 DOI: 10.31577/sd-2024-0018

Dancing into the Sunset: *nicht schlafen* by Alain Platel

Amos Fergombé
The Polytechnic University Hauts-de-France, Valenciennes, France
Research Laboratory Societies and Humanities – DeScripto

Abstract: This study is devoted to the Belgian director and choreographer Alain Platel's stage creations, nicht schlafen, premiered in 2016. The text looks at the creative process, analysing the orchestral sources, the diversity of sound materials and the set designed by Belgian artist Berlinde de Bruyckere. Finally, the text examines how stage creation reveals itself as the crucible of a chaos of bodies, shedding light on contemporary tragedies.

STUDIES

Key words:
Alain Platel, Gustav Mahler, Berlinde de Bruyckere, body, creation, sound, tragedy, horse, dance, clothing, Steven Sprengels

Reading the contemporary world often involves examining reminiscences of the dramas of the past. As they walk down the path of creation, artists are absorbed by their surroundings. They sense the imminence of crisis and catastrophe. They feel the urgency of putting the stage and the world to the test. Such an approach requires attention to the present, a sense of the future, but also a diversion through history, which is essential to shed light on the present but above all to open up a more sensitive reading of the world's future. Witnesses of their time, artists often appear as watchers and scouts, listening to the rustle of the world.

This contemporary grounding is the main characteristic of director and choreographer Alain Platel's approach[1]. Since the creation of his company, Les ballets C de la B, in 1984, Platel has been attentive to the expressiveness of the body and invests the present in crisis, while seeking to question the past and diagnose the world through the body. For the artist, it is a question of bringing the human gaze to the shores of history. In his various creations, Platel weaves subtle links between the past and the present, between the themes of downgrading leading to the relegation of human beings, between barbarism and everyday life, between community and the individual. The director creates a dialogue between time and place, opening the door to otherness while transforming the stage into a place of politics and reconsideration of the human being in twilight.

Platel's approach to dramaturgy involves reading essays and novel[2] collecting documents on current events that can serve as a reservoir for his creative work, and a great capacity for listening stemming from his training as a remedial teacher.

Three names, three figures – Johann Sebastian Bach, Pina Bausch and Fernand Deligny – have left their mark on the work of choreographer and stage director Alain Platel, shaping his approach to the stage, an aesthetic imbued with Baroque music and a reconsideration of the expressiveness of the body and the human figure.

Bringing together dancers from different countries (South Africa, Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Burkina Faso, France, Italy, Poland, Switzerland, Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Portugal, etc.), Platel's creations offer a constant cross-fertilisation between the so-called learned forms and popular forms, genres considered major and those considered minor, notably the popular ball,

1 In 1984, Alain Platel founded his own company, Les Ballets C de la B with whom he created *Stabat Mater*, 1984, *Lichte Kavalerie*, 1985, *Mange p'tit coucou*, 1986, *Alchemie*, 1987, *Emma*, 1988, *O Boom*, 1989, *Mussen*, co-directed with Kirsten Thomas Delholm, 1990, *Landschap van Laura*, co-directed with Eva Bal, 1991, *De tuin,* co-directed with Eva Bal, 1992, *Allons les gars*, 1992, *De pijl*, 1992, *Bonjour Madame, comment allez-vous aujourd'hui, il fait beau, il va sans doute pleuvoir etcetera*, 1993, *Moeder en Kind*, co-directed with Arne Sierens, 995, *La Tristeza Complice*, 1995, *Bernadetje*, co-directed with Arne Sierens, 1996, *Iets op Bach*, 1998, *Allemaal Indiaan*, co-directed with Arne Sierens, 1999, *Wolf*, 2003, *vsprs*, 2006, *Nine Finger*, a joint production by performer Benjamin Verdonck, Rosas dancer Fumiyo Ikeda and choreographer Alain Platel, 2007, *pitié!*, 2008, *Out of Context* (renamed *Out of Context – for Pina*, in memory of the choreographer Pina Bausch, 2010), *Gardenia*, co-directed with Frank Van Laecke, 2010, *C(H)ŒURS*, 2012, *tauberbach*, 2014, *Coup Fatal*, with Serge Kakudji, Rodriguez Vangama and Fabrizio Cassol, 2014, *En avant, marche!*, with Frank Van Laecke and Steven Prengels, 2015, *nicht schlafen*, 2016, *Requiem pour L.*, with Rodriguez Vangama and Fabrizio Cassol, 2018, *Mein Gent*, with Frank Van Laecke and Steven Prengels, 2023, and *Ombra* with Steven Prengels, 2024.

