

Dance Winners and Losers in Lyon and Paris: A Review Essay¹

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La Biennale de la danse de Lyon traditionally opens with a parade that wends its way along Rue de la République, a grand boulevard stretching from city hall to Place Bellecour on Presqu'île, the spit of land carved out by the Saône and Rhône rivers that separates Old Lyon, to the west, from the business and residential neighbourhoods to the east. For its most recent, twentieth anniversary edition, held from September 9-30, 2023 and showcasing the work of 40 artists from 14 countries, the Biennale parade was staged just two days after Les Bleus had stunned New Zealand's mighty All Blacks 27-13 in the opening match of the 2023 Rugby World Cup, hosted by France at stadiums throughout the country, including Lyon's Parc Olympique. And while I missed the official kick-off event to the Biennale, during my ten days scurrying between venues attending various shows and events, I did reflect on how often I found myself caught up in, or attempting to dodge, random acts of boisterous procession, most involving convivial and slightly inebriated Welsh and Australian rugby fans. If my fellow Biennale attendees had no team songs to sing while queuing for the bar or the loo, that did not mean that discourse about the performances was any less spirited, or that fierce loyalties weren't also on display. In a festival this size, one that attracts the likes of Alessandro Sciaroni and Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Marlene Monteiro Freitas and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Dimitris Papaioannou and Boris Charmatz, this is to be expected. What surprised me, however, was how apt the sporting metaphor seemed to be for my spectating experiences. Maybe it was because of the ubiquitous and frenzied backdrop of the World Cup, or maybe it was an unloosed energy after the scaled-back and COVID-displaced version of the Biennale in 2021, but many of the shows I attended, especially the larger ensemble works, read to me as explicit contests of one form or another—including, but not limited to, skill, stamina, power, and will. Depending on the production, the rules governing these contests were sometimes more, sometimes less clear. Almost always, however, an interplay of competition and cooperation was a structuring dialectic, not least in the relationships established between performers and audience members.

Besides the influx of rugby fans, the 2023 Biennale was notable in another way. It was the first under the new directorship of Tiago Guedes, the Portuguese dancer, choreographer, and curator who took over from Dominique Hervieu after she was appointed director of the Cultural Olympiad of the 2024 Paris Summer Games, another looming international sporting contest about whose dance world entanglements I will have more to say at the end of this essay. As Guedes acknowledges in the official program, much of the 2023 schedule had already been set by Hervieu, always a logistical challenge given that the Biennale is planned not just in concert with its visual art cousin (held in the same city in alternating years), but also with the annual programming of the Maison de la danse de Lyon, which is likewise overseen by the Biennale de la danse artistic director. This double duty helps to explain why, despite its global programming remit, the dance festival tends to focus on French, French diasporic, and European companies and choreographers. Because the Biennale is committed to commissioning new work and to showcasing the Maison's affiliated artists (to which local, regional, and national funding is necessarily attached), this makes curatorial and fiscal sense. That said, Guedes has made it a priority to internationalize the festival, and one of his first efforts to that end was to convene a forum of five non-European dance curators—Angela Conquet from Australia, River Lin from Taiwan, Nayse Lopez from Brazil, Angela Mattox from the United States, and Quito Tembê from Mozambique—who would help to seed, at a local level, programming from their

respective regions that would then be presented, in one form or another, at the next Biennale in 2025.

Coincidentally, Conquet had served as the invited international curator for the 2021 edition of Dance in Vancouver, a bi-annual event in my hometown that she was forced to participate in virtually owing to the pandemic. I was pleased to be able to meet up with Conquet in person to exchange show notes and get some inside festival gossip. Hearing that I would be in Paris following my time in Lyon, she also alerted me to an important international symposium on “Competing!?” being sponsored by the Centre National de la Danse (CND) that, retrospectively, has contributed to my critical framing of the works I witnessed in Lyon. In the manner of an athlete’s training diary, I present the highs and lows of those works in their viewing order. I then offer some brief remarks on the CND symposium, before ending my survey of recent dance exhibitions in France with a discussion of one final performance—this one presented at the Festival d’Automne in Paris—that for me put the dance and/as sport analogy into a performatively thrilling and politically terrifying contemporary context.

Tuesday, September 19, Maison de la danse: Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and le Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève, *Ukiyo-e*

The French premiere of Larbi’s *Ukiyo-e*, created during his first season (2022-23) as the new artistic director of Le Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève (GTG) in a co-production with the Biennale and the Maison de la danse, was grand in scale and dense with ideas. It was also stylistically confusing and choreographically uninspired. Featuring twenty-four performers (22 GTG dancers plus the singer/dancer/musicians Kazutomi Kozuki and Shogo Yoshii), a moveable set designed by Alexander Dodge composed of four interlocking staircases, and live music from a collaborative score by Szyman Brzóska and Alexandre Dai Castaing, the work takes its title and inspiration from the woodblock prints that became popular during the Edo period (1603-1808) in Japan. These “images of the floating world,” so-named because their subjects (kabuki actors, sumo wrestlers, geisha, and other figures from the sex and entertainment industries) were associated with impermanence and a detachment from real life, certainly provide the Belgian-Moroccan choreographer and his collaborators with an arresting opening tableau: members of the company, wearing kimono-inspired designs (the costumes are by Yuima Nakazato), slowly ascend the fused and front-facing staircases, only to pitch, once at the top, into the backstage abyss. If, with this image, Larbi is seeking to make a connection to dance’s own disappearance—and to the concomitant transience of the dancing body—there is much in the piece that works to reinforce what also remains.² This includes not just repertoire from the Western dance canon (among the references I clocked was an overt *Rite of Spring* intertext), but also from the choreographer’s own previous creations. The courtly dance references scattered throughout *Ukiyo-e* recall Larbi’s contributions to Joe Wright’s film of *Anna Karenina* (2012) and, perhaps most obviously, the Asian intercultural theme and use of choreographic objects (in this case staircases as opposed to stackable boxes) contain echoes of *SUTRA* (2008), one of Larbi’s most acclaimed works.

