

Interview with Boris Charmatz
by Gilles Amalvi, December 2020

Your next creation is a solo performance centered around two main axes: on the one hand, the idea of drowsiness, of half-sleep; and, on the other hand, the idea that the performer himself produces the music in the form of whistling – whistling that evokes melodies and accompanies the dance. Do you already have one or more titles in mind at this stage?

Titles say a lot about the future of the piece. The piece is not likely to have the same connotations if it is called “somnialescence” or if it is called “sleep,” “half-asleep,” or “Music.” At the moment, I’m mulling over the meanings implied in each of these titles, the possibilities they reveal, and the limitations they might entail. A title is a micro-universe of meanings. Since it is how a creative work first “communicates,” I discuss the title a lot with the team of [terrain]. So far, I really like *somnialescence*, which evokes an in-between state – halfway between waking and sleeping. Ideas for performances often come to me when I’m half-asleep. And I like the moves, most often involuntary, one does when falling asleep: it’s like a languid dance, convulsed by jolts. For me, creation – and choreographic creation in particular – has to do with a non-voluntary form that draws on the unconscious. I don’t will myself to create, with a clear idea of what I want to do; I let myself be guided by impulses, tropisms, meandering states of mind...

Some of your pieces come directly from dreams – or from hypnagogic states.

Indeed, the piece *régi*, with Raimund Hoghe, is a dream piece – which I partly dreamed before putting it on stage. So far, I spent only three weeks working on this solo, towards the end of the first lockdown. Going back to the studio was like a breath of fresh air; I started working on what could be a first part, which involves dancing while whistling. But I still can’t quite see what other parts might look like... Could they extend the principle of whistling or, on the contrary, explore other physical dimensions related to voice? Specifically, I was thinking of a principle of chiasmus: the idea of movement deceleration with vocal acceleration, and vice versa. But the idea of dancing while whistling is so rich in possibilities – wedding the production of movement to the emission of breath, sounds, and melodies – that I don’t want to abandon it. I want to see how far I can take it. As a result, as sometimes happens with certain pieces, it is possible that an idea that was present at the outset might find its way into another piece. Maybe it will be the case of this idea of chiasmus, of inverted dynamics between text and movement, voice and gesture.

For the moment, the dynamics of the piece tends

more toward unity, toward a whistled choreographic movement that transforms, that evolves – rather than a piece with several distinct parts. I’ve done several pieces that had a lot of speaking parts. The whistling corresponds quite well to a desire to whistle away meaning. The relationship between whistling and dancing builds a choreographic balance that corresponds to the energy that is mine today.

*We are very likely to see many solo performances coming out in 2021, in the wake of the lockdown – the solo being a form that most dancers were able to continue working on at home or in their studios. How do you envisage the form of this solo? In a way, you have done only “false solos,” like *Les Disparates*, with Dimitri Chamblas. What does this solo produce in terms of a mental universe, economy, or relationship to choreography?*

Why do a solo today? One could say that, with the lockdown, we’ve had a set of rather particular conditions to practice dance. This is true, but I wanted to do this solo before the epidemic. It’s probably a question of lightness; it doesn’t have the same weight. I’m the only one responsible for what happens on stage: everything happens between myself and me. What’s appealing about the solo format is that there’s no need for translation. The connection with what you dream at night – the fantastical and intuitive dimension of the creative work, whether it’s set down in a notebook, kept in your head, or enacted through your body – is much more direct. There is no need to explain, to make people understand, as might be the case in a group piece. And, in recent years, I’ve done a lot of group pieces, sometimes with very large groups! To create a performance, you have to induct other dancers into your vision, work out the mechanics of the show together. In a solo, there are no intermediaries. From *somnialescence* to creation, everything is done in a much more direct way.

I want to keep this work as long as I can in a state of indetermination typical of *somnialescence*, of reverie. This is why, to start with, unused to working on my own, I brought some texts into the studio as a crutch to lean on. In the end, the time spent working alone, to the tune of whistled music, allowed me to do away with these props. The further it moves along, the more the work becomes internalized, mental, and the less I feel the need to call on external support.

But at the beginning, there was nothing obvious about doing a solo – which is probably why I’ve done so few. First, because in a solo you are exposing yourself. Personally, I have the impression of showing much more of myself in *10000 gestes*; but there, I am exposing my mind, not my image. When we did *Les Disparates* with Dimitri Chamblas, we called it a “two-headed solo.” It is indeed a solo – I dance alone –

but composed four-handed. Besides, in reality, it's more of a duet, with the work of Toni Grand – juxtaposing a heavy, static sculpture and a body in motion.

