



ARCHÉE

INTERVIEW WITH MYLÈNE BENOIT

You came to dance through fine arts. Can you tell us more about your story, and about the unique influence it had and still has on your shows?

Mylène Benoit: I think I would have liked to be an anthropologist, to practice science and excavate things! In truth, what drove me first to plastic arts, then to dance, was a deep interest for trying to understand the living. In the 1990s, in London, I encountered a way to teach art strongly influenced by postmodernism's freedom of thought. Students were encouraged to tackle a number of both aesthetic and political issues through practice, research, and reflection. We learned how to free ourselves from the influence of systems such as the patriarchy. One day, a philosophy professor opened his class with these words: "I'm going to tell you about the Neolithic, the period when the human being, by becoming sedentary, began to plough the earth... and women." It stayed with me for a long time. Without knowing it, I began the journey that would lead very directly to today's *Archée*. Back then, I created many installations that had to be activated by people, all while thinking about the place of the audience and how to take bodies into account in plastic arts. From there, I turned to museum scenography. For four years I worked with the Cité des sciences et de l'industrie, taking part in the conception the scenography for exhibitions about genetics, sound, or the brain. I was particularly interested in phylogenetics and in the history of species... I worked with scientific data and constraints which I had to translate not only into forms, but also into relationships. It's still a big influence on my work as a choreographer.

Science and philosophy are two of the main aspects of your research, and you put a special emphasis within those disciplines on the importance of giving and sharing. You want to exchange with your performers to create spectacular, unique, and free states of being. How do you communicate with them when you don't come from their discipline?

Deep down, I'm a plastic artist, a researcher. I use all the media I have at my disposal with, since 2004, a special emphasis on the body. Dancers are very open to other disciplines, I even think they're the most plastic of all artists! The first time I set foot in a studio, I was very impressed. I came in with my experience of the image, space, and aesthetics of dance, and brought specific work protocols, dramaturgy, and sources, but as a spectator, a reader, a researcher. I remember bringing texts by American sociologist Erving Goffman about "kinetics", the study of communication through the body and through gestures, which led us to work on how to present daily life on the stage and on the choreography of personal and intimate gestures. Nowadays, I chose my performers based on faithfulness or affinity. I share with them the subject of the show and a number of arguments, so that they can also choose me and choose the subject. Every subject is translated into a practice, like fencing or echolocation. It allows us to create a starting point, but also to get a feel for our bodies through an original experience unique to each play. For *Archée*, the original experience is that of the voice. In this global context of erasure and discrimination, "to raise your voice" is at once a spontaneous response and a vital necessity, which led me to putting this work with the voice both at the heart and at the beginning of the show, to then lead to the gestures, to dance, and to the work on the stage. We forged our voices like weapons, worked on our vocal apparatus, on saturation, on screaming, so that the performers could unleash their vocal power without hurting themselves. We were also introduced to Inuit throat singing and went into a trance with a shaman. All my shows aim to free the body by unleashing its power, be it through movement or through the voice.

Bodies forged through very archaic, almost primitive forms; voices as weapons; a reference to Kyudo in the title: what other loci of female power are called on in *Archée*?

In Japan, movement is in service to a spirituality or a vitality that goes beyond simple practice, and when I went to Kyoto, the image of those women gathering to practice archery really struck me. They practiced a very codified martial art, screamed, gave off such intense power, and played all the roles, including that of referee. That situation, which looked to me either very old or from the future, brought to mind the idea of matriarchy as an alternative organisation of the world. A society which would rely on the strength of women and on their potential—realised or not—to “give birth” to a new world. Women experience in their bodies what Hannah Arendt calls, in the context of political thought, “natality”: every human being ever born carries a part of unpredictability, of radical newness, of something truly revolutionary. When you shoot an arrow, the moment where you draw the bowstring back is like suspended in time, between the aiming, the intention—to hit the target—, the focus on the end of the action, and the knowledge that once you let the arrow go, something begins of which you can’t know the outcome. Archery, like giving birth, is an experience of the activation of a process at once intentional and random, the acceptance—which is a great source of power—of being the origin of something you can’t control, and which exists only to escape your control. And if a whole spiritual and mythological organisation formed during the Paleolithic era around those bodies and their creative power, we’re seeing the exact opposite play out today. In our modern societies, there are very few statues of pregnant women, when it is probably the most astonishing moment of power for the female body. Part of the show will also deal with menses, an undeniable sign of the power of women nevertheless seen as taboo, as a weakness. With agriculture and sedentarisation, the logic of the sowing of both the earth and women caused an epistemological break. There’s an argument that that’s where the mechanisms of domination and control of the female body originated. That tension between past and present reactivates on the stage an unwritten and invisible history of women. The show refuses the standardisation of bodies to allow us to imagine egalitarian societies that would have done away with cultural violence and with the battle between the sexes. I also want this show to offer new models of relationships for both men and women, to allow the construction of alternatives that would take into account states of vulnerability, of porosity. In the Inuit culture, there are several categories of human beings. Not only men and women. Transgender people have a real status within that society, because they are seen as richer, vaster. *Archée* tries to show the richness of human diversity in a world which objectifies the bodies of both women and men.

You insist on the importance of fixing history.

The word “mentrification” spread through the internet a few months ago. This neologism refers to the erasure of the role of women throughout History. For centuries, if not millennia, women have been deprived of the recognition their knowledge, inventions, and research should afford them. This erasure has been compounded by a falsification of History when women succeed. Understanding today what was the role of women in the History of art, gestures, and ideas allows us to operate a shift in the way responsibilities are divided. Yes, this show aims to delve into the History of the world and to invent rituals of reappropriation of the feminine gestures that have been erased from the official History of humanity. While visiting Taipei in January 2020, where I was overseeing an audition for dancers, I met Pi-Chen Liu, an ethnologist who specialises in Taiwan’s matrilineal aboriginal cultures. She told me that, originally, the rites of passage for young men included their dressing into women, to call into their body the power of the feminine. Around that same time Tsai Ing-wen, the first woman President of Taiwan, was reelected. It’s interesting to note that Taiwan is now among the freest countries in the world, with an excellent situation for human rights and a participation of women to political life among the best in the world. Rehabilitating the place of women in History and working for a fair representation in our collective memory allows us to heal ourselves, to rearm the future of men and women.

What world will you create for your new show, for those *archées* and for this arch?

We put up within the heart of the Cloître des Célestins a stage which is a space of resonance for the voice, sensations, and thought. A stage on which can take place songs and dances uniquely addressed. The costumes evolve throughout the show. They’re inspired by the protective gear worn by martial arts practitioners and enhance the bodies of the dancers. The goal of the scenography, costumes, and props is to create a fiction disconnected from any specific time and space, to deconstruct our systems of representation. In a way, the stage of *Archée* is a true matrix in service of the power of women.

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