

Sky's the limit: Boris Charmatz's rooftop dance reclaims cities from terror

His dancers have performed at Tate Modern and been lifted by cranes. Now, the maverick choreographer is taking them to the top of a multistorey carpark for a feverish protest show



Tribal groupings in Danse de Nuit. Photograph: Damien Meyer/AFP

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It is dark, and a cold wind is blowing over the top floor of the multistorey car park where a crowd has gathered. The French city of Poitiers is small and pretty, but we are a long way from the bustling cafes of its centre. We have been herded to a rooftop by the railway tracks to watch *Danse de Nuit*, a work by the French choreographer and cultural provocateur Boris Charmatz.

Suddenly, a man barges into the space, shouting as he throws himself to the ground. More voices and bodies follow. Although we know this must be part of the performance, the situation feels momentarily frightening. Since the 2015 attack on the Bataclan concert hall, public spaces in France – as in many other European countries – have acquired an undercurrent of danger.

Danse de Nuit is Charmatz's response to our terror-oriented world. He and his five dancers talk incessantly while they perform: half-formed sentences about blasphemy, religion, celebrity, identity. Their tight, jittery movements, in solo monologue or in close, tribal groupings, seem fraught with a defensive energy. Yet they frequently flip into a more comic gear, joking with us, capering and grimacing like cartoon characters. If *Danse de Nuit* starts out playing on our night-time fears, it also tries to confront and dismiss them.

The following morning, Charmatz says his aim was “to free the tension around our public spaces. Now, even in Poitiers, there are soldiers with machine guns. We have become frozen with fear”. While he accepts that firearms may be necessary, he believes we must also reclaim our cities – for pleasure, for protest and for dancing. When he brings the work to the UK this month, it will be performed in a comparably dark and deserted location in Stratford, east London.

While one of Charmatz's aims was to “rethink togetherness”, his other motivation was to free up the language we use to address the politics of terror. The issues are so complex they can stifle debate, which is why the words his dancers speak have a chaotic quality. “Instead of thinking what we should say, our talking is fast and free. We can say something stupid, clever, planned or on-the-spot. The language has a plasticity so that the audience can grab what they want. They can make their own thoughts inside the flow of ours.”

In conversation, Charmatz expresses his own thoughts with similar hurtling intensity. The 44-year-old comes from a traditional dance background, having trained at the Paris Opera Ballet school and the Lyon conservatory, but for him dance has never been simply about bodies and steps. For each new work, he spends two or three years “thinking and dreaming” around its possibilities, the points it can make, the questions it can pose.



Fingers of eight ... one of Charmatz's 10,000 gestures. Photograph: Donald Christie

the time before the end of the wall; no one else did that.”

As a child, he had a variety of talents and ambitions: he played table tennis and the violin; he wanted to learn Russian and go to school in England. Once he decided to concentrate on dance, he was characteristically wholehearted, auditioning for the Paris Opera Ballet school because he “knew it gave the best training”. But he never wanted to become a conventional classical dancer. “I didn’t project myself as a prince in *Giselle*. I was interested in dance because it had a history, a culture, a mental landscape. I could read about it, discuss it, write and make it, as well as perform it. I could touch on politics, history, social and economic ideas.”



Always probing ... a scene from Charmatz's production *Enfant*. Photograph: Tristram Kenton for the Guardian

As soon as he had finished his training, he went out on a limb as an independent dancemaker. His first work, a duet made at the age of 19, was performed in whatever public spaces were available: “We’d set out a square of benches and chairs in churches or gymnasiums or gardens. I saw that dance is a medium that didn’t necessarily need a stage. It can happen in an instant.”

His closest creative peers are the French conceptual choreographer Jérôme Bel and the British-German artist Tino Sehgal. “Dance is such a wide frame today,” he says. “It can be a Madonna show, it can be the *Billy Elliot* musical, it can be YouTube, it can be a hardcore work by Trisha Brown.”

How a choreographer situates themselves within such diversity is a question that fascinates him. Some establish a niche with a signature movement style, but Charmatz takes his vocabulary from a range of sources. For *Flip Book*, he strung together images from the choreography of Merce Cunningham, creating a homage to the late choreographer. Sometimes the work was performed by professionals, sometimes by amateurs, who joyously – and heroically – pitted themselves against one of the most complex dance languages in history.

So, as well as addressing the geopolitical and linguistic fallout from the war on terror, *Danse de Nuit* plays with the “blurry” relationship that develops between dancers and audience when they are in an open space. Having to deal with the dynamics of a volatile, shifting crowd makes the dancers more than performers. Similarly, the audience are not merely watching, but also figuring out where to position themselves in relation to the dance: “They’re having to think, ‘Where do I stand, am I too close, am I in the middle of something, am I part of the performance itself?’ They can’t entirely grasp what the dance is.”

This is an issue Charmatz examines in many of his works. Last year, when in residence at Tate Modern, he and his team spent a weekend performing a series of choreographic installations among the artworks, with the result that visitors to the museum often found themselves part of the choreography.

He says the relationship between dancer and viewer becomes a “fragile, interesting thing”. Even when Charmatz is choreographing for the stage, he probes the ways in which we look at dance or imagine what it might be. In *Enfant*, he had his cast lifted around by a small crane. In *Manger*, he focused on the least choreographed feature of the dancer’s anatomy – the mouth – orchestrating a ritualised performance that included singing, talking and eating.

The accompanying programme note led the Daily Telegraph to complain of Charmatz’s magnificent pretentiousness. He serenely admits that even in France “there are a lot of critics who accuse me of being elitist and pseudo-intellectual”. But philosophising about dance has always been Charmatz’s way, not least because both his parents were teachers and, he says, “militants”.

“They were militants for politics, for pedagogy, for literature, for culture of all kinds,” he says. “I grew up in a small town called Chambrey, near Switzerland ... while everyone else would go to the mountains for their summer holiday, we would go to Berlin. It was

A different iteration of the *Flip Book* concept will be explored in the work Charmatz is creating for Manchester international festival this summer. A literal enactment of its title, *10,000 Gestures*, it will be performed by 25 dancers who, during the course of an hour, will execute exactly 10,000 moves. None will be repeated and they will all look different. He plans to draw his cast from a variety of ages and backgrounds, too. In this way, “their motivations for doing each gesture will be very different: one might be a very technical dance movement like a double *tour en l’air*. Some others might be practical or pornographic or political”.

It is as ephemeral as a dance work can be, eschewing the traditional repetition and patterning that help fix a movement in the audience’s memory. “Each gesture you see will never come back. It will be unique. You will hardly even keep it in your mind. It will be like a shower, a storm of movements or states.”

The complexity seems to fill Charmatz with a masochistic pleasure. “For the viewer, it will be chaotic. For me, it will be an almost impossible task. How do I come up with 10,000 gestures? How do I get the dancers to remember them?” He grins joyfully. “Perhaps it will be about my failure as a choreographer.”

. *Danse de Nuit* is at the multistorey car park, Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, London E20, 17-20 May. *10,000 Gestures* is at Manchester international festival, 13-15 July.

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