



LIED BALLET

INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS LEBRUN

Where did this idea to work on German *Lieder* come from?

Thomas Lebrun: The *Lied* is something I've been familiar with for a while. I began dancing in a school, in the north of France, which focused mostly on the expressionist current, a non-academic vision of dance close to that of Jacqueline Robinson. I remember dancing solos on *Lieder* at the age of eighteen or so. Later, I worked with choreographers like Bernard Glandier and Daniel Larrieu, whose writing is more precise, more poetic. I know those parallel paths can be seen in my work, they've had an intimate influence on my work as a choreographer.

What do you do to turn those *Lieder* into choreographic material?

Lieder almost always revolve around the same themes: love, nature, death, wandering. In the first act of *Lied Ballet*, we work on all those themes. We don't tell a story, the texts are short. Some sentences taken from those *Lieder* form a wonderful basis for the development of a unique choreographic writing. Take this one, by Alban Berg, for instance: "Spring is solemn, its dreams are sad, each flower looks moved by pain, a secret sadness trembles in the nightingale's sound." Each of the eight texts I chose is treated differently, based on specific constraints and instructions.

The structure in acts is a reminder of the fragments and sequences that characterise several of your plays, like *La Constellation consternée* (*The Appalled Constellation*) or *Trois décennies d'amour cerné* (*Three Decades of Surrounded Love*). Why this structure?

The fragments in *La Constellation* or *Trois décennies* have often been described as successive plays, but if they are plays, to me they are first and foremost linked to one another to form a larger play. *Lied Ballet* works very differently, since eight dancers are present at the same time on stage. In *Trois décennies*, you had a group as well, but you observed it member by member, individually. Here, what the audience sees is a community. That being said, *Lied Ballet* can be related to those plays in the sense that the different acts do create separations. The three acts are really different, yet they echo and respond to one another. The reason for that choice is simple: it's the classic structure of ballet. Studying the *Lied* and ballet led me to a certain methodology, a concept: using *Lieder* as libretti, and working on the foundations of the ballet: pantomime, libretto, narration, technique, variation, pas de deux, etc. For instance, in the first act, we look at pantomime. We didn't try to reproduce or even know the entirety of the extremely codified vocabulary of that art form. We would rather offer our own vision of it, play with the way we perceive it. In the second act, we worked with the motifs of the solo, the pas de deux and pas de trois, of variations, which led to a form of dance that is much more physical than in the first act. As for the third act, it revolves entirely around the idea of chorus, which is the role the corps de ballet often plays.

Your plays often move from narration to abstraction, from the theatrical to the most uncluttered. Is that interplay between theatricality and abstraction important in *Lied Ballet*?

It is indeed something that comes back in several of my plays: a beginning that is rather illustrative, if not outright eccentric, before a gradual move towards modesty or introspection. It is not something I plan, and at the same time I want to go in other directions as well. Why should we have to choose between theatrical dance and abstract dance? Those categories are useful *a posteriori*, when they help you identify forms, but they can only be restrictive during the creation process. I think it will be particularly hard to fit *Lied Ballet* into one or more boxes. Each act contains both narration and abstraction, it's much more nuanced than that. I don't really like analysing that aspect too much. Once the show begins, it belongs to the audience anyway. Sometimes I feel as if I'm creating something based more on performance that is nonetheless still regarded as "belle danse," whereas other forms that are densely written will be perceived as being more abstract or experimental. Everyone has his or her own reading of a work.

Does this relationship between "belle danse" and the modernity of your writing explain your interest for the *Lieder*, whose diversity you mention, from the popular *Volklied* to the academic *Kunstlied*?

Alban Berg's *Lieder* are particularly interesting here: some of them are very melodious, very soft, inspiring in a direct and easy way, whereas others, much more modern in style, can seem almost dissonant. Listening to them, it's hard to imagine they were all written by the same man. I like this kind of freedom, which exists as much in the texts as in the form itself, it amuses me. I wonder whether when they were written, people discussed which was a narrative *Lied* and which was an abstract one, which one fit its time and which was innovative. I wonder whether there wasn't a greater freedom of creation then than there is now. I have the same relationship to dance: just because, at a specific point in my life or in a creative process, I have a desire for an explosive form of dance or on the contrary something calmer, doesn't mean that it is what I will be doing forever. *La jeune fille et la mort* (*Death and the Maiden*), *Trois décennies*

d'amour cerné, and *Lied Ballet* are very different experiments with music and writing, with performers as individuals and as a group. With every new creation, I question my own desires when it comes to dance.

The dancers are accompanied by two musicians who play the *Lieder* live. Was that aspect important for this play?

I think it is very important that music be played live, that it be a living thing, with us. Benjamin Alunni, a tenor, and pianist Thomas Besnard are young, open-minded artists, and they're both interested in choreographic languages. They share a direct connection with the dancers when on stage, and the dancers give this relationship a central place.

There's like a touch of irony in the title of your play. You are once again playing with stereotypes and representations.

The *Lied* was originally a form of popular music that only then became art music. I think ballet followed the same path in reverse. Ballet used to be associated with the upper class. Nowadays, *The Nutcracker* plays in front of a very popular audience. Contemporary dance, though, isn't exactly what you'd call a crowd-pleaser! I'm exaggerating a little, but I like to work on this sort of reverse symmetry. I like to put on an equal footing melodious *Lieder* and more complex ones. The truth is that art music can be just as melodious, of course; it's a key part of my work, through the choreographic diversity I have always defended. I do find it amusing to call a play *Lied Ballet*, compared to my usual production and to the way it might be labeled. Artistic labelling is something we French are very fond of!

You say you look for “dancers for whom the pleasure of dance does not prevent contemporary writing.” What do you mean by that?

Young dancers today sometimes focus on one aspect of dance, to the exclusion of everything else. Others are more open to this diversity of outlooks that I find so interesting. I like to work with the latter. Thinking that choreography as an art form should be one way or another, political or conceptual, narrative or abstract, isn't satisfying. A dancer who refuses a state of dance or who imposes constraints on himself to be more trendy, to the point of falling into a new form of academicism, doesn't really interest me. I think it's a bit sad. I look for dancers who, through dancing, express their pleasure as well as their personal engagement, who defend their job and are ready to defend a play as a group, and not only the integrity of their individual engagement. I like dancers who like to give and receive, who constantly put their bodies and their minds at stake.

Interview conducted by Renan Benyamina.

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