2 The works of Marguerite Duras, Alessandro Baricco, Jonathan Littell and Philipp Blom are particularly noteworthy.

a souvenir of the Ghent festivities last July. The new ball he is creating features figures that allow the actors and dancers to 'move,' a style that features bodies shaped by so-called classical movement, mime, circus, hip-hop and the art of contortion. By claiming a form that he describes as "bastard," Platel creates works that deliver a patchwork of scenic forms, a hybridity of bodies and forms. The bastard form established by the artist gives rise to the affirmation of a presence in the world. The treatment of sound, a mixture of Bach music, the sounds of sleeping animals, bells and a metronome, reinforces a hybrid style. The micro-narratives that emerge from the improvisations reveal human figures, a bringing into the world of being that is sometimes done in reverse or by immersing oneself in the reality of broken bodies, handicapped or defective children, and so on.

The creation of *nicht schlafen* in 2016 highlights an approach that values artistic hybridity, subtly weaving links between past and present, while exploring the signs of the times and the shattering dramas that emerge from them. This contribution looks at the crises of representation sublimated by the staging of bodies and the construction of music.

Nicht schlafen brings together and consecrates an approach born of an intuition about the state of the world, weaving subtle links between past and present, inviting us to grasp in the signs of time a sensation of upheaval to come, forms of pulsations and stammering of history. The artist explains: "I asked the dancers to bring all sorts of images of the world. The real world or the artistic or poetic world, or whatever. These images were displayed on the wall and could inspire people. I saw that there were quite a few images that were linked to a certain form of violence in the world at that time. There was the run-up to the US elections and I already had a feeling that something out of the ordinary was going to happen. The show premiered in September 2016 and the US elections were in November. We had no idea. We never thought it was possible that someone like Trump could win them. But all the same, we felt it. We were in the middle of the immigration crisis and all the wars going on in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, which impressed a lot of people. There were also the attacks, the Paris attacks, for example, in 2015, which shocked a lot of people. And then after Brussels, it was a period when, I think, everyone felt that there were some very strong things happening."[3]

Such a dramaturgical approach allows us to envisage analogies between eras and to look for echoes of the years leading up to the First World War. The writing of *nicht schlafen* was based on three stanzas, three works that put the present into perspective: Philipp Blom's essay *The Vertigo Years: Change and Culture in the West, 1900–1914*, Berlinde De Bruyckere's horse sculptures and Gustav Mahler's music.

The essay *The Vertigo Years: Change and Culture in the West, 1900–1914*[4] by German journalist, historian and novelist Philipp Blom was a source of inspiration for Platel.

---

3 We have chosen to keep long passages from the interview we conducted with Alain Platel in 2020 in order to preserve the voice of the approach that animated him.

4 BLOM, P. *The Vertigo Years: Change and Culture in the West, 1900–1914.* Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2008.



Alain Platel: *nicht schlafen*. Biennale de la danse 2016. Photo © Chris Van der Burght. Les Ballets C de la B (LaGeste) Archive.

For Blom, the period 1900–1914, described as the Belle Époque because of the technical advances (aeroplanes, sonar, neon lights) and avant-garde movements[5], prefigured "the great swing towards the First World War," a certain carefree spirit, and what he calls "years of vertigo, exhilarating, vibrant, troubling, even terrifying."[6]

The effervescence of these years gave rise to masterpieces, artistic and literary figures and works that resonated with the times. It was also in this context that the composer Gustav Mahler (1860–1911) wrote his major works (7 symphonies and more than 15 lieder), which reflect the explosion in progress and the disaster to come. Platel says: "I realised that certain artists, like Gustav Mahler for example, were capable of giving a form of expression to something we felt in society. This isn't the first time we've said that there are artists who sense something in society and try to express it in the works they create."[7]

Mahler had appeared only occasionally in Platel's previous creations, notably in *Gardenia*[8]. The German composer seemed rather far removed from the constellation

5 These movements include Fauvism, Expressionism, Abstraction, Cubism and Futurism.

6 BLOM, P. Entre 1900 et 1914, l'Europe a été prise de vertige [The Vertigo Years: Change and Culture in the West, 1900–1914]. In *Books*, Issue 6, June 2009. Available at: https://www.books.fr/philipp-blom-entre-1900-et-1914-leurope-a-ete-prise-de-vertige/.

7 Extract from a previously unpublished interview with Alain Platel that we conducted in 2020.

8 Based on an idea by Flemish actress Vanessa Van Durme, choreographers and directors Alain Platel and Frank Van Laecke created *Gardenia* in 2010, a work featuring nine performers, including seven transvestites.



Alain Platel: *nicht schlafen*. Biennale de la danse 2016. Photo © Chris Van der Burght. Les Ballets C de la B (LaGeste) Archive.

of musicians called upon. The director's work focuses more on Baroque music and especially Bach, whom Platel describes as the "ultimate comforter" and whose music permeates and punctuates the works, to the point of becoming, as Platel puts it, an almost Hitchcockian presence, a cameo whose furtive appearance signals an attachment to the figure who could haunt the stage.

