

Sea Change

Interview with Boris Charmatz and Gilles Amalvi, march 2021

A few months on from La Ronde at the Grand Palais (a 12-hour event that took several months to prepare working in very uncertain conditions), you are once again creating a large collective event in the public realm, this time to mark the opening of the Manchester International Festival. Do you feel that there is a need to invent new ways of creating and presenting dance in response to the current Covid-19 pandemic?

I believe that we are all trying to avoid stopping; trying to find ways to continue at any cost during this critical time; trying to keep creating, trying to stay alive. It's interesting to see the kind of projects that are being invented right now. We have entered a second stage of the pandemic: it is no longer the first lockdown where people were dancing in their bathrooms. Instead, we are witnessing the emergence of real artistic responses to this situation. Ideas are being born that do not resemble what was done before Covid. In the future, it will be worth looking back at what this constrained art looked like. In the case of *Sea Change* in Manchester, the situation is further compounded by the fact that this is an invitation made by an English festival to a French choreographer just a few months after Brexit. Again, there is a kind of "whatever happens". Even though the UK has left the EU, we will continue to create things together.

If Sea Change reignites the pandemic in England, that may not help matters...

I'll be going directly to jail! Given all of this, it is courageous of MIF to have maintained their openness to the project. The reality is that it is more complicated today to bring a French artist into the country than before (when we did *If Tate Modern was Musée de la danse?* in London for example) - you need a passport, visas...

This project in Manchester is a direct continuation of the event at the Grand Palais; its principal originates from my initial idea to create a *Tempête*, a storm of movements in an immense space; a tempestuous crowd, filling the expanse of space with intensity. Initially, I wanted to propose *Tempête* for Manchester. But this collective dance of unrestricted bodies, gathered together in the same place, was not possible under the current conditions. We could have thrown in the towel - us, the Festival - but in October 2020 we decided to invent another form - as we did with *La Ronde* which replaced *Tempête*. This successful proposal, *Sea Change*, is a new idea - but one that brings together principles from previous events or existing pieces. In normal circumstances this is a project that we would have tested for a

long time before opening. But under the current conditions, we decided to take the plunge. At the moment, we can't travel to England. We don't know if we can we gather even 20 or 30 people together, let alone more. Everything is still in flux and will remain so over the weeks and months to come... *La Ronde* and *Sea Change* are very big projects, but they are also the most free and improvised pieces that I have been able to make; everything is done in a hurry, without having proper time to test the ideas before creating the work in real conditions.

La Ronde was a radical departure from *Tempête* as it was initially planned: responding to the Nave of the Grand Palais with emptiness rather than fullness. In the case of *Sea Change*, how did you transform *Tempête* to adapt to public health restrictions?

We tried to take all of the health restrictions linked to the pandemic into account, and to transform them into formal rules for dance. *Sea Change* is a project that respects all possible protocols. Obviously, this does not guarantee anything, everything can still be cancelled. Under the direction of John McGrath, the Festival invites artists to design an opening event for each edition that is both a large festive gathering and a work of art, and so this event was already designed to take place outdoors. It's not just an opening party; and it's not an artistic project like others during the Festival - it is about linking these two dimensions - which, of course, interests me a lot. The idea of tying together a collective gathering, a party and a work of art is an active principle in many of the projects that I have created in the past, from *Fous de danse* to the first [field] test in Zurich. For MIF19 it was Yoko Ono who created the opening - with a performance for 6,000 people created with various sized bells.

For *Sea Change*, I took up a principle from the piece *Levée des Conflicts*. In this piece, the choreography is designed in such a way that the dancers embody the beginning, the middle and the end separately. Therefore, the whole is visible in a single glance. By starting with this division of the different elements of the piece, we came up with the idea of separating the dancers in the street - by as many metres as necessary - with each embodying a segment of the choreography. Continuing with this need for physical distance, we also decided to separate the audience: instead of having a large mass of people gathered in one place, the audience is divided into small groups, who, as they walk, discover the choreography. And, given that I like this kinetic effect, I decided that it could be even more interesting

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to watch the choreography whilst running - creating an effect similar to that of a flip-book: with audiences animating the series of gestures made by the dancers by themselves being in motion. Suddenly, two lines or two routes will be offered to spectators: a line to watch the choreography while walking, and a line to watch it while running. The choreography will be spread over 300 or 400 meters - forming a long line of bodies performing movements corresponding to different stages of the choreography. I think it will take 8/9 minutes to discover it by walking, and about 4 minutes by running.

This is a new principle, but one which reflects principles present in all your work: the series of gestures forming a choreographic snapshot recalls Levée des Conflicts, the kinetic principle of sequential movement Flip book, the line of bodies dancing the