Then, too, the question of what, kinetically, survives beyond the moment of its initial manifesting, keenly felt during a long gestural sequence that punctuates the middle of the piece, is overwhelmed (and ultimately overdetermined) by one dancer’s recitation of a text, “Hold Your Own,” by spoken word artist Kae Tempest. That is, the smuggling of information implicit in the collective generation and fugitive sharing of the gesture patterns seemed at odds with the text’s privileging of individual

bodily autonomy and fixity: “When everything is fluid, and when nothing can be known with any certainty/ Hold your own.” A defensive formation works far better on the playing field than in performance. Much more satisfying for me were those moments when Larbi risked geometrical abstraction, as with the patterns the dancers created on the staircases (including a penultimate rolling down of them), and then in a final horizontal line when the ensemble (now in nude semis and presumably having passed on to some other floating world) does a ghostly shuffle that reminded me of the walking patterns Sharon Eyal is famous for. Here the dancers seemed to merge with their backgrounds, creating a flat picture plane in which, as with *ukejyo-e* and the best of Japanese anime, the image of movement and the moving image are coextensive.

Wednesday, September 20, Radiant-Bellevue: Compagnie Dyptik, *Le Grand Bal*

Founded in 2012, Compagnie Dyptik is overseen by the hip-hop duo of Souhail Marchiche and Mehdi Meghari, who are based in Saint-Etienne, about sixty kilometers southwest of Lyon. Another commission for the Biennale, their newest work, *Le Grand Bal*, is at once a post-Covid and pre-apocalyptic dance narrative, one that according to the choreographers’ program notes seeks to probe the enfranchisement and liberation of the body after emerging into the light from one disaster, while still anxious about the encroaching shadows of another (climate end times, global nuclear war—take your pick). This experience of liminality commences pre-show, as while audience members file into the auditorium one of the Dyptik dancers has already taken up her place, underneath a spotlight, at the top of the audience left aisle. I only noticed this when the trio of young women behind me, who talked excitedly throughout the performance, started training their phones behind them (video recording was also openly in evidence throughout the performance), the dancer who was the subject of their fascination remaining calm and poised while last-minute patrons swirled around her in search of their seats. Eventually the lights dimmed, and a thumping bass kicked in, the cue for not just the dancer in my aisle to start moving towards the stage, but also for a second dancer, now illuminated in the audience right aisle, to do the same. And then, just as suddenly, another overhead spot illuminates a third dancer, this one sitting in his own centre orchestra seat. This last revelation sent the women behind me into conniptions, but not as much as when a fourth dancer, also sitting in the audience, started to move. When were the reveals going to stop, we were all thinking, and does every successive introduction of “those who are among us” have to be cued to such a heart-stopping bass note? Yes, it turns out, because sound is the secret weapon of this piece, a driving, pulsing score by Patrick De Oliveira that combines electronic beats with remixed folk music, and to which the dancers react instinctively, their bodies pounding and contracting and collapsing in rhythmic entrainment with the soundscape.

As our quartet gradually makes their way to the stage, we eventually notice that there are other dancers already there, moving in shadow, with their backs to us, their dancing seeming to beckon the others, as well as the audience’s gaze. When the full company of ten dancers assembles on stage, what follows is 50 minutes of ecstatic dance, with the hybrid musical influences in the sound score reflected in the dancers’ movement vocabulary, which oscillates between hip hop, vernacular folk dancing (including a lot of versions of spinning dervishes, one of which wittily riffs on a series of balletic fouettés), and structured improvisation. What we are witness to, in other words, is the fever of dance: both in the sense of the lure of unleashed bodily intoxication after forced confinement (as during lockdown) and the willful escape into a present of pure sensation in the face of a dystopian future. Indeed, the choreographers even reference a spontaneous outbreak of feverish dancing in sixteenth-century Strasbourg as an inspiration, one of a series of “dancing plagues” during the Holy

Roman Empire that the medical historian John Waller has attributed to a mass psychogenic illness following a series of famines and outbreaks of disease.³

What rescues *Le Grand Bal* from descending into an MDMA-induced cliché, however, is that the choice to keep dancing in spite of everything is clearly foregrounded as intentional for each member of the ensemble. At points during the piece, we see individuals out of sync with the rest of the group, or breaking into painful, disjunctive, and potentially self-harming movements, or just being exhausted. In all cases, a choice is made to rejoin the group, to fall back into its rhythms, and to keep dancing. To this end, there is an interesting moment near the close of the piece, when the dancers begin to descend from the stage and start to walk up the aisles, seemingly on their way to rejoining the audience. But then the music suddenly cuts out, and collectively they rethink this decision, eventually retreating back to the stage and beginning another unison sequence, their breath in this case serving as the score that reattunes anxious disequilibrium into shared euphoria. There are any number of ways this moment might be read, but for me it cannot be separated from how the piece begins and, as such, both involves and indicts the audience. In the spectator sport that has become contemporary catastrophizing, will you sit passively watching as this world destroys itself? Or, if that's all there is (to quote Peggy Lee), will you keep dancing?