It was after *C(H)ŒURS*, a work bringing together the choirs of Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner, that Gerard Mortier (1943–2014), then director of Madrid's Teatro Real from 2010 to 2013, invited Platel to take an interest in the work of composer Gustav Mahler.

Platel's relationship with Mahler's work was not as intense as his relationship with Bach's work: "I always had trouble with Mahler's music. It wasn't music I liked. It was Gerard Mortier who persuaded me to think about it before he died. He told me, after *C(H)ŒURS*, that it would be good now to try listening to Mahler's music. He knew that he was really one of the composers I didn't like at all."[9]

The creative process was also marked by a collaboration with the artist Berlinde De Bruyckere. Alain Platel recalls the intention and creative process of the scenic and scenographic device conceived by Berlinde De Bruyckere[10]. The relationship be-

9 Extract from a previously unpublished interview with Alain Platel that we conducted in 2020.

10 A contemporary Belgian artist born in 1964, Berlinde De Bruyckere is a major painter and sculptor. The major exhibitions devoted to bearing witness to the artist's recognition and place in the contemporary field: *In Flanders Fields*, In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres, 2000, ***Kreupelhout***, The Venice Biennale, 2013, *Sculptures and Drawings*

tween the two artists, Alain Platel and Berlinde De Bruyckere, is a long-standing one, and their mutual admiration gives this first stage work an exceptional plastic dimension: "I'd wanted to work with one of Berlinde De Bruyckere sculptures, a horse sculpture, for a very long time. It was one of the first works I saw, a very long time ago. And, even though I love everything she's doing at the moment, it's always a particular work that she's done around horses. And she agreed to do it. And I think the most important moment was when she invited us, the dancers and the team, when she made the sculpture in a university where there were carcasses of dead horses. She and her assistants made a sculpture from these carcasses. A mould of this sculpture was then made. The fact that she invited us to see and witness this work was extremely important to us. You don't see live animals. You don't even see real carcasses. You see Berlinde's sculptures. We were lucky enough to go through the whole creative process to get to this point."[11]

The initial project was called *Mahler-Projekt. This title referred to the process, to a possible future for the work.* The final title will be the fruit of chance and can be considered as a found object, a ready-made: "It was during rehearsals. That's when I saw that Mahler had written instructions for the musicians on each score/part he had written. One of the instructions on one of the scores was: 'nicht schleppen.' I don't know much German, but I thought it meant 'don't fall asleep.' And I found that very funny because he had also written that for very slow music. So I found it a bit ironic that a composer would ask his musicians, 'if you play this piece, which is very slow, don't fall asleep.' But Steven Prengels, who was the music director, explained to me that nicht schleppen meant 'don't dawdle' or 'don't play too slowly.'" I thought that instead of nicht schleppen, we should write nicht schlafen. The title certainly refers to this amusing anecdote, but it also seems to be an instruction about what's going on in the world."[12]

The stage, crucible of a human disaster

The artist has set the scene with horse carcasses and 9 dancers[13], 8 men and one

2000–2014, S.M.A.K, Ghent, 2014. Her work, which includes sculptures, installations and drawings, is characterised by a strong emphasis on the flesh and a representation of the body inspired by twentieth-century tragedies and religious iconography. The representation of animal bodies occupies a special place. The installation *In Flanders Fields* (2000), made up of five horse casts, highlights the disaster of the First World War. The artist's work is also a genuine appropriation of materials (wood, fabric). The use of pigmented wax restores a sensation of skin (human, wood, realistic flesh) but above all conveys the strangeness that permeates the figures or objects represented. Placed on cushions or logs, suspended from steel pillars, locked in cupboards or placed under cloches, or covered with long hair or blankets as if to emphasise the ambivalence between warming and concealment, the bodies evoke a certain disquiet in the viewer. The artist gives her figures an expressive power rarely seen in contemporary sculpture. Berlinde De Bruyckere's art appears to be a place of healing for bodies that are often fragmented or headless, an invitation to think about the human being in the face of his vulnerability.

11 PLATEL, A. – FERGOMBÉ, A. Alain Platel Le geste, creuset de la figure humaine. [Interview, 12 July 2016 in Ghent (Belgium)]. In GENETTI, S. – LAPEYRE, Ch. – POUILLAUDE, F. *Gestualités/Textualités en danse contemporaine Des années 80 à nos jours*. Paris : Hermann, 2018, pp. 165–172.

12 Extract from a previously unpublished interview with Alain Platel that we conducted on 22 April 2020.

13 Bérengère Bodin, Boule Mpanya, Dario Rigaglia, David Le Borgne, Elie Tass, Ido Batash, Romain Guion, Russell Tshiebua and Samir M'Kirech.

woman. The singular female presence of Bérengère Bodin is particularly noteworthy. The initial plan was to bring together only male dancers. The insistence of the dancer, present in *C(H)ŒURS* and *tauberbach*, to take part in the creation was heard by Platel. This female presence will not be asserted or exalted, and the artist will make the stage the place where gender is erased.

