



Des fourmis dans les jambes

RENCONTRE AVEC LA CHORÉGRAPHE MARIE-SOLEIL PILETTE

Ants in her pants— meeting with choreographer Marie-Soleil Pilette

Joan Barbe

Riding the wave of artistic fusion, young choreographer Marie-Soleil Pilette created Zone Gigue, a carefully studied mix of traditional stepdancing and contemporary dance. Her roots energize her dynamic and very much present-day work.

Marie-Soleil unearthed stepdancing from her roots and from “Quebécois” tradition and with creative momentum, gave it new life.

Young, dynamic and smiling, dancer and choreographer Marie-Soleil Pilette has recently been rewarded with rave reviews of her new show. Her work which was presented in January within Espace Tangente’s « Nouvelle Gigue » series, has swept up any preconceived notions about traditional dance. Stepdancing becomes present-day choreographic material when met with other dance forms, far from being stilted and uniquely reserved for traditional holidays.

A return to her roots

With a taste for folklore inherited from her mother, Marie-Soleil Pilette danced with folkloric troupes since childhood. And yet, she only began her real stepdancing training at the age of seventeen, and hasn’t stopped since. Freshly graduated from UQAM’s bachelor in Dance, she wanted to merge tradition and novelty to promote a contemporary vision of traditional dance.

Stepdancing which was imported from Europe due to migration, became a dance symbol for the choreographer’s origins. “It speaks to us of our roots, our origins, where we come from. And it locates us within a time frame. For me, coming into contact with stepdancing means coming into contact with time.” The choreographer goes beyond simply merging two styles, the work is also a reflection on the « québécois » identity that sets itself within a temporal continuity. Marie-Soleil Pilette does however make a distinction between stepdancing as it is practiced in a traditional and conventional fashion, and its renewal on stage which is more prone to variations. On stage, it becomes “vocabulary”, an element of mediation. «Stepdancing is infused with meaning. We cannot abstract that meaning, but we can use the vocabulary in the same way as we can use ballet or contemporary dance vocabulary.”

The youthful renewal of stepdancing does not threaten its initial identity. Offstage, this custom will always exist in its traditional form. Moreover, the choreographer’s intentions aim to etch this dance form into our times. Inasmuch as it is danced by present-day beings, stepdancing must speak of current things, must anchor itself into the here and now.

Visually, stepdancing can be recognized by the dancer’s straight posture, arms along the sides of the body and the steps hitting the ground. However, Marie-Soleil Pilette’s and Lük Fleury’s work – second choreographer in this series – bring about a certain postural nonchalance paired up with a freedom in the upper body, mostly visible in

the arms. The arms hit, intertwine and undulate.

The body's rhythm

What's even more striking than the arm work in Zone Gigue, is the absence of music. With the exception of a short repetitive melody hummed for a few seconds by one of the dancers, no musical soundtrack is heard. The musical abyss is highly perceptible especially since this dance form has traditionally been linked with accordion or violin playing. But is it really silence? Far from it.

Noises usually concealed by music are revealed. And so the spectator can not only distinctly hear the dance steps hammered onto the floor, but also the small details, such as the breathing of three dancers becoming progressively heavier. The musical scarcity is echoed by bare sets and scenography. With such minimalist presentation, the choreography makes the dancers the centre of attention: «We see the dancers creating the rhythm. Finding the essence of stepdancing is what's at stake.» The dancers become rhythmical instruments that interact with the floor. They evolve within the choreography as notes evolve within a partition. From the beating of the heart to the tapping of the feet the body is the rhythm and creates the rhythm.

The attention is focused on the dancer-floor couple. The floor isn't a neutral element, especially in stepdancing where the feet play a predominant role. The floor answers to the tapping of the feet. As the composition progresses, the relationship between these two elements becomes louder. After a few minutes of physically demanding and frantic dancing, not only are the feet tapping, the hands are also hitting the floor and the initially vertical torsos are falling to explore fatigue horizontally.

Experience dance

The relationship between the spectators and the dancers goes beyond simply and attentively contemplating each other. The performance space at Espace Tangente has a particularity; the stage and the tiers share the same floor. Because of this, each jump and accentuated step produces a vibration in the tiers and radiates into the surroundings. Add on repetitive stepdancing rhythms, physical and audio proximity with the dancers, and the recipe is perfect for creating an empathy between the spectators' and dancers' bodies. The dancers' intense physicality is almost individually felt and the franticness of the steps crawls onto the spectators' legs. The choreographer wanted the work to be trance-like by using the repetition of steps.

Constantly wanting to choreograph through fusion, Marie-Soleil Pilette is pursuing her research in the midst of dance trio Rapetipetam with Martine Billette and celebrated stepdancer Pierre Chartrand. When asked about her solo work, she admits wanting to continue to work with silence and singing but with an added scenic element : chairs. On which to sit stepdancing's new reputation.

Translated from french by Olena H