Thursday, September 21, Opéra de Lyon: Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Meskerem Mees, Jean-Marie Aerts, Carlos Garbin, and Rosas, *EXIT ABOVE: after the tempest*

Although the storm referenced in this collaboration between the legendary choreographer and artistic director of the Belgian dance troupe, Rosas, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, the singer-songwriter Meskerem Mees, sound designer Jean-Marie Aerts, and dancer-guitarist Carlos Garbin alludes both to the one blowing Walter Benjamin's Angel of History backwards into the future and the one whipped up by Shakespeare's Prospero, it was a real thunderstorm just before the show that sent me running for the Opéra de Lyon lobby. Based on the walking practice that has been central to De Keersmaeker's choreography since the start of her career, the piece is structured as a danced song-cycle of sorts, Mees having composed a series of adaptations based on Robert Johnson's *Walking Blues* that she sings live—while also moving alongside the rest of the company. The piece begins, however, with a coup-de-théâtre that involves Garbin, Mees, and a single Rosas dancer, who performs a virtuosic solo that showcases, among other things, his impressive street dance and breaking skills, all while a shimmering silver sheet billows behind and around him, at one point forming a tunnel for him to emerge from in explosive fashion. This would seem to be the furthest thing from pedestrian walking, in the way we have come to identify it as a conscious interruption of inherited dance vocabulary (as with American postmodern dance), or in the rigorously precise and geometric way De Keersmaeker has used ambulation as a structural foundation in the early pieces, like *Fase* (1982), that established her reputation. But in the same way that the choreographer turned to the free-form jazz funk of Miles Davis to both loosen *and* underscore the leitmotifs that shaped her landmark *Bitches Brew/Tacoma Narrows* (2003), so here does she call upon Mees' variations on Johnson to reveal to us—and to her dancers—the joyful patterns of folding and unfolding that can emerge when we move together.⁴

As such, as the wind machine cuts out and the sheet gradually comes to a rest behind the full company of dancers, who have now assembled on stage in a group, Mees launches into her first song, which is literally an instructional walking score (“Put your left foot forward,” is how it begins).

The piece progresses from there, alternating between relatively simple patterned group sequences, that unfold in an assortment of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal arrangements, and more eruptive and chaotic and whirling solos and partnered combinations, in which Rosas company members—together with Mees and Garbin—take turns improvising and freestyling movement that cuts across and circles around and around the grids they have just formed. At first, the shift in styles can feel somewhat arbitrary, with a new song from Mees seeming to be the cue for each new sequence. Gradually, however, the transitions between the group's collective traversings of the stage and the free-form jamming (with the ensemble getting progressively more abandoned in both their movements and their clothing) start to become more fluid, and De Keersmaecker's overall design becomes more explicit, which is also to say more obviously *transversal*. That is, she shows us in individual dancers' improvisations their points of intersection, how and where lines curve, and why this is necessary physically and metaphysically—both in terms of the biomechanics of sharing space and the desire to find harmony in doing so.

Oleg Lebedev, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, identifies this “matter-force interaction” in De Keersmaecker's work as the moment when her “Gothic line breaks with the lifeless abstract space: it loses its Euclidian [*sic*] coordinates to become expressive, filled with a vital force—a space that will affect us.”⁵ Given that I had just toured Lyon's magnificent Fourvière Basilica prior to this performance, and had experienced in manifold ways just how thoroughly the expressivity of acoustic space helps to enliven Euclidean visual space, I was predisposed to be affected by both the matter and the force of the interactions between De Keersmaecker's moving lines and Mees and Grabin's sonic riffs. But in *EXIT ABOVE*, the choreographer also provides a map for how we arrive at such an equation, revealing to us that every twirl of the torso and spiral of the head, every swooping arm and bowed leg, every jump and run and twist and shout, has behind it a common entry point: one footfall followed by another; to the front or the back; in step or off axis; turning to the right or to the left. Now add a beat, a rhythm. Share that rhythm on down the line—like an arena wave, or a chorus of applause, that goes on and on. A moment of wayfinding, in a stadium or in a theatre, when performers and audience seem indivisible.

Friday, September 22, Théâtre National Populaire: Peeping Tom, S 62° 58', W 60° 39'

Division is exactly what's being sown in this newest creation by Peeping Tom, receiving its world premiere at the Biennale. The title references latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates in the general vicinity of Deception Island, off the western coast of Antarctica. It is here that the motley crew of a sailboat have found themselves stuck in an ice flow, their only chance for escape the melting of said ice. As always with this Belgian-based dance-theatre group, the set is a hyperrealist work of wonder, the bobbing boat and the stark white blocks of slippery and springy ice creating a Foucauldian heterotopia,⁶ in which normal atmospheric and social relations are inverted. But onto this othered space company co-founder Franck Chartier maps yet another, namely the space of the theatre itself, with this existential drama about the climate crisis really serving as a metaphor for Franck's own stuckness as a director. Thus, it is not long into the production before we hear Franck's invisible voice (much like in *A Chorus Line*) coming from the back of the house to interrupt the action, alternately lamenting his lack of new ideas for where the scene should go next, or else cajoling his company members to do what he's asked them.

But said company members start to rebel against his directives, refusing to play out the tragedy as Franck has scripted it. Marie Gyselbrecht is sick of playing mothers and victims (though she does both exceedingly well). Crew member Yi-chun Liu is not at all pleased at having to step into the role of the romantic ingenue. And boatswain Chey Jurado just wants to dance (and in a production almost completely lacking in choreographed movement per se, Jurado's angling solo to the strains of the William Tell overture does stand out). The deviations culminate in a long and passionate final monologue delivered by a naked Romeo Runa, in which he disavows his life in the theatre, threatening to kill himself on stage, before deciding that an orgy with the entire audience is a better option. There then follows a game of brinksmanship in which Runa, having descended from the stage, approaches successive audience members, threatening to have sex with them. We think he is bluffing, but soon it becomes clear that the piece will not end, and Runa will not exit the auditorium, until someone offers to go with him. I was half tempted to volunteer, so excruciating was the stalemate, and so exhausted was I by an already over-long performance. But a woman a few rows behind beat me to it—and gamely joined the cast for their final bows.

