdity of what he is doing.

His second piece, *D'un pays lointain (From another land)* involves a similarly subversive approach, but his focus is the language of 19th century ballet mime. Soulier uses four dancers from the Ballet de l'Opéra du Rhin: Vera Kvarcakova, Sandra Ehrensperger, Alexandre Van Hoorde and Stéphanie Madec. If they are listed in order of appearance, the first is Kvarcakova, who demonstrates close to a hundred phrases of mime in alphabetical order from *angry, afraid, baby, beautiful*, to *why, wicked, woman, you*, without explanation or context, then again with recorded explanations. The purpose of ballet mime is of course to avoid speech, but Soulier is interested in this interaction.

Hearing this vocabulary one is inescapably drawn into the nature of the stories and fairy tales from which they derive their meaning, as if from another land. While the individual words are known today, the worldview and social context are of another era and mindset. *Death by bow and arrow* is a case in point. Soulier now goes a step further: Alexandre Van Hoorde joins Kvarcakova and a male voice is added to the recorded explanations, Van Hoorde following the male voice, Kvarcakova continuing to follow the female voice. Soulier also changes the order of the phrases for each voice, so there are two 'conversations' that sometimes overlap or comically contradict each other: '*come, go away*'. After a brief pause, the process starts again with increasing complexity: a trio, (Ehrensperger), then a quartet (Madec), with the addition of respective recorded voices. Soulier thus constructs consecutive words and phrases along the animated line of dancers, like a sentence on a page: '*welcome, baby, I beg you, to love*' with the delicious irony between the mimed 'baby' and the contemporary meaning of the spoken word. Soulier now filters this vocabulary of conversation into snippets of recognizable, historical mime from *Sleeping Beauty*, though still with the recorded explanation: '*Why did you forget me?.. She will grow up to be beautiful and graceful, but she will prick her finger and die... The princess will indeed prick her finger with a spindle but instead of dying she will fall into a deep slumber that will last a hundred years at the end of which a prince will come to awaken her.*' In the context of Soulier's cerebral treatment so far, seeing and hearing this suggests the delightful absurdity of classical mime itself.

In the next sequence, Soulier removes any trace of context, and focuses on abstraction by giving his quartet a series of random phrases, which creates a line of semaphoric choreography, on top of which we hear the odd explanatory term: *mother, to die, to kiss, to speak, afraid, to listen, there, to imprison, to die, to give, why?* The quartet is reduced to a duet, in which the two speak the mime themselves, then Van Hoorde is left alone: '*Protect me, come! Thank you, go away! To kill, two, go away, to protect.*' He continues in silence to the end, performing two gestures at the same time with increasing intensity, the movements taking on an individuated life of their own, beyond any recognizable meaning: an existential fate.

For those who enjoy Soulier's subversive and thought-provoking treatment of dance, he will be back in London with his *Idéographie*, a discourse about the relation between thought and movement, at Dance Umbrella later this year.

While the house lights are still up after the intermission, Freddie Opoku-Addaie enters with a microphone as if he is a stagehand with a last-minute task before the show; except that Opoku-Addaie is too recognizable and too brightly clad in his red shoes and suspenders (thanks to designs by Justin Arienti) to be mistaken for a stagehand. His hair rises in front into a permanent exclamation mark, so even with his deadpan expression, you know that something unexpected is about to happen. Then Frauke Requardt enters pushing a popcorn stand, placing it downstage right. Opoku-Addaie opens the perspex hood and inserts the microphone. Then the fun begins.

Peter Hall has written that children at play have a concentration – and thus a belief – which is absolute. The only sin is to break the concentration by not believing – by not playing. *Fidelity Project*, commissioned for last year's Place prize, has the air of an inspired improvisation, and neither Opoku-Addaie nor Requardt can be accused of lacking concentration and belief in what they are doing from the moment they arrive on stage; that is what is so attractive about their performance. Much of Opoku-Addaie's work consists of game-playing and risk-taking with a large dose of cunning. Out of the blue, Requardt delivers a backhander to him, but he parries in lightning speed. She turns to hit him again, but he ducks. A tentative embrace leads quickly into a sequence where Requardt pushes Opoku-Addaie's head down, spins him around and lifts him out of the way, placing him on the floor where he remains in shape while she wanders off to turn on the popcorn machine. There is no story to speak of in *Fidelity Project*, but fidelity is about trust and the work is all about the trust between these two quite dissimilar artists that is incredibly strong and precise. They perform a dance equivalent of the game of rock-paper-scissors, involving a similar skill in one partner being able to predict the moves of the other in order to gain the advantage. It is difficult to know if the sequences are choreographed or not but there is such split-second timing in some of their antics that the point is moot. It is the kind of precision that gives a thrill and hilarity to the performance. They take movement where you least expect it to go, as when Requardt grabs on to Opoku-Addaie's wide open mouth to counterbalance his backbend to the floor. Their interaction never develops into a closeness of emotion, but remains a constant testing of these two characters who reveal the freedom with each other to perform intimately, yet with a constant deadpan distance, demonstrating the sheer pleasure of being together. And they are equally matched; she doesn't pull punches, and he is respectful of her force. At one point she throws him, and he rolls in pain, screeching like a wounded animal, while she goes to serve the popcorn. A moment later they get back together again, and she throws him a second time, with identical results. She turns to the back wall, and when he reaches her he pins her against it above his head. She seems to be trying to strangle him from up there. He lets her down, they kiss, and she blows out her stored popcorn, rubbing his nose: the gestures of two lovers who have developed their own language and intolerance. She points to something; he looks, then she serves him a left hook. Opoku-Addaie is out for the count, as is the popcorn machine, and then the lights. Like two contestants in a tournament, Opoku-Addaie and Requardt take their bows, though there are no winners. Nevertheless, Requardt raises a triumphant arm.

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