

A Culture of Dialogue

In June, choreographers chosen from all over the world meet at Bagnolet

Lorrina Niclas,
director of the Rencontres
Chorégraphiques
Internationales
de Seine-Saint Denis,
in conversation with
Gabriele Naumann,
Artistic Director of the
Internationales Sommer-
theater Festival, Hamburg



Lorrina Niclas

Gabi Naumann: *When you took over what was then the Bagnolet choreography competition in 1987, you had a clear idea of what could and should be achieved with this initiative for dance*

Lorrina Niclas: Dance has existed as a form of contemporary expression for about a hundred years; Bagnolet had been a choreography competition for twenty of them. I was convinced that dance was ready to receive the recognition it deserved through the awarding of a prize comparable to those awarded for literature, cinema and the visual arts. This seemed reasonable to everyone in that each of these art forms creates its own market, its own industry – but not dance.

People had to be made aware of this, and that required more time than it would have done with other art forms.

Does that mean you wanted to develop an economic system for dance?

Lorrina Niclas: It's important first of all to recognise dance as an art form and then to work on its economic structures and conditions. For the future we'll have to create an economic system for dance. The choreographers don't make much money from their work; the theatre directors, thanks to whom the work can be developed and shown, mostly support it without getting much financial return on their investment.

The actual profit is intellectual and spiritual – and so we'll never be able to compare dance as a business in society with any other business activity.

Over the last ten years you've nurtured the choreographers' meeting as a flexible organism. Why have there been so many changes in the last two years?

Lorrina Niclas: I was sure that the choreographers themselves would speak up as soon as change became important for them, and this happened last year. Everyone who talked to me about things underlined the positive side but emphasised that the competition situation as practised in France was obsolete; the choreographers declared that a competitive framework couldn't also be a meeting that satisfied the strong desire to understand each other through the work

In your concept you don't separate art, politics and society. Why are such political and social approaches so important to you?

Lorrina Niclas: I cannot imagine a world without art – without art we'd live in a city without lights, cold and dark. The existence of art has a significance for every human being – not just for those who create it but also for those who see and experience art in their surroundings, whether directly or indirectly.

What would happen if all the cinemas were closed down, if the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe were demolished? If everything were locked away, the museums emptied? What then? We're afraid that everything costs too much, that we can't possibly afford it – but could we afford to live without it? Surely not.

Why do you think there is still such deep-seated resistance to contemporary dance?

Lorrina Niclas: It's due to the specific qualities of the art form. If music, the visual arts or even theatre are more approachable it's because one has a medium for understanding them: one can hold the book or the painting still – but when we're talking about dance, the moment we're describing has vanished as quickly as it came, and so people will always have difficulty with dance

For us the ephemerality is what makes this art form so interesting. It demands that we be constantly prepared for the moment, which encapsulates the entire quality of what comes across.

Coming to understand more about dance has also changed me as a person; I've learnt that I have to be open to experience every moment of my life. Every moment is unique. If you're not ready for it you miss it and it's gone for ever. That's the training that dance gives us.

When you began your work, five countries were involved in the concept. Now there are 30 dance platforms in 22 countries and interest is steadily growing. Those who wish to participate surely do so in the awareness that they're part of an international dance community. The growing popularity of the Rencontres is on the one hand evidence of success, but isn't it also indicative of the difficult situation in which contemporary dance finds itself that such initiatives are essential for the survival of the art form?

Lorrina Niclas: I meet people in every country who've dedicated themselves totally to this art form. None of them would accept that dance could die out. What all the national platform organisers and we at Bagnolet are doing together is demonstrating to the outside world that we are a community; that's the most important part of this process.

In principle we're meeting for the first time in a hundred years. All the other art forms did this much earlier. This was precisely my intention when I suggested the project in 1987: I was convinced of the necessity of publicising the fact that we, like all the others and with all the others, constitute an international ar-

tistic community. That also helps public funding bodies and their representatives to understand why one should participate in the economics of the art form. The significance of the international dimension also has an impact on those for whom dance in their own country is an activity for a tiny minority.

You often emphasise that the national platforms are more important than the final meeting in France, through the spin-off effect that the process generates.

Lorrina Niclas: The whole thing is a process: it begins at the platforms and feeds back into them. At the beginning artists meet nationally and internationally at the platform. They perform under certain conditions and encounter audiences, programmers and artists from other fields of the arts. That's the least we can expect from a platform event. The other effect is that the intellectual environment created at each platform also makes an impact on the thinking of public representatives and audiences, those who have to be brought to an understanding and identification with the whole thing. If there's to be real success at a platform it has to operate in human dimensions.

In a world that's changing so fast, can choreographers assume any responsibilities?

Lorrina Niclas: Inasmuch as nobody can relate to more than two people without accepting some sort of responsibility, there is no such person as the choreographer without social responsibility; anyone who thinks otherwise can stay in their studio and work for themselves. They don't interest me.