On the one hand, the anxiety, hopelessness, and despair that frequently accompanies creative crisis chimes with similar symptoms that researchers have associated with climate grief, or what the philosopher Glenn Albrecht has defined as “solastalgia,” a homesickness from and for home.⁷ At the same time, it strikes me as morally suspect to equate individual artistic stagnation with the looming extinction of the planet, and had Chartier and his collaborators worked harder to connect the resource extraction fueling petroculture with that of traditional theatre-making (including the mining of actors' emotions and memories as a monument to a director's ego), I might have been more on board. As it was, no thought seemed to be given to the amount of plastic carpeting the stage. Then again, I am all for “offending the audience,” and in this respect I am reminded that Peter Handke, to whom this work owes a major debt, famously stated that his plays were about “Making people aware of the world of the theatre—not of the outside world.”⁸ In the context of my larger time in Lyon, and the carbon emissions expended to get there, I am reminded, too, of a passage by Handke near the beginning of *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*: “It was a beautiful October day. Bloch ate a hot dog at a stand and then walked past the stalls to a movie theatre. Everything he saw bothered him. He tried to notice as little as possible. Inside the theater he breathed freely.”⁹

Saturday, September 23, Célestins-Théâtre de Lyon: Alexander Vantournhout and not standing, *Foreshadow*

Continuing his dual interests in choreographies of constraint and the human applications of animal movements (in this case, those of geckos), the Belgian artist Alexander Vantournhout's latest work for his company not standing, *Foreshadow*, is a technically accomplished but emotionally dull work of acro-dance. Eight dancers engage in a mash-up of gymnastics, contact improvisation, and circus moves: they share each other's weight, catch and release each other's limbs, and prop each other up in a series of actions that get progressively riskier and more high stakes. Quite literally high in that the wall at the back of the stage becomes a crucial obstruction. Working with and against this structure, while continuing to support each other, the dancers' bodies, of course, defy gravity, ascending the wall in turn via a series of combinations (handstands where feet become a new base of support, arm hangs that simultaneously cradle a waist) in which the horizontal and the vertical become interchangeable.

As a demonstration of the dancers' athleticism, the piece certainly delivers. But beyond the virtuoso display of technique and training there is little to stir the soul—except, perhaps, the dancers' own sense of mutual accomplishment. Whether they are watching from the sidelines or in the throes of exertion on stage, the successful completion of a tricky sequence inevitably elicits a shared smile, and almost as frequently a collective look of satisfaction at the audience, as if offering a spin on Spinoza: “Look what our bodies can do! Look what our bodies can do together!” And yet, while I appreciate the ways in which cooperation wins out against competition in the piece, to me, the experience of joy on stage registered as more mechanical than sensual.

**Sunday, September 24, Usines Fagor: Boris Charmatz/Tanztheater Wuppertal
Pina Bausch/[terrain], *Liberté Cathédrale* + Tamara Cubas, *Multitud***

Today was a two-show day. Both pieces took place at the Biennale's central hub, Usines Fagor, a collection of repurposed warehouses in Lyon's seventh arrondissement. Both were also large-scale choral works dealing with the spatial architecture and the social politics of bodies in assembly. But whereas Boris Charmatz, newly appointed as artistic director of Tanztheater Wuppertal, employed 26 professional dancers (including guests from his own company, [terrain]) in the creation of *Liberté Cathédrale*, the Uruguayan choreographer Tamara Cubas collaborated with sixty-plus amateur movers of all ages from Lyon to mount *Multitud*. As parallel site-responsive works that likewise explore how we listen to and respond to other bodies when we move together as a group, I much preferred the latter.

Charmatz's first work for the company founded by Pina Bausch, and that has struggled to reinvent itself since her death, is billed as a cathedral without walls. And yet it did premiere in an actual church: a brutalist masterpiece designed by Gottfried Bohm in Neviges, Germany, not far from Wuppertal. Nevertheless, in adapting the piece for the raw and open industrial layout of Usines Fagor's Hall G, the choreographer remains attuned to the ways in which volumetric space compels the body to sing and/or resound. As such, each section of *Liberté Cathédrale* is structured around an organizing sound—or its absence. In the first part, it is the human voice, with the dancers running en masse into the performance space while vocalizing a version of la, la, la. They pause, slowly contracting their bodies to the floor, writhing uncontrollably before getting up and beginning the same sequence in a different direction. Next, the dancers fan out, facing the audience (who are arranged in the round). To a recording of chiming bells, they begin repeating individual gesture phrases, the mostly jerky and convulsive movements gradually degrading or transforming as the chimes grow louder and more insistent. There then follows a completely silent canon sequence, in which the dancers weave in and out of circle formations, their mouths opening up to the heavens as their bodies fall backwards towards the ground, like wordless penitents unable to articulate the immensity of their suffering. Soon, however, they recover their voices, for in the next section the dancers begin to interact with members of the audience, shouting bits of text or singing loudly as they thrash aggressively in front of helpless front row spectators, with several performers also pushing further up the risers to conscript from the assembled house confessors who might be able, if not willing, to attend to their bodily and verbal revelations.