Over and above the mutual benevolence, the writing establishes a poetic relationship with the horse, questioning the principle of figuration, an experience of physicality, a disconcerting incarnation. "I wanted to do a play with men. But Bérengère Bodin, who had just finished creating *tauberbach*, told me that she really wanted to continue working with me.

Can't I dress like a man? Then she sent me photos of herself showing how she could shave and so on. Where she was showing off her back muscles. She was teasing me, but she was also joking. After that, I started to wonder. Wouldn't it be interesting to have a woman in this troupe of men? And then, at a certain point, I said to myself that I had to try and I offered her to take part in the project. At first, I thought she might be a dramaturgical thread for this play. When you see how a woman tries to get into this dance, into this troupe of men, you wonder what kind of tension she could represent. But very quickly we realised that it was something very banal, which didn't help us. It was too naive because I could see that her presence in this group of men, her presence, already gave a certain colour. We didn't want to accentuate it by telling a story we didn't want to tell, nor was it necessary to tell a story: where did the two African boys come from? Where did the Muslim boy come from? Or why was there a Jewish boy in the room? We quickly realised that their presence gave the play a certain colour anyway. So we threw out all these ideas to explain why the woman, a woman, was in the room. And I think that helped us. It really was the right choice. The criticism we heard most often. It was that the presence of women in this company was very, very beautiful and very good. A lot of people said: 'At last we're seeing a play where the woman isn't presented as the mother, the rival, the Madonna, the prostitute and so on. But that's only part of the cast.'"[14]

The installation designed by the artist Berlinde de Bruyckere is characterised by two elements:

On a pedestal, three horse corpses moulded by Berlinde de Bruyckere are superimposed, connected to the poles by several ropes, waiting to be lifted. The pedestal on which the horses rest occupies a central place and constitutes the focal point, making the death of the animals the metaphor of an apocalypse. The community of nine dancers seems to prostrate themselves not before the new golden calf, but before the equines, sublimated by the artist. They are also there as an echo of a battle that sowed desolation and disaster, those of the First World War. The scenic and choreographic writing appears to be the site of a plastic exploration in which the stage magnifies fabric, wool and flesh.

14 Extract from a previously unpublished interview with Alain Platel that we conducted on 22 April 2020.



Alain Platel: *nicht schlafen*. Biennale de la danse 2016. Photo © Chris Van der Burght. Les Ballets C de la B (LaGeste) Archive.

A large tapestry used as a backdrop curtain forms the second element of the set. The curtain, damaged and torn in several places, bears the scars of time, a wear and tear that amplifies the ageing, anguish and distress of the world. The interstices of the curtain reveal what Georges Banu calls the "fissure of the world," opening onto the off-stage, a transcendent possibility, the source of the cataclysm that lies within this confined interior and that cannot be concealed beneath the artifices of the backdrop curtain magnifying a certain illusionist form.

The backdrop hangs irregularly, revealing a large drapery on the courtyard side. At times, the lighting work highlights the large canvas, giving it a fairy tale, poetic aspect, far removed from the tragedy of the scene. Like the blankets that envelop some of Berlinde de Bruyckere's sculptures, the canvas envelops the bodies, constituting a humanity trapped in a precipice and in a chaos that is gangrenous.

Like a watchman, Alain Platel creates a twilight work that reveals the traumas of bodies, a world at odds with its own rout, while "the night follows its course" in the words borrowed from Victor Hugo. And also:

"Everything that lives, exists or thinks,
Looks with anxiety
Advance this dark silence
Into this dark immensity."

To escape the night and the catastrophe, the artist operates like a seismograph, probing the depths of the human being.



Alain Platel: *nicht schlafen*. Biennale de la danse 2016. Photo © Chris Van der Burght. Les Ballets C de la B (LaGeste) Archive.

Such a representation of bodies is also achieved thanks to the sound material, a sampler produced by Steven Prengels, a composer who has taken part in the creations of *Gardenia*, *C(H)ŒURS* and *tauberbach*. "I met someone who was absolutely fascinated by Mahler's character and music. He was a fan of his music and so it was he who really guided me. He did it in a very, very, very, very beautiful way, because first of all he looked for music that he thought would appeal to me. Because I'm rather romantic. So he looked for extracts in Mahler's music that would appeal to me and help me to listen more deeply to this music. But little by little, he guided me to other places. And what was really nice was that he didn't try to convince me with a lot of words. There are people I've met in my life who would say yes, but why don't you like Mahler and then start making speeches about the music. I didn't really listen to what I was listening to. He didn't. He did it by offering little extracts of his music. And then he started playing me symphonies and songs. For example, for *Gardenia*, he had already suggested using *Oh Mensch* and that's what we did. For the creation of *En*

avant marche, we used other parts of Mahler's music that I consider very important in my life. It was quite a journey that he took with me and the fact that he never tried to convince me with a lot of words, but by seducing me to listen to certain forms of music, was the right thing to do. It really is the best thing he could have done."[15]

