

Boris Charmatz's 10,000 Gestures: pushing forward, one step at a time

Boris Charmatz's blistering new work is, he says, like life – a blizzard of unique moves, never repeated



'Unstoppable momentum': Bruce Charmatz's 10,000 Gestures. Photograph: Tristram Kenton for the Observer

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It's the idea of dance, the thought behind movement that most fascinates the radical and exacting French choreographer [Boris Charmatz](#). He first started thinking about [10,000 Gestures](#), his blistering new dance piece commissioned by the Manchester international festival, about five years ago when he was watching one of his earlier pieces at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The question he asked himself was: what if, instead of repeating steps in a loop or a pattern as dance-makers normally do, to give their works shape and sense, you created a piece made up of 10,000 gestures, each one individual and never repeated? It is, once you think about it, an extraordinary notion, so simple yet so disruptive. "It's not a good choreographer's task," says Charmatz, with a grin. "But because I didn't know how to do it, I felt that was what we should try."

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We are talking in the decaying surroundings of the sprawling Mayfield railway terminal, once a busy depot, now a porous, red-brick shell with water seeping through various leaks in the roof. This is the kind of space Charmatz prefers; somewhere his dance can breathe. “I think dance is a super-wide experience,” he says. “And I am more comfortable here with the layers of history, the dramatic effect of the postindustrial space. It is more normal in my DNA than a theatre where you have *Billy Elliot*.”

Later, I was allowed to watch a dress rehearsal before the premiere last Thursday. At night, the space is bewitching, with a shiny, smooth dancefloor stretching back into the recess of square concrete arches, illuminated with chains of white light. Inside this striking frame the piece unfolds, beginning with the movements of one female dancer in red, spangly bolero and skirt, making gestures both big – the start of a pirouette, a jump – and tiny, as she knocks her face or blinks an eye.

This contrast between big and small continues when she is joined by 24 other dancers, all frantically moving, the speed like the blizzard Charmatz wanted. Sometimes they flick a finger, or touch a leg; sometimes they execute a grand jeté or an arabesque, or contort their bodies into strange shapes. Other contrasts come into play too: between stillness and frenetic activity, between group collusion and individual acts. The dancers shout and scream, and count; at one point, they rush into the audience, compulsively gesturing to reach their target.



A scene from *10,000 Gestures*. Photograph: Tristram Kenton for the Observer

There's a bewildering impression of chaos, but also the sense of a calm centre at the heart of the storm. By the close, to snatches of Mozart's *Requiem*, the dancers oddly resemble medieval paintings of saints as much as modern strivers. Two kiss and fall to the floor like a latter-day Adam and Eve; a girl shoots herself with her finger in mock despair. There's so much happening, it is hard to watch, impossible to grasp.

"You have to put the gesture away after you have done it," Charmatz told me beforehand. "For me, this was almost life and death. You have to go on. You were a beautiful young boy at 10, now it's over and you're 12, then 16. Of course, you carry a lot of things from the past, but there is something about trying to keep running, keep doing. Inventing."

This sense of unstoppable momentum grips *10,000 Gestures*. There's something profoundly touching about its inevitability. It may be a bad idea for a choreographer, but it is a really good and haunting work.