Fortunately, I was in neither splash zone. Nor was I chosen, at the end of this sequence, to be led on stage, with selected audience members joining the dancers in a large circle, a silent Labanesque movement choir in which, for a moment, a choreographic communion between performer and spectator replaced, but did not completely repair, the earlier discord. For, notwithstanding these

elements of audience participation, the assemblage Charmatz is exploring in this work is not a completely open one, as with the different iterations of his *Dancing Museums* series, in which the interactions between dancers and gallery visitors/viewers are more fluid and co-constitutive.¹⁰ This is borne out by the final section of the piece, when the ensemble turns inward, becoming a single throbbing organism, clumping together and climbing over each other, their bodies rising and falling like a giant bellows as an organist (Jean-Baptiste Monnot) pipes out their successive exits. Singly and in pairs the dancers peel themselves or are pulled from the group, a forced act of moulting that, much like the creaky architecture of *Liberté Cathédrale* itself, suggests that the sum of a thing is not always equal to its parts.

How a group of strangers might resolve this paradox, coming together as a network in ways that acknowledge and work through relationships of proximity and distance, association and disassociation, is at the heart of Cubas's *Multitud*. Working with a volunteer cast of non-professional performers who responded to an open call put out by the Biennale, the choreographer has crafted a flexible score in which the emancipatory occupation and animation of a public space by a collective derives not from the slavish following of a set of directives (as with the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021) but from the reciprocal negotiation of a set of choices. This begins with how the performers enter the playing space, choosing when to do so, where to stand, and in what precise spatial relation to those around them. In waves, bodies begin to crumple and collapse to the floor, before one and then another and then another gets up and starts running back and forth. In this, however, the dancers' pathways are not unimpeded, and if in their circuits to and fro they come upon one who still lays prone upon the ground, they must make a decision. Do they go over or around this person? Or do they pause before them, paying silent vigil? Most often it is the latter, sometimes with four or five previously running dancers piling up behind each other. Elsewhere, during subsequent trust exercises, performers alert to the sensations of the group rush to catch those beside them who, with little warning, start to pitch their bodies to the floor. Or else they form human slingshots, working in small groups to receive and cushion their retreating brethren, before flinging them back out into open space.

All of this culminates in an orgiastic bacchanalia of swapping and stripping clothes, with the dancers massing together on the floor, becoming in their shared pulsations and constant mutations a single body, a Body without Organs, which is to say, following from Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*,¹¹ one whose organizational potential rests in the very disaggregation and unregulation of its constituent parts. Or, to put this in terms of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, "An actor is what is *made* to act by many others."¹² For Latour, as for Cubas, this is not a theory that is coercive, but rather a practice that is relational, and upon which the future of human, let alone inter-species, assembly very much depends. With this performance Cubas models an ethics of social formation, one that might apply equally to sports fans or to political protestors, and in which the multitude is always an "active social subject, [acting] on the basis of what the singularities share in common."¹³

Monday, September 25, Maison de la Danse: Dimitris Papaioannou, *Ink*

Tonight's show was the French premiere of Greek choreographer Dimitris Papaioannou's *Ink*. A duet for a clothed man (Papaioannou, alternating the role with Haris Fragoulis, but dancing this evening) and a nude man (Suka Horn), on one level the piece could be viewed as a response to Louis XV's famous declaration, "Après moi, le déluge." In Papaioannou's case, however, it would seem the maxim needs to be revised to "Après le déluge, moi." For, in addition to the stage being flooded

with water throughout the piece from a nearly always running spray hose, this is very much a meditation on self-identity. That is, the alternately seductive and antagonistic, and reciprocally dominant and submissive, relationship between the two men is easily read through the lens of duelling lovers (the BDSM elements framing the piece are legion), or cruel father and wayward son, or self and unconscious, or simply as mirrored doppelgängers. Frankly, however, what registered most insistently with me was a Frankenstein and creature narrative, especially near the end, when the nude man adopts various ape-like poses.

Whatever the allegory, it is certainly filtered through a very male-centric worldview, complete with a Moses-in-the-reeds birth story that, in its male-male parthenogenesis, reads as a rather disturbing fantasy of self-reproduction without women (complete with a breast-feeding scene). Papaioannou, whose initial training was as a visual artist, and who rose to international prominence as the choreographer and artistic director of the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2004 Athens Olympic Games, certainly knows how to create a *mise-en-scène*. Beyond the nearly incessant flow of water, among the elements to captivate one's attention were disco balls, the hard plastic floor and the softer plastic backdrop underneath and behind which the naked man alternately manifested himself and became imprisoned, several animatronic toy fish, and a giant goldfish bowl that more than once served as the interstitial means by which the performers' alter egos communicated and made contact with each other.

That said, as with the work by Peeping Tom, how authorial introspection gets transposed onto the overall design of *Ink* rubbed me the wrong way. Watching all that water jet out onto the stage, I couldn't help thinking of the fires that had been ravaging Greece since July. How much longer, I wondered, can the theatre continue to think it is not connected to the outside world?

Tuesday, September 26, Radiant-Bellevue: Silvia Gribaudi, *Grand Jeté*

Working with MM Contemporary Dance Company, from Reggio Emilia, in *Grand Jeté* the Italian dance artist Silvia Gribaudi deconstructs, while also slyly celebrating, the vocabulary of classical ballet. Filled with the choreographer's trademark humour, and very much relying on the audience's active participation, the piece sits at the intersection of stand-up and lecture-demonstration, with Gribaudi serving as both rehearsal director and referee. In these roles, she corrals her restless dancers into performing a series of exercises in which the basics of ballet—from its counts to the order of its combinations (*tombé-pas de bourrée*, *glissade-pas de chat*)—are wrested from the tyranny of their correct execution and freed to be applied not just to other kinds of dancing, but also to everyday life. To this end, the suspense/suspension of the title move hovers—quite literally—over the piece, with the dancers, now willfully improvising their own futures, itching to catch more and more air over the course of the evening.