The idea of drowsiness has been present in your work for a long time. I remember an interview in which you evoked the idea of a piece in which the dancers would be in a state of inertia: a dance of inert bodies, like the sleeping children in enfant, or the siesta in A Dancer's Day. It seems to me your relationship to dance has oscillated between two poles: on the one hand, an excess of movement, as in 10000 gestes; on the other, drifting away, inertia – or death.

Indeed, in a piece like *10000 gestes*, I am looking for excess, for plethora – some rapacious form of energy expenditure. With the present creation, I hint at a *mode*, a *mood*, a line of dream. But, as a general rule, I always end up sweating in the end! I like contrasts, abrupt changes. For the moment, I am starting off very slowly, whistling in monotone; the melody evolves, I go through different states, different stages of interconnection between breath and the dynamics of the body, of melodic construction, its combinations, its ruptures.

It may well be that my choreographic work is located between these two points: a demonstrative expenditure, on the one hand, and the somnolence of inactive bodies, on the other; a perpetual motion, the desire to dance, to jump, to exhaust the body versus the image of a body that is calmer, also more darker, an image that evokes stoppage, death, a body at its breaking point – a body *after exhaustion*. It is a body that has gone beyond excess, beyond the plethora – or that has been broken by the overflow.

Immobility is, in dance, sort of a limit point. Perhaps it's the equivalent of white monochrome in painting: a form of emptiness, a void. I recall Yvonne Rainer's lecture at Musée de la danse: Nothing doing / doing nothing, in which she evoked the impossibility of "doing nothing." Once on stage, the body always does something, even when it's doing nothing.

What I like about the idea of drowsiness is the mental spectacle it offers. When you're drowsy, you can dream of 10,000 gestures. States of rest and half-sleep interest me because they mark an intermediate point between the fact of not moving and the act of moving a lot. The idea of moving *little*, even while moving like mad in your head. It's a bridge between the mental world and the physical world. With this creation, I want to conjure up the gestures of those who sleep poorly, insomniacs, sleepwalkers... It's possible the present situation makes us sleep less well. I like the idea of exploring these states of insomnia, of restless sleep. In *danse de nuit*, we repeat "sleep sleep sleep" over and over while changing positions. In *enfant*, the bodies are

manipulated by machines, children pretend to sleep or play dead.

The other component is music, by way of whistling. Where do the ritornelles you whistle during the performance come from? What is your "mental jukebox"?

It draws a lot on the music that was played on the radio when I was a kid, that is, mainly the musical backdrop of the radio station France Musique. It's like a reservoir of classical music I dip into without really asking myself what comes from where or from whom. The melodies are just there, they come to me – whether it's Bach, Mozart or Vivaldi... At first, I started whistling in the studio, because that's what I do all the time... Basically, it's a rather roundabout way of reviving a fairly traditional juncture between dance and music. In fact, I thought the piece could just be called *Musique*. Or *France Musique*. Or *Classique*. On the one hand, because the form of the solo is very classical; on the other hand, because this relationship between dance and music belongs to the classical form. What comes to mind when I whistle is mostly classical music. It's almost against my will. I would love to whistle Xenakis, Miles Davis... No doubt the melodic aspect has a lot to do with it; it is simpler to whistle a theme, an aria, a melody than a complex sequence of notes; that said, we find very potent melodies in contemporary music, for example Stockhausen's *Mantra*, or certain sonatas for prepared piano by John Cage, which are reminiscent of Satie's melodies.

The idea of doing a solo built around a connection between dance and music is not necessarily very exciting in itself; except that it has to do with music that I create myself, that I generate while I dance. I can summon it and I can interrupt it whenever I want – it's all done live. The whistling acts as a filter – a filter for the breath. I don't even activate my vocal cords – unlike in *manger*, where a group of dancers dance while eating and singing. Whistling is a very simple and very fragile musical action. Dry lips is all it takes to make it stop. You're out of breath, and it stops – hence the need to produce a dance of *paucity*, a diminished, languid dance. If you move too fast, the whistling very quickly sounds false or becomes inaudible. This is a tightrope walker's dance, where the body movement affects the instrument. The performance literally *hangs on my lips*. I really like the title of Jacques Audiard's film, *Sur mes lèvres* [*Read My Lips*] – which would be another possible title! Voice rises out of the throat, from the vocal cords, before passing through the mouth. Whistling is generated where breath meets the lips. Voice is thickness, matter; whistling is faint, minimal, tight. It is not very loud. It can fade away.