Steven Prengels will use the sound materials to weave together musical works by Gustav Mahler and Johann Sebastian Bach, sounds of sleeping animals created by the photographer working under the pseudonym code K49814[16]: "Und selbst im Atem des Schlafes drückt sich dieser irrsinnige Wille zum Leben aus [And even the breath of sleep expresses this mad will to live]." The ensemble forms a soundscape that envelops the nine dancers caught up in a chaotic and equally subtle maelstrom, a rustle conducive to what Roland Barthes calls "*machè,*" the battle, the single combat, the duel, the struggle.

The different types of music (Mahler, Bach, Pygmy Polyphonies) are complemented by another sound source, that of sleeping animals and recordings of sleeping animals collected by K49 814. "It was during the creation of *tauberbach* that we tried to work on the voice. I met K49 814 who was a very, very special girl because she loved *tauberbach*. I spoke to her. She was a girl who, in my opinion, was extremely sensitive and who had artistic ambitions, which she tried to realise, but I had the impression that she was not understood by the world of the arts and the outside world because she was someone who lived an extremely solitary and very obsessive life. She was obsessed with killing animals, putting them in cages and so on. That's what guided her life. So when she saw *tauberbach,* which she loved very much, after a few months she gave me the recordings of the animals she had made. She goes to the stables to sleep with the animals and records their sighs in a drawing. I found it extremely fascinating. At one point, I asked Steven if it would be possible to make a composition using these sounds and extracts from Gustav Mahler's music. And that's when I realised that something very powerful had happened. And I also think that, little by little, that's where the title of the piece comes from."[17]

In praise of "syncretic" scenic writing

With *nicht schlafen,* the artist introduces a style that blends learned sources, popular forms and a variety of sound recordings that could become a key to dreams. In this syncretic rite, Mahler's music serves as ferment for an exploration of crises and as a detonator for a drama to come. The ritual acts as an awakening to life. And when madness overtakes him, all that remains is the absurd, sex with dead animals. The staging of *nicht schlafen* opens like a long prayer, addressed not to a supreme being who has become silent, but to immolated animals piled on a plinth. The ceremony brings together a community of nine dancers stranded in a disused space, transformed into a temple of dance.

---

15 Extract from a previously unpublished interview with Alain Platel that we conducted on 22 April 2020.

16 For more see: http://atmenohnepause.org.

17 Extract from a previously unpublished interview with Alain Platel that we conducted on 22 April 2020.

To the various orchestral sources borrowed from Gustav Mahler are grafted a Bach cantata, *Den Tod niemand zwingen kunnt* [Nobody could restrain death], J. S. Bach (recomposed and arranged by Steven Prengels), polyphonic songs *Ambula Makasa* and *Bulelela* by the duo Boule Mpanya and Roussel Tshiebua, Pygmy songs, sounds of bells and sleeping animals. Reality and nature offer a counterpoint to disaster and chaos. The diversity of sound materials is achieved through the use of polyphonic traditions.

Alain Platel's claim to multiple sources and hybridity makes *nicht schlafen* a work that renews our relationship with the Baroque. For this latest creation, only one work, by Bach, sung by the dancers, belongs to the Baroque repertoire. The aim is not to embody the Baroque form and use it as the basis for moving the bodies. The stage is designed to confront the spectator with a box of music and sounds, a mesh that acts as a figure of drama. Animal bells open the show, followed by the voice, *a cappella* song whose lyrics attempt to sublimate the lurking dread: "Hör auf zu beben! [Stop shaking!] / Bereite dich zu leben! [Get ready to live!]"[18]

Platel's productions are characterised by their ability to tear the spectator away from the comfort of watching. But beyond the staging, the artist proposes a form of hope, the horizon of a world that is collapsing. To the tragedy of the world, Platel will oppose a resurrection through voices capable of countering the tocsin of the bells and the general drowsiness. The long stick held by the dancers, usually used by shepherds to guide horses and men, traces a vertical line, an orientation towards the "transcendent being," which has become silent for a choir that expresses its desolation by abandoning its body and clothes to dislocation. Harmony here is illusory, and the collective knows it is threatened by a form of being there, a presence imbued with tragedy. From this collective, threatened by the invading nihil, emerges a scenic construction, a 'pure form' in the sense of the Polish writer and artist Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, a form detached from any reference to reality.

The scenic construction is based on micro-narratives conceived as counterpoints to maintain a certain tension in the piece and in its reception by the audience. As a prelude to the long battle of clothes, Dario Rigaglia's dance movements will emerge, a fluidity inspired by classical, modern, contemporary, Latin and hip hop dance.