What we're going through is an era that we have to seize for ourselves; in the long term it will amount to a revolution. People want to meet, exchange views, develop something, present something. In this they are generous, but also critical. In dance you don't get this obsession with power games, with who's who and what. By this I mean we could form a sound, healthy community.

One often hears criticism of choreographic quality and conformist mediocrity. What's your view of how choreographers have developed in the last ten years?

Lorrina Niclas: Dance demands more patience than other art forms. It sometimes shocks me the way people approach dance.

To understand a piece of work in all its complexity the choreographer has to put it on stage. If a visual artist makes a bad piece s/he throws it in the garbage and nobody gets to see it. It's never exposed to the public view – but if a choreographer does a bad piece of work he's already made use of other people's lives: for months he's been taking up their energy and time, also their money. He wants to – he has to – show the work even if it is bad. If it really is we ought to seek constructive and open dialogue.

An art form like this can't be treated like every other; a shift in attitude is required of

everyone, including the press and the programme makers. I can't stand these maliciously destructive articles about artists whose work is not good.

In this connection, talking about choreographers' development also means talking about AIDS and what this brutal illness means for the world of dance. Choreographers are dying, and taking their entire artistic legacy, their entire creative talent, with them to the grave.

From the work that we've seen over the past several months it's apparent that the influence of Formalism has declined since the Eighties and early Nineties. Is the human individual reclaiming the place at the centre of events?

Lorrina Niclas: There are various centres of creativity with differing central concerns. In some regions of the world we find a more dramatic form in dance that comes closer to theatre. I see Formalism as stronger in the northern hemisphere and the USA. Taken as a whole, the multifariousness of forms reflects human variety. Variety is not just an exponent of the choreographers' different cultural backgrounds; within this variety there are differences that enable and allow the work to be as varied as humanity itself.

In the last five years the political map of the world has been re-drawn; many countries and regions are re-defining their identities. Migration has become a burning issue, not just socially and politically but also in the arts. How crucial is migration for dance?

Lorrina Niclas: Dance has never had a problem with migration because it has always been practised pluralistically; in every company one comes across people from all over the world. Choreographers travel the world to see how people live, how they move, in order to understand something of the 'Other', to bring something back and to leave something of oneself there.

Do you not see any danger in this internationalisation?

Lorrina Niclas: Internationalisation – that's the political structure. Let's take Europe: it's contradictory to work towards a united Europe and at the same time think in narrow national categories. That would be an outline for a thought process which sees Europeanisation in ever-emptier terms.

Nobody is or has ever been creative only in their own back yard; we've all related to Asian, Chinese or Latin American artists. Of course in certain situations we'll also find artists who've become fundamentalists, who want to set up more frontiers and look inwards with a more nationalistic attitude. They're in the minority, but we are obliged to take note of them and work with restraint. That's also part of our responsibility.

The Rencontres, as you've often made plain, exist to serve the artists. Are the platforms, then, still the appropriate form to ful-

fil the artistic needs and political imperatives of the various countries?

Lorrina Niclas: Each country develops its own platform with its own spirit. The differences which are thus created appeal to me; they're good, and that's how it should be. If, however, we take the idea of serving the artists' interests seriously, that means creating conditions for dialogue. It's does the choreographers no good if the platform is more important than they are. What counts as success sometimes restricts the conditions for dialogue and thus limits the space available to the artist.

Artists can speak for themselves – we shouldn't always do it for them – but they need space for this. What's important is that the platforms concentrate on reflecting what dance is and not what we would like it to be. If one regarded a platform as a market place, it would lose all its spirit; we'd have sold our souls to the devil and lost the world. But the artists don't remain aloof from the market; they need it.

Financial conditions are changing all over; no platform can be staged without considerable financial support. How can one avoid the danger of the Rencontres becoming the province of the rich countries?

Lorrina Niclas: Most of the countries taking part aren't rich. A platform can be organised on a low budget; one needs only goodwill on the part of the organisers and the artists. We've been to platforms that were very modest but where the atmosphere was honest and tremendously alive, the artists were well looked after and the dialogue with the other arts was easy and fruitful.

When the eighteen invited choreographers arrive in France, what situation will they find themselves in? What can they expect in the way of experiences and dialogue?

Lorrina Niclas: The artists were chosen by the 32 platform organisers – all of them deeply committed to dance. We talked about the works to be invited; the artists will form a more or less representative picture of dance today. We would never claim that it's a reliable picture; it's made up only of those artists who applied to the Rencontres. It's not exactly the same as if I were to travel the world, picking out what I saw as a representative selection of dance, but I'm nevertheless sure that we've collated a real picture of today's dance. Of course one can only show some aspects of the whole field.

Some of them will be invited by dance programmers in the following year. All of them will receive a monetary prize, half of it for the next co-production and the other half to subsidise possible touring.

The Rencontres sees itself as a work in progress. There's no reason to lock it into a rigid framework with regulations; we've changed it and we will continue to make changes. □