This offer is eventually extended to the audience, with Gribaudi and the dancers coaxing us to *jeté* up off our seats. On the one hand, this is a canny way of soliciting a standing ovation. On the other hand, it might be interpreted in light of photographer Philippe Halsman's theory of "jumpology": that in the act of jumping, one's true personality is revealed.¹⁴ Coincidentally, Halsman's theory has served as the inspiration for another work of contemporary dance, Jan Martens's *The Dog Days Are Over* (2014). The two pieces are very different, but they both have at their core a common principle: it's not how or when you jump, but why.

Wednesday, September 27, Théâtre National Populaire: (LA)Horde and Le Ballet National de Marseille, *Age of Content*

The final Biennale performance that I attended was created by (LA)Horde, the dance/performance/design trio of Marine Brutti, Jonathan Debrouwer, and Arthur Harel, who together share the artistic leadership of Le Ballet national de Marseille. The piece, *Age of Content*, takes as its point of departure our information saturation via the Internet, social media, video games, and film. In an era defined by viral Tik Tok dances and digital streaming, what new movement repertoires are being produced through the interfacing of humans, our devices, and our online avatars? And how might concert dance respond in ways that manifest the leakages between virtual and real environments, while also reverse engineering their affordances?

Thus, whereas in a video game like *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA), a player learns to manipulate different on-screen objects—not least a series of jacked vehicles—to achieve a certain goal, in *Age of Content* it is an actual car (remotely controlled by a mysterious man perched on a stage right scaffold) that choreographs the available actions of its would-be boosters. The serial battle that erupts among the similarly track-suited and balaclava-clad dancer-clones at the top of the show, a gleeful parody of the sexualized violence that is a mainstay of any action film, is less about who wins and who loses than it is about how they are responding to their environment, and what options it presents to them. Which is to say, in a real-world takeaway applicable to any inner-city neighbourhood, if a flashy car is left unattended, it is asking to be stolen. Then, too, the distinctive walk of GTA non-player characters, when replicated live in the middle section of *Age of Content*, raises a further perceptual paradox. The familiar bow-legged hip swinging, the bouncing and swaying, and the running in place that makes this movement instantly recognizable, and therefore mimicable, requires an “on-screen performance [that] is stable and repeatable.”¹⁵ But in order to register as unique in an embodied context, whether on stage (by professional Ballet Marseille dancers) or in the street (by the committed amateurs who regularly post their GTA walk videos to the web), not only does the movement have to appear variable, but the content has to remain fresh.

This is what (LA)Horde demonstrates so brilliantly in the final third of this piece, applying the principles of mash-up culture behind the glut of deterritorialized popular online dance memes in order to reterritorialize them for the sprung platform of the concert stage, and for the assembled talents of the Ballet Marseille company. Here, dance data is transformed into choreographic dadaism. That is, familiar moves that get flattened on screen, and that are doubly constrained by the size of content posters’ bedrooms/living rooms/kitchens *and* the apertures of their phone cameras, are cut up and recomposed into patterns and combinations that fully dimensionalize the performance space. In this case, that means that the width and depth *and* height of the Théâtre National Populaire stage are maximized through, among other things, both the surging of and the surveillance from the stage right scaffolding; a horizontal transit of and disappearing behind the upstage curtain that evokes the action circuit pursuits of early Pac-Man; and a downstage spoken word duet that repurposes Alphaville’s 1984 synth pop hit “Forever Young” for a social media generation whose nostalgia extends only as far as their last Instagram search.

Due proportion is also given to the bodies moving through this space. Thus, during a final bravura chorus line sequence that in its repetition is also constantly mutating (as with the Philip Glass score accompanying it), each dancer, now wearing street clothes that help to convey their distinctive personalities, busts out with a recognizably popular dance move or phrase, embellishing and

transforming it, much like a sports star celebrating a clutch goal or bold play, into a signature moment of joyful abandon. In this way, the piece succeeds in demonstrating that, for live performance as for digital media consumption, in the wake of too much content, there is only process.¹⁶

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“Dance not only enters into challenges, contests and competitions, but in doing so its embodied actions also do the work of contesting, challenging, and offering competing or alternative ideas. In this sense, dance wins every time.”

- Sherril Dodds¹⁷

While I agree, in theory, with Dodds’s statement, made at the end of her introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Competition*, in practice dance sometimes loses. Among the shows I saw in Lyon, there were those that were more successful, or had fuller houses. And, in terms of size and scale, overall visual presence, and international attendance, the Biennale was certainly no match for the World Cup of Rugby. During the CND symposium on “Competing!?” in Paris, at which Dodds served as an invited keynote speaker, I also learned about the tactics used by elite dance schools to weed out under-performing students; the mixed career prospects among winners of the Prix de Lausanne dance competition; the ways in which a choreographic prize, despite the best of intentions, can sow divisions among local dance communities; and that Eurovision’s attempt to replicate the success of its annual song contest for televised dance was an unmitigated disaster. The paper that made the most impact, however, was by Anne Nguyen, the French-Vietnamese hip-hop dancer, choreographer, and writer. Nguyen convincingly argued that the introduction of breakdancing as a competitive sport in the upcoming 2024 Summer Olympics was a cynical capitulation to the market, with the costs far outweighing the benefits.¹⁸