Abandoning the long stick, he crosses the stage in the direction of the enjoyment of gestures. Platel's creation is also a place of shocks, a writing that opens up another fracture, ridding the stage of any temptation to sentimentalism. This clash of scripts gives rise to an initial hand-to-hand encounter between Ido Batash and Elie Tass.

The deflagration of this sequence (about 15 minutes) of hand-to-hand combat transforms the stage into a battlefield where the dancers tear off their partners' clothes. This long pitched battle, while expressing violence, could sometimes be seen as a form of gratuitous gesture. But like any war, it often has its origins in the small gesture that produces the spark, before turning into disaster. The aim is to strip human beings of their dignity. The chaos thus created is akin to that of the

18 Gustav Mahler. *Resurrection Symphony No. 2 in C Minor*.



Alain Platel: *nicht schlafen*. Biennale de la danse 2016. Photo © Chris Van der Burght. Les Ballets C de la B (LaGeste) Archive.

curtain and the horses, symbols of the loss of meaning in a world grappling with nihil.

The show opens at dawn. A long sequence of hand-to-hand combat in which the dancers tear off each other's clothes. "In the case of *nicht schlafen*, the idea of starting with a battle surprised me myself, because I hadn't intended to create scenes around violence or anything like that. But that's because we were talking about it a lot and at some point I introduced the exercise so that we could get an idea of the act of fighting. We were confronted with a lot of things we hadn't expected. We could see that it was very exciting to fight, but also to see people fighting from that moment on. We introduced it very quickly in the rehearsals. We realised that it was important to try and show something that referred to the violence in the world, because so many people don't understand why there is so much violence in the world. And Mahler's music referred to an atmosphere that was already palpable at the time, namely that catastrophic events were about to happen, the First World War and then the Second. So this night of violence and fighting raised questions. For me, it was important to show them very quickly and not to make any comments, not to explain why these people started fighting. Because for me that's the big question. Why do we fight? Sometimes there is no reason. Sometimes, in the real world, there's a lot of aggression and violence that we don't understand why. This question then became the starting point for the film we are making."[19]

19 Extract from a previously unpublished interview with Alain Platel that we conducted on 22 April 2020.

And then, in a subtle way, brief moments of expressive dance punctuate the long dance session, completing or sublimating the chaos. In this way, Platel delivers a grammar of gestures, a medley of choreographic forms, sometimes offering a script, a digest, an ironic quotation from the history of dance. The writing also takes the form of an exploration of musical fragments, choreographic forms and tattered clothes.

Musical sources, noises and also silences become material for sculpting and shaping states of body, giving the dancers a listening presence. Silence is sometimes the starting point for apprehending this night that shines so brightly, forcing us into a half-sleep.

In this night, fear seems to drive the body and be a vehicle for emotions. The artist gives gestures a particular eloquence. Every presence is manifested in the human gesture in the face of the fear that looms on the horizon, in this night that offers no escape. Stripped of the clothes that litter the stage, the dancers are reduced to mere presences.

Platel has David le Borgne and Romain Guion re-enact the hand-to-hand combat/body on body, echoing the horses on the plinth, caught up in the ritual of a killing. Alain Platel also seems to have adopted the ideas of legal historian Pierre Legendre, author of *La Passion d'être un autre. Étude pour la danse* [The Passion of Being Another, a Study of Dance]. For Legendre, dance is defined as "an institution particularly apt to play out drama, psychotic drama. We don't know why the hand speaks, but we know that it speaks. This recognition underpins the act of theatrical enjoyment."[20]

The choice of the birch tree, which is over 3 metres long, is not insignificant, as it evokes the *axis mundi*. In Platel's work, the birch connects, elevates and leads bodies through a world of night dominated by death. It establishes a certain resurrection and regeneration of beings.

The body is born of a pulsation of memory, and sometimes refers to an attempt to restore the shreds of an imagination haunted by the trouble of an appearance and a figuration, bodies shaped as the place of paradoxes, sowing in those who apprehend them, a double but also a disturbance of representation. This disturbance blurs the reference points envisaged to draw the human framework that emerges, a topography of the making of the human figure. The piece opens with a ritual sublimation of death. The dancers keep turning towards the bodies of the horses in a series of prayers designed to break the sting of death. The choir singing Bach's cantata is seized by the tocsin, which seizes the dancers, giving rise to fear and a dance whose expressiveness borrows from a rich grammar of gestures, disasters and wars. The stage also becomes the reservoir of an emotional pulse.

David Le Borgne abandons and strips himself of most of his clothes, keeping only a pair of Calvin Klein briefs, displaying a symbol of consumerism and fashion in the disaster of stage bodies. In a world marked by the tearing of clothes, the indication

20 LEGENDRE, P. *La Passion d'être un autre. Étude pour la danse* [The Passion of Being Another, a Study of Dance]. Paris : Seuil, 1978, p. 342.

of the name of the brand in the technical specifications of the costumes is not insignificant. David Le Borgne becomes a horse, imitating its neighing, transforming this space of death into a stud farm for humans.