So we have dance and music. That's a solid

block. But within this block, the music is fragile, and the balance can be broken at any moment. Everything hangs by a thread. The challenge is to bring this fragile form to the big stage. It will premiere at the Opéra de Lille, a large classical stage. To make this frail, barely audible melodic thread be heard on such a large stage is both risky and possibly very powerful. Whistling is like a conversion operation: it converts the grand into the insubstantial. A Haendel aria is reduced to almost nothing: a skeleton, a melody. It's like striking a match: there is light, heat, but it's short-lived, it goes out quickly: it can be put out by a single puff of air.

What you've said about whistling reminds me of the concept of ritornelle, as articulated by Deleuze and Guattari. They turn this musical phenomenon into a concept that allows them to analyze the making of an absolutely singular space-time. In your case, it's a matter of creating a space through music and movement – of constituting the stage as a refuge, but porous, open to the outside...

I need you to find me this passage in Deleuze and Guattari!¹

What I'm whistling are indeed ritornelles, bits of melodies that run through my mind. They're a world unto itself, which, without being closed off, stands apart, creating a kind of familiar shelter, a climate. Whistling makes it possible: to inhabit the space I occupy. That's probably why I felt so good, alone in the studio, dancing as I whistled along. It's a way of forging a space that is absolutely personal, but which I can share. From the moment I start whistling, I feel completely at home. I become the Boris who's been whistling since he was 6 or 7, through half of every break at elementary school. That's a lot of time!

That's exactly what Deleuze says: the ritornelle is time crystallized.

This makes me want to do fractions: I have whistled about a fifth of the time that I have spent walking alone in the street. I feel like I have whistled almost as much as I have danced in my life – except that whistling belongs to solitary, not public, time. If I quit whistling when I was 18, I think I would have whistled at least as much as I have danced. Since then, I've no doubt whistled less.

I like the idea of dancing and whistling a great deal, because of its simplicity, its clarity. Given your penchant for compiling levels difficulty, trying to confront a form of the impossible, the question is whether you

¹ «A child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath. He walks and halts to his song. Lost, he takes shelter, or orients himself with his little song as best he can. The song is like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilizing, calm and stable, center in the heart of chaos. Perhaps the child skips as he sings, hastens or slows

can hold on to the simplicity of this idea?

I am at a crossroads. I feel the desire to do nothing *but* whistle. And that *this* is not to be considered as limiting. Whistling is very rich semantically, starting with the whistle as a call: we whistle to call out to people, herds, animals, to communicate in the mountains. We whistle to warn of danger, to imitate birds, which in turn whistle to mark their territory or to seduce. Lastly, we whistle to produce a melody. Whistling involves ambivalence – an affect located between fear and solace. We whistle to reassure ourselves, to conjure up a presence when walking alone in the street. But whistling also signals to others that we are there, it's a warning, a sign. This brings to mind Peter Lorre whistling a tune from Peer Gynt in Fritz Lang's *M*. He whistles when a murderous impulse comes over him, and it is this whistle that ends up betraying him, when the tune is recognized by a blind beggar. Fritz Lang takes advantage of this duality of whistling: reminiscent of a soothing lullaby, it ends up becoming the sound of terror. Whistling conveys something between fright and comfort. There is a good reason why whistling is often used in film music. Besides that, in the studio, I had fun whistling some of Ennio Morricone's tunes, but I don't think I will keep them. The referential universe they evoke is too potent; and then, physically, what can you do besides wait in the sun, wearing a big hat...?

You presented a short excerpt of this creation La Fabrique at Centre National de Danse (CND) during Festival d'Automne in September 2020, just before you performed J'ai failli, and I was amazed at the precision of your whistling. Where does this interest in whistling come from?

I whistle as an amateur, and I still have a long way to go to hone my technique.

When I was a child, I dreamed of composing a piece for a whistling orchestra. That never happened! To better explain why I'm interested in the fragility of whistling, let me use a comparison: as a performer, I did a project for Fanny de Chaillé (*Underwear*), during which she introduced me to Pixies' song "Where Is My Mind?" I danced to this song with a bubble of saliva trapped between my lips. I really liked this idea of a movement *hanging onto my lips*; a minuscule movement, suspended by a thread. If I breathed too hard, the bubble burst. If I moved too fast, the bubble popped. And if there was no more bubble, there was nothing left. With the whistling, it's as if I have taken up the principle of the saliva bubble once again and made it *audible*.

his pace. But the song itself is already a skip: it jumps from chaos to the beginnings of order in chaos and is in danger of breaking apart at any moment." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 310.