The inclusion of breaking in the Olympics, Nguyen maintained, and the flattening of its local networks and styles and histories to a standard of “excellence” determined by a supra-national corporation like the International Olympic Committee, constituted a form of aesthetic “gentrification” that was akin to hip-hop’s ongoing commodification by concert dance choreographers and presenters. In both cases, according to Nguyen, this does violence to hip-hop’s varied and independently regulated communities of practice, mapping a neoliberal framework of competition onto the form’s mutually supportive and essentially redistributive movement rivalries. To be sure, hip-hop is not the only vernacular dance that operates this way—nor, for that matter, the only one seeking official sanction by the Olympics (ballroom, under the aegis of the World DanceSport Federation, has long been lobbying for a similar nod). But it is one of the few (voguing is another) whose battles are expressly tied to an intergenerational and place-specific transmission of technique. As a form of embodied knowledge, the breaking traditions that have been developed and passed down in the Bronx or the *banlieues* of Paris speak to their unique social, economic, and racialized histories, and to the struggles of their inhabitants. How does one cheer for that on a global stage like the Olympics? Only by changing its character, making it more respectable and attractive for a television audience. This is what Nguyen means by the “gentrification” of breakdancing in its Olympic debut, and notwithstanding the surprising and ironic news that it has already been dropped from the designated roster of sports for Los Angeles in 2028,¹⁹ the local effects of street dance’s temporary displacement under the banner of the Olympic flag will be keenly felt for generations to come.

Of course, one of the avowed goals of the Olympic movement is to use competitive sport as a way of promoting global unity. A similar principle is at the heart of the Belgian visual and performance artist Miet Warlop's *One Song*, which received its world premiere at the Festival d'Avignon in 2022, and which I caught during my penultimate day in Paris as part of the programming of the 2023 Festival d'Automne. The fourth of NTGent's *Histoire(s) du Théâtre* series of commissions,²⁰ the piece is structured as a combination music and athletic competition. Arranged on the stage are bleachers and a broadcast booth at the back, a warm-up station stage left, and various "performance areas" that combine both gym equipment (a balance beam, a wrestling mat, a treadmill, a set of Swedish stall bars) and musical instruments (a violin, a double bass, a set of drums, and some keyboards). As audience members are still taking their seats, an older woman wearing orange overalls and a visor installs herself in the broadcast booth. She is soon followed by four "designated spectators/fans" and one male cheerleader, cross-dressed in a fetching white majorette uniform. Then the team of athlete-musicians emerges: three men and one woman, who proceed to start their warm-up exercises. All throughout this our announcer is speaking into a megaphone, apparently in French, but in a way that deliberately distorts her words into gibberish. This is especially hilarious when she introduces each of our athletes, the only thing comprehensible about her narrative being the number on the jersey they each sport.

The competition (which, it turns out, will be one of endurance more than anything else) starts when one of the team members sets the pendulum swinging on the metronome positioned downstage. This is the cue for our female athlete to ascend onto the balance beam and take up the violin, her playing matching the metronome's moderate tempo. She is followed in succession by her male teammates: one playing the double bass while doing sit-ups on the wrestling mat, another working the keyboards affixed to the top of the Swedish stall bars with the assistance of a springboard, the singer belting out his lyrics while keeping up a punishing pace on the treadmill and, finally, the percussionist tracking back and forth between his drums, pounding out a relentless beat. The spectators on the upstage bleachers are also keeping time via a succession of cherished sports audience techniques: hooting, clapping, stomping, doing the wave, and so on. Finally, our cheerleader does a choreographed routine with pom poms back and forth just in front of the bleachers.

There is no real narrative to the piece, with the song's repetitive English refrain—"Run for your life/'Til you die"—seeming to offer a stark reference to the very spectacle we are watching on a loop (the song's composer is Maarten Van Cauwenberghe). In this respect, what *One Song* mostly starts to resemble is a reality television competition gone off the rails, with the stakes of the musician-athletes' feats of virtuosity (physically and aesthetically) consistently ramping up along with the tempo of the metronome. Everyone, including the on-stage fans, the cheerleader, and the ever-commentating sportscaster, is compelled to keep up, in a frighteningly real manifestation of Jon McKenzie's diagnosis of the "pressure to perform" in late capitalist culture.²¹ At one point this becomes too much for the bassist, who resets the metronome in an effort to slow things down. But he is overruled by the percussionist, and following the introduction of various other elements (including water and ping pong balls and plaster casts of empty cheer words and some funny moments of choreographed slow motion), the piece essentially devolves into a study in entropy. Each of the athletes successively collapses from exhaustion, the audience members too. This leaves only the cheerleader spinning and spinning on his own while holding a plaster cast inscribed with the word "IF" as the broadcaster watches. When even the cheerleader finally passes out, it is left to the broadcaster, whose unintelligible but nevertheless insistent messaging and rallying of the crowd starts to take on darker overtones, to revive everyone. She does so by belatedly asking all on stage to

rise for the singing of an anthem, the indistinguishable words of which are presumably as meaningless as the non-signifying flag that has been flying throughout the performance.

Or are they? Most reviewers, following from the artist herself, have read *One Song* as a celebration of what it means when we lift each other up and go to extremes for one another, transcending our differences, the physical limits of our individual bodies, and time itself to become a single ecstatic unit.²² Forgive me, but that also sounds like any number of versions of national or religious or political extremism, and in the months since I attended the performance, when the world has only descended further into violent factionalism, for me the power of the piece has increased in proportion to the warning rather than the hope that I see it offering.

Thus, as everyone on stage is compelled to join the sportscaster in singing the corporate anthem that ends up usurping the song they had just worked to cooperatively compose, all that has preceded this moment slots in my mind into several ugly historical scenarios: the pressure we place on our athletes and our artists to “represent” on the world stage (be it the Olympics or a prestigious international festival like the Biennale de Lyon or the Festival d’Automne); the ugly xenophobia that often emerges among fans whose regional and national loyalties are tested in witnessing these events; and, perhaps most frightening, how governments seek to coopt these events for the purposes of political messaging. Don’t get me wrong: as a way of bringing people together, I do see the value in having a team song, even among Swifties whose summers were all the crueller for not scoring tickets to one of her concerts. But, like the lonely away fan at a homecoming parade, I also do not want to feel compelled to join in for the final foot-stomping chorus. During my recent time in France attending the performances described here, I never felt like this was the case. And when on those occasions I did accede to such a call, it always seemed to me that I, along with the dance, was the winner.