The hand-to-hand combat between Elie Tass and David Le Borgne, which provokes a certain abreaction, should be set against another, more sensual relationship between Romain Guillon and the horses on the plinth. And because "horses are best killed,"[21] David Le Borgne's body is treated like that of a corpse, examined, triturated, the skin stretched, the body tossed about, before being thrown away with the dead horses. It's also a nod to classical dance. One of the last scenes offers a more ironic ballet performance.

The dancers, dressed in beggar's costumes, offer dissonant steps while taking a classical approach. The ending is a reference to *Swan Lake* and an echo of *The Awakening of Spring*. Dance becomes pleasure, the stage is brighter, and the piece opens on an ironic note. The dance becomes a shadow theatre where the living copulate with the horses' corpses.

Platel offers a counterpoint to the tragedy and fear that leave us dumbfounded. And to the dereliction of the bodies, Boule Mpanya's dance creates a humanity of disaster and impossible resistance to fear. The uniqueness of Platel's work lies in its ability to move from moments of fear and tragedy to a feeling of joy. It is as if the spectator is being invited not to remain in the grip of death. The dancers stand up straight, contrasting their verticality with the horizontality and heaviness of the horses.

The dancers' reversal frees the bodies and the bells on their feet, sublimating the drama and freeing themselves from gravity with the *Ambula Makasa* sung by Boule Mpanya and Russell Tshiebua and taken up by the funeral choir. These more instinctive moments testify to the ability to envelop *doel*, in the sense of mourning and pain, with the cunning of bodies, bells on feet and the *youyous*, heralding a form of resilience for the survivors. And to counter death, madness is summoned. The insignia of madness, the marotte resonates and awakens the sleeping body, producing a thrill and the possibility of celebrating a certain resurrection over death.

These bells, also known as *Jingle Bells*, mingle with the *bells* mixed by Steven Sprengels from Gustav Mahler's *Symphony No. 6*, Part. 1 and Johann Strauss II's *Emperor Waltz*.

The dance opens with an awakening around the slaughtered animals. The choreographer and director Alain Platel orders the ceremony, like an organiser, setting in motion a choir caught up in the thrill of a free dance, a liturgy, in the sense of a public service, an essential ceremony to re-establish the order of the world after a disturbance or to "ward off fear,"[22] and thus overcome the instability of the world.

---

21 Borrowed from the title of the film *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* Directed by Sydney Pollack, ABC Pictures and Palomar Pictures, 1969.

22 BOUCHERON, P. *Conjurer la peur : Sienne, 1338. Essai sur la force politique des images* [The Power of Images : Sienna, 1338. Essay on the Political Power of Images]. Paris : Seuil, 2013.

The length of this dance of the bells acts as a counterpoint to the opening session, with the dancers in soothing hand-to-hand combat. A collective expresses itself and takes hold of the chaos of death. The community exalts an ensemble that moves from the depths to life, while revisiting the Pygmy songs and dances performed by the duo Russell Tshiebua and Boule Mpanya. The response to the dislocation of the human race comes through dance and song, and finds its true expression in the exchange between two other dancers, two commitments made before witnesses, two promises too, one by Ido Batash, of Jewish origin, and the other by Samir M'Kirech, of Arab origin. Platel chose not to translate this dialogue, which he felt could have been reduced to an anecdotal discourse. The dialogue between these two dancers, one Jewish and the other Arab, takes the form of two presences at the centre and at the front of the stage, suggesting a possible alliance, an overcoming of the fear of each the other.

Ido Batash[23]:

דתוא גורהל אלו דב עוגפל אל חיטבמ ינא !דב עגפא אל סלועל ינא דל חיטבמ ינא ,רימאס!

סתוא גורהא אלו דלש סירבחבו החפשמב עגפא אל סלועלש חיטבמ סג ינא!

תאו דתשא תא !תויניחאו סיניחא ,תודודו סידוד ,סיחא ,תויחא ,דלש אתבסו אבס ,דלש אמא תא ,דלש אבא תא דידלי...

הללאשניא !חיטבמ ינא !סתוא גורהא אלו סהירבחבו דלש סירבחב עגפא אל סלועלש סג חיטבמ ינא

Samir M'Kirech[24]:

8لئ اذأ اوديا

.كدلاو يإ وأ لنقن ببسنأ نيي لن أنبنؤا وأ دأ نذ يذأ .أدبًا رض يأ كذ بأ ف س ادأ .ىأو دأس أ
,كذاقدقدثو كئاشأ كبنو ءانبأ كذالخاخ ؛انبأ كناقدقش .كلدجأ)كندلاو
.للهء اشا نإ كبعأ أدأ موقأ نيي لن أنبأضأ كعنيأ ام ك
.كئانبأ و كنجوز كنامع كلاوخأ ءانبا وأ كتمومع { ...كئاقدصا نم ايأ وأ كفلئاع ءان
.كاقدصا ءاقدصن **حتى** وا كئاقدصأ ءاذيإ وأ لنقد

Beyond death, which has become a sign and a place where the human being is erased, a fraternity between beings opens up. It is in keeping with the motto of Les ballets C de la B: "This dance is part of the world, and the world belongs to everyone."

---

23 "Samir, it's I do, I promise never to hurt or kill you. I promise never to hurt or kill your family and friends: Your father, your mother, your grandfather, your grandmother, your sisters, your aunts, your uncles, your nephews... Your wife, your children... I also promise never to hurt or kill your friends or their friends. I promise God willing." Translated by A. Fergombé.

24 "I am Samir. I promise I'll never hurt you. I promise I won't kill you or hurt you. I also promise not to kill or harm your family or any of your friends: Your father, your mother, your grandparents, your sisters, your paternal cousins, your maternal cousins, your paternal aunts, your maternal aunts, the sons and daughters of your brothers and sisters, your wife and your sons. I also promise never to kill or hurt your friends or even your friends' friends. I promise you, Inch'Allah." Translated by A. Fergombé.

Conclusion

In this dark work, created by Platel, the stage becomes the crucible of an ordered chaos regulated by the music that envelops the bodies emerging from a human night. With *nicht schlafen*, Alain Platel sketches out a path through the gap in the curtain, introducing a choreographic and scenic style that brings about a certain resurrection, an emergence of bodies and an overcoming of nihil. The simulacra of horses and the sounds of sleeping animals mingle with the living, carried by a new sacrament of spring.

Embracing the diversity of languages – German, Arabic, Hebrew, Lingala, Pygmy, sounds, the breath of sleeping animals, bells – the collective take on Babel, orchestrated by Alain Platel and Steven Prengels, lets us hear the rustle of a fraternal humanity. If with the music theatre performance *vsprs*, the *Magnificat* or *Prayer for Peace* whispered by dancer Lisi Estaràs in the soprano's Claron McFadden ear evokes consolation and love through the text attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi,[25] this night against the drowsiness and blindness that sometimes ensnare humans gives rise to a certain dazzle of words, the promise of a 'future' favourable to otherness and fraternity.

Literature

BLOM, Philipp. Entre 1900 et 1914, l'Europe a été prise de vertige. In *Books*, Issue 6, June 2009. Available at: https://www.books.fr/philipp-blom-entre-1900-et-1914-leurope-a-ete-prise-de-vertige/.

BLOM, Philipp. *The Vertigo Years: Change and Culture in the West, 1900–1914.* London : Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2008. 480 p. ISBN 978-0297852322.

BOUCHERON, Patrick. *Conjurer la peur : Sienne, 1338. Essai sur la force politique des images* [The Power of Images : Sienna, 1338. Essay on the Political Power of Images]. Paris : Seuil, 2013. 288 p. EAN 9782021134995.

FERGOMBÉ, Amos. *Alain Platel, éloquence du corps* [Alain Platel, Body Eloquence]. Bruxelles : Revue Degrés, winter 2016, No. 168.

LEGENDRE, Pierre. *La Passion d'être un autre. Étude pour la danse* [The Passion of Being Another, a Study of Dance]. Paris : Seuil, 1978. 352 p.

PLATEL, Alain – FERGOMBÉ, Amos. Alain Platel Le geste, creuset de la figure humaine. [Interview, 12 July 2016 in Ghent (Belgium)]. In GENETTI, S. – LAPEYRE, Ch. – POUILLAUDE, Frédéric. *Gestualités/Textualités en danse contemporaine*. Paris : Hermann, 2018, pp. 165–172. ISBN 9782705697228.

PLATEL, Alain. *Les Ballets C: de la B.* Uitgeverij Lannoo, 2006. ISBN 9789020964431.

PLATEL, Alain. *Requiem pour L* [Requiem for L.]. Berchem : EPO, 2019. 302 p. ISBN 9789462671706.

25 "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me put love. If I offend, I forgive. Where there is discord, let me bring unity. Where there is error, let me put the truth. Where there are doubts, let me put my faith. Where there is despair, I bring hope. Where there is darkness, let me bring light."

STALPAERT, Christel – COOLS, Guy – VUYST, Hildegard De. *The Choreopolitics of Alain Platel's Les Ballets C de la B: Emotions, Gestures, Politics.* London : Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021. 280 p. ISBN 9781350233577.

Amos Fergombé
Professeur des universités en Arts du spectacle
Université Polytechnique Hauts-de-France (UPHF)
Campus du Mont-Houy
59313 Valenciennes
France
E-mail: amos.fergombe@uphf.fr
ORCID: 0009-0005-3601-8231