
IN CONVERSATION WITH XAVIER LE ROY

Martin del Amo

While speaking to French choreographer Xavier Le Roy in a Melbourne café last November, I was reminded of when I first watched one of his works more than ten years ago, in Berlin in 1999. Interestingly, the piece was *Product of Circumstances*, the same Le Roy had performed in Sydney a week earlier and was to present again at Dancehouse a few days later. In the Australian context, where independent dance artists are rarely given the chance to show their work beyond the premier season, this seems like an extraordinary feat. It turns out that *Product of Circumstances* isn't even the oldest work in Le Roy's repertoire. He also still performs *Self Unfinished* from 1998. Both works are presented worldwide and on a regular basis. So yes, truly extraordinary indeed. Especially, considering that there was very little in the first 25 years of Le Roy's life to suggest that he would one day become an internationally sought after and highly respected choreographer and performance maker.

Le Roy initially studied molecular biology at the University of Montpellier in France. It wasn't until he was preparing the thesis for his PhD that he started taking dance classes and began working with various dance and performance groups in France and later Germany. In 1993 he began to develop his own work. By the end of the Nineties, his pieces were a fixture on the European festival circuit. Even though it's his solos that have proven the most enduring, in the last ten years he has also frequently collaborated with fellow dance artists such as Jerome Bel and Eszter Salamon and made various group works, often with untrained performers. Drawing on diverse influences from the world of science, performance art and contemporary dance, Le Roy's work defies categorisation. For every work, he chooses a new focus and a different mode of working. This approach has resulted in a body of work that is characterized by the absence of an overall signature, which, to some degree, is exactly what his signature has become.

It is curious then that someone who has been as diligent as Le Roy to question his own process and avoid categorisation is constantly associated with labels, mainly that of 'conceptual dance' and its variant 'non-dance'. What are his thoughts on that? Le Roy's answer is unequivocal. Those terms, in his opinion, are neither constructive nor productive. They don't further the discourse about the nature of dance and simplify the context in which work is viewed. It is the opposite of

what Le Roy aims to achieve. He feels that this kind of labelling does not only misrepresent his own work but also does injustice to those choreographers who aren't labelled the same way. It is not as if works that have gone before had no concept, is his argument. And as far as he is concerned, there is nothing more boring than a concept for concept's sake. A concept is only ever as interesting as what it communicates to an audience.

The impulse for Le Roy's work and that of other choreographers who, like him, started making work in the mid-Nineties and shared similar artistic and philosophical concerns, is often interpreted as a response to the highly physical, adrenaline-fuelled dance of the Eighties and early Nineties as exemplified by companies such as La La La Human Steps, DV8 Physical Theatre and Ultima Vez. Le Roy seems to agree with this view when he says that one of the objectives of his early works was to show that it was possible to think of dance in different ways. That it was, in fact, crucial to continuously rethink the possibilities of what dance can be in order not to get stuck in convention and fall into existing models. A further objective was to challenge the notion that dancing and thinking are mutually exclusive, as seems to be a widely held belief. Maddening as it is. For this challenge to be constructive though, Le Roy points out, it has to go both ways. As the dance makers work to challenge audience expectations and preconceived notions, they also need to keep challenging their own approach and ways of making work. It's all very well for artists to be the instigators of challenge but if they don't honour their side of the deal, they lose all credibility.

So for all the absence of dance in his work, at least in the conventional sense, does he see himself as a dance maker? When answering, Le Roy chooses his words carefully as he explains that he differentiates between choreography and dance. His interest is in the art of choreography, responding to ideas that arise from the field of dance. He is less interested in the use of a pre-determined dance vocabulary. As an example he gives his fascination with the Judson Church choreographers of the Sixties and their inquiry into the integration of daily movement with dance, one of the main influences on his own work as choreographer.

There is an undeniable rigour to Le Roy's approach. Without a doubt, he takes his work very serious. At the same time, it's his underpinning sense of humour and a lightness of touch that makes most of his work so engaging. As for his insistence on the importance of constantly challenging oneself, he certainly puts his money where his mouth is. Among the many, extremely varied projects he has undertaken during his choreographic career, the one that struck me as one of the most unusual was a piece that he made for 40 children between eight and eleven in 2006. The work was set to the piece *Ionisation* by French composer Edgar Varese and presented as part of a performance evening with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Sir Simon Rattle. Now, how does a choreographer, for whom the discussion of methodologies with his collaborators is so integral to his process, work with children? Le Roy doesn't miss a beat. You ask them to play games, he says. The answer is unexpected but not surprising. For many years, Le Roy investigated the playing of games as a choreographic tool. The findings were presented in the group piece *Project* (2003). It was Le Roy's aim to involve the children as much as possible into the development process. They were, for example, asked to bring in their favourite music and clothes. The two main instructions to them were: "You are telling yourself what to do." and "You cannot do anything wrong."

What I find telling about this project is that it's only at first glance that it seems untypical for Le Roy. Within the larger context of his body of work it is not untypical at all. It does, in fact, demonstrate perfectly the driving force behind all of Le Roy's pieces - his openness to experiment and his curiosity to explore the unknown and its possibilities.

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