



les ballets C de la B

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ONLY SLOW CHANGE IS TRUE CHANGE

Directing an opera? No way, says Alain Platel. 'It is a machine that would drown me'. And so, *C(H)ŒURS* will be a 'performance', with ten dancers and eighty choir members on stage. Starring Verdi and Wagner.

It is quite an exciting year for choreographer Alain Platel. *C(H)ŒURS*, commissioned by Gerard Mortier for the Opera of Madrid, will be one of his most ambitious and large-scale projects ever. One with a time-consuming working process as well, that already started last October. More than a hundred figurants from all over the country gather every Saturday in the dance studio at the Bijlokesite. They try out an arsenal of movements that may work for a large crowd. These findings will serve as a blueprint when Platel goes to Madrid in February to rehearse with the Teatro Real choir members and the live orchestra. Ten dancers of les ballets C de la B will be on stage as well.

'It is a privilege to be able to work so long and intensively on a performance,' says Alain Platel. 'I am fully aware of that. Normally opera directors only practice only nine working days with a choir. But in my way of working, this is the most sacred moment: the creative process during which you see things happen and gradually grow. As a choreographer, I lead and stimulate. But I also pick up stimuli from the group during our improvisation sessions. These interactive tensions are pushed to the limit in this project.'

C(H)ŒURS will be a performance about the power of numbers, about the group and the place of the individual in it. It is in line with Platel's former large-scale productions such as *Wolf* (2003), *vsp̄rs* (2006) and *p̄iti!* (2008) in each of which classical live-music was the driving force. After Mozart, Monteverdi and Bach, *C(H)ŒURS* begins with Verdi opera choruses and ends with Wagner.

What is so fascinating about Verdi? How does his music affect you?

'Well, I was asked a first time to set up a performance about Verdi by the dance festival in Modena in commemoration of the hundredth anniversary in 2001 of Verdi's death. I played with the idea to set up a project with old-aged singers, retired stars for whom Verdi had established a rest home. But then, Gerard Mortier came with a more specific request about Verdi, using the choir as protagonist.'

'Verdi did not compose the most beautiful music, I think. But you can feel that he was driven by a deeply humanistic ambition. Some of his melodies are so well-known that it is almost too common place to use them. Yet, we do. With 'Va pensiero' from *Nabucco*. It is a choir moment with a most wonderful effect. You can really feel this music is in our genes.'

Verdi stands for pathos. In a cold era such as ours, does that fit in?

'Oh, I don't mind pathos. I am not afraid of sentimentality, although I fiercely fight it sometimes.' I also understand the power of Verdi's music and opera in general. Opera is one of the rare art forms that do not shy away from displaying deep emotion. This choir project was originally intended for the New York City Opera. Seeing their performances, I was mystified by their old-fashioned approach. Even in our amateur theatre I had seen stronger stuff. And then I understood that the New York opera works as an antidote, as a weapon against the distance and defence mechanisms in daily life, in which emotions are hardly allowed.'

From Verdi to Wagner, that is quite a big leap. How do they come together in this project?

The body language I explore in my work finds a haven in Wagner's music. Even more perhaps than it did in the baroque music I often worked with. With Mozart and Monteverdi, it was the contrast that did the trick: the contrast between the dance and the playfulness of the music. With Wagner and Verdi, there is no contrast, there is harmony. The music has many layers digging deep. You could call it contorted stillness. Although Wagner also composed very grasping, unavoidable music. The overture of *Lobengrin* kept us busy for weeks. Anything is possible with this music. And it is impossible to listen indifferently to 'Heil König' from *Lobengrin*. It is as if all of the *Lord of the Rings* comes together in it.'

According to you, a choir on stage is 'dangerously beautiful'. Why is that?

'There is something tempting about a group. You want to be part of it but at the same time you are also afraid of losing yourself in it. A crowd can turn against you in no time. It is something I could experience myself while choreographing this project.'

How do you give a solo part to a choir? I had all kind of visions about it. But finally, I realized that less is

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more. Eighty people raising their little finger is more impressive than the most sophisticated movement pattern. The 'Dies irae' from Verdi's *Requiem* is a powerful moment. It takes about twenty minutes for the choir to appear. The choir comes down the stairs, and no more is needed to send a shiver down your spine. Why is that? Because of their number? I have no idea, but I know it works.

The masses, how are they to be understood politically?

Verdi's and Wagner's music take us back to an era in which pathos grew well. But that pathos was needed to evoke a feeling of fellowship and union. Both Verdi and Wagner lived in a country that was not yet a nation. You could compare their Germany and Italy to our present-day Europe. Are we staying together or do we split up: an ever pertinent question on history's chess board.'

'Together or apart is what the performance is about: dancers versus choir, individual versus masses, sub consciousness versus ratio. To have your own voice or not. The temptation of excluding. It was not very difficult to find images illustrating these notions. The media are full of them.'

'We also use quite a few quotes. From Jonathan Littells' novel *the kindly ones* e.g., in which you find confronting statements about individual responsibility. Who is more responsible, the railway employee operating the switches or the officer giving orders in the extermination camp? As an individual, one gets easily caught in a collective happening.

I was also deeply moved by what Marguerite Duras said about democracy and politics. According to her real democracy is seven billion people living together and watching the world fall apart. As a statement, you may find this quite fatalistic. But it also means that, regardless our many differences, we are all alike. As we are all in the same boat, the one-million-dollar-question is: what do you want to do with your life? You cannot leave decisions to others, nor to any higher authority. Over and over again, you can choose what you want to do.

The power of the masses was quite often in the news over the last year, amongst other things because of the Arab Spring. How did you feel about this?

Choir and masses inevitably refer to popular uprisings : from the Belgian French fries revolution, over Occupy Wall Street, to the Arab Spring.

I have been deeply moved by the revolutionary wave in Egypt. It had ardour at first but the revolution quickly lost momentum. History shows that revolution always eats its own children. Makes you wonder what today's indignados will do ten years from now. Where will they be in the system? In my opinion, change can only work when it is slow and gradual. Never when it is radical or sudden, because that kind of change is a delusion.

In both my personal and professional life, I prefer compromise over obstruction. That is what I love about our Belgian 'experiment' as well. Due to the political situation we have to find a *modus vivendi*.

In your most recent performances you seem to insist on giving a more prominent place to the hurt body. Why?

It is my way of interpreting deeper contemporary feelings through dance. Undoubtedly, I have become less radical in many respects over the last few years. I no longer look down on classical ballet or Maurice Béjart's dance expression, because I recognize their ways to deal with important issues and emotions. Showing a hurt body on stage has become my personal language. A language with a universal message, as I understand. With *Out of Context – for Pina*, we toured for two and half years. It was performed 180 times. We had never played in Chile before and yet we got a full house over and over and were proclaimed best international performance. To know we made something happen in Santiago is touching.

Twelve years ago, you took a sabbatical because you wanted to get away from the exhausting pace of creating and the complicated tour schedules. Are you in peace with that now?

Touring is still heavy but my new strategy is to enjoy and live to the full every place where I go as if it were a stop on a life's journey. This way you find wonderful things and meet the most extraordinary people.