



# SOFT VIRTUOSITY, STILL HUMID, ON THE EDGE

## INTERVIEW WITH MARIE CHOUINARD

**In your shows, walks have various meanings. Here, they are specific presences that recur throughout. Every individual follows his or her own trajectory, but together, they look like they could be depicting the walk of Mankind.**

**Marie Chouinard:** Walking is a way of wandering through everything that's possible. As a young dancer, I used to watch how people moved and walked. I watched various little things that happened in their knees, their shoulders, their ankles. It fascinated me, and still does, to see how each person's walk is like a personal dance. When a body bends because it has been twisted, or because something is in the way, it moves differently through space. For this show, I indeed asked the dancers to walk and then accentuated their moods and worries, because the body transforms based on our emotional or psychic circumstances. It allowed me to experiment with new architectures of the body. It's a very playful process.

**Those walks would probably not have the same weight without the faces and eyes of your dancers, which you shoot in close-up directly onstage.**

I couldn't quite say why, but what interested me from the start was to work on the relationship between walking on the one hand and our faces and their details on the other: a mouth that slowly relaxes, a gaze that changes... In the constant transformation of every aspect of our bodies, the face, including its muscles and nerves, changes based on what it intimately experiences. Ideally, I would want the entire audience to be sitting in the front row to see what's going on, to be able to enter this work. And because I had this physical need to show faces, the use of cameras, in real time, seemed obvious. At other times, faces are covered, uncovered, re-covered. I like this cycle of appearance and disappearance.

**There's an undeniable extrasensory dimension to the show, a resonance of the bodies, one with the other of course but also with the light, the music.**

I think the right word would be hypersensitivity. I'm looking for states of bodies that would be alert and permeable, in order to recreate this form of intelligence that constitutes us, psychically, physically, organically. I see the body as an antenna, a seismograph. In my show, the whole body – its senses, its pores, its cells – is on alert in order to record the constant fluctuations, be they visible or invisible – like the air, or currents – that surround it. It's like trying to go forward while holding the reins of wild horses. It requires of the performers a high level of self-control and a hypersensitive presence. They are energetic, strong, centered, and at the same time attentive and open-minded.

**How do you explain this philosophy of the body that is yours alone, and that you built while performing as a solo artist for fifteen years?**

I invite the dancers to venture into zones of freedom and internal research. It is only by doing that that they will see movements we cannot name emerge. If I talk to them about the face, for instance, I try to make them feel comfortable, in order for the masks they might be hiding behind to fall away. I'll tell them that the face is like the surface of a lake in which their inner movements are reflected, that they need to let it change, that they shouldn't censor themselves. That's when some truth will come out and be shared with the audience. I try above all to give dancers the opportunity to live the stage fully by creating specific circumstances that will reveal them. It's true that dancing on my own for so long gave me an intimate understanding of the act of performance; so when I direct them, I know exactly what it means for them to delve into those states of engagement.

**There is in the show a moment where your dancers seem trapped, like the refugees crossing the Mediterranean are aboard their boats...**

While working on the show, I pictured the great disasters of classical paintings, those wrecked ships and tormented faces. It can make it seem topical, but war and deportations have been topical for centuries. And in this play, there is indeed a form of violence that wasn't visible at the time and that I noticed only later. Generally speaking, inspiration to me comes from the presence of the body in the empty space of the studio, which is like a sacred time, a sacred place. A body and its multiple articulations, thoughts, sensations, even its breath. My raw material is the phenomenon that is living. As a result, all my shows have a vital violence to them that can then be linked to various events of life.

**Your work has taken forms as diverse as poetry, drawing, photography, cinema, or installation art. You recently developed a web application. How do you go about creating?**

The reason why I'll choose to work on a solo piece or on a group show is the same why I'll sometimes write poetry or work on a video installation. It starts with a desire to create, and only then do I look into the form that desire will take! I can spend two years or more thinking about a show. Most of the things I work on with dancers are like dormant until the moment I find an impulse that can serve as a starting point. Like walks and faces here. Then, with the dancers, the creative process can take anywhere from twelve to fifteen weeks. The more time passes, the less time it takes. It's as if we were getting better at using the tools at our disposal. And the further I get into this creative process, the more pleasurable it becomes, everything seems rife with possibilities. For *Soft virtuosity, still humid, on the edge*, we worked on walks and faces, and it became like an equation: you start with one element, and once you apply its own logic to it, it develops, creates its own variations, unfolds almost by itself. If I picked the right elements at the start, if they start resonating with something bigger than me, with the history of Mankind, the show almost makes itself. My only job is that of an architect. I unleash a power, then I try to see where to take it and how. It's like a game. I see creation as a game, the most beautiful game you could ever play. It's an act of life, an act of joy, the act of being in the action. Everything starts with dance. Once it's done, we create the music, here with Louis Dufort, with whom I have been working for almost twenty years. I send him a sequence, and he'll write a piece, based on which I'll make adjustments. Choreography is poetry made flesh: you can build around a paragraph, a chorus, a repetition...

**Can you say something about the title of the show? It sounds almost like a haiku.**

I remember saying during rehearsal that I was interested in that particularly virtuosity on which we worked with the dancer, namely, the very subtle changes of the face. I told them it was like a "soft virtuosity." I used those words to explain that what I was looking for wasn't the virtuosity of grands battements, but was still a form of virtuosity. I wrote that down somewhere and when the time came to find a title, that's what came back, in English, which is unusual, as I usually think in French!

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu  
Translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