Notes

1. When I decided to attend the Lyon Dance Biennale in September 2024 at the start of a year’s sabbatical, I didn’t think I’d end up writing about the performances I saw. Ditto those I subsequently attended in Paris in early October. But something about the shows, and the cultural context in France through which I was viewing them, compelled a response—one that eventually grew into this very long review essay. However, when I pitched it to various performance studies journals for possible publication, I was asked to either radically shorten the piece or reframe it as an academic article. I wished to do neither, as I believe the present form best encapsulates my viewing experience and what I want to say about what I saw. So, rather than let the piece languish on my computer desktop, I have decided to post it to my personal website—if only as a document of an eventful three weeks of performance spectatorship.

2. See, in this respect, Anna Pakes, *Choreography Invisible: The Disappearing Work of Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). Pakes makes a case for the “thingness” of dance, and for the reproducibility of what she calls “dance works.”

3. See John Waller, *A Time to Dance, A Time to Die: The Extraordinary Story of the Dancing Plague of 1518* (Thriplow, England: Icon, 2008).

4. On the application of Gilles Deleuze’s reading of Leibniz to De Keersmaecker’s work, see Ratharan Sireekan, “*Dark Red* at Kolumba: When Things Fold to Infinity,” April 14, 2021, available at https://www.rosas.be/en/news/875-idark-redi-at-kolumba-when-things-fold-to-infinity#_edn9. See also Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (London: Athlone Press, 1993).

5. Oleg Lebedev, “Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker: An Unbridled Activity of Vital Lines,” in *Aberrant Nuptials: Deleuze and Artistic Research*, ed. Paolo Giudici and Paulo de Assis (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019),

- 145-62, quote on 153. See also Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
6. See Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22-27.
7. See Glenn Albrecht, *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).
8. Peter Handke, "Nauseated by Language: From an Interview with Peter Handke." With Arthur Joseph, trans. E.B. Ashton, *TDR: The Drama Review* 15, no. 1 (1970): 57-61, quote on 57.
9. Peter Handke, *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*, trans. Michael Roloff (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2007 [1972]), 4.
10. See, in this regard, Boris Charmatz, "Manifesto for a National Choreographic Centre," *Dance Research Journal* 46, no. 3 (2014):45-48.
11. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).
12. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 46 (emphasis in original).
13. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin: 2004), 10.
14. See Philippe Halsman, *Jump Book* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959).
15. Kiri Miller, *Playable Bodies: Dance Games and Intimate Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 20.
16. See Alistair Riddell, "Data Culture Generation: After Content, Process as Aesthetic," *Leonardo* 34, no. 4 (2001): 337-43.
17. Sherril Dodds, "Introduction: Competition Culture: Winning and Losing at Dance," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Competition*, ed. Sherril Dodds (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1-14, quote on 11.
18. Anne Nguyen, "La danse au service du marché: le prix de la quantification. Réflexion autour de l'arrivée du break au Jeux olympiques de 2024," Paper presented at Colloque international "Concourir!"/International Symposium "Competing!?", Centre national de la danse, Paris, September 30, 2023.
19. See Sean Ingle, "Feuds, truces and dollar signs: how five sports made cut for 2028 Games," *The Guardian*, October 10, 2023, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2023/oct/10/olympics-la-2028-cricket-flag-football-breakdance>.
20. NT(Gent), or Nederlands Toneel Gent, is the resident city theatre of Ghent, Belgium, with a mandate to tour in Flanders, the Netherlands, and internationally. In 2018, Milo Rau, newly appointed as artistic director of NT(Gent), inaugurated the *Histoire(s) du Théâtre* series, in which a director is invited to reflect on theatre as an art form, with his own production of *La Reprise*. Congolese choreographer Faustin Linyekula and Spanish director Angélica Liddell were the second and third artists invited to participate in the series. Following Warlop's *One Song*, the series continues under the new artistic directorship of Barbara Raes, Melih Gençboyacı, and Yves Degryse with Tim Etchell's forthcoming production of *How Goes the World*.
21. See Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2001).
22. See, for example, Andrew Todd, "Avignon festival review – hit the timewarp gym and dive into a trippy Chekhov," *The Guardian*, July 12, 2022, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/jul/12/avignon-festival-review>; and "One Song: Histoire(s) du Théâtre IV review: An exhilarating, raucous meditation on grief, and on life," *The Irish Times*, October 16, 2023, available at <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/stage/review/2023/10/16/one-song-histoires-du>

[theatre-iv-review-an-exhilarating-raucous-meditation-on-grief-and-on-life/](#). An exception is the review in the *New York Times* by Laura Cappelle, who in praising the show states that the piece “also felt like ‘The Hunger Games’ for theater aficionados.” See Laura Cappelle, “Avignon Festival Gets Its Buzz Back,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 2022, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/14/theater/avignon-festival-kirill-serebrennikov.html>. Warlop, who developed this piece as an extension of the themes of grief she first explored in *Sportband* (2005), composed as a requiem for her brother, Jasper, describes *One Song* on her website as follows: “how one song can give meaning to a whole society. Unity in diversity.” See Miet Warlop, “ONE SONG: HISTOIRE(S) DU THÉÂTRE IV,” 2023, *MietWarlop*, available at <https://www.mietwarlop.com/portfolios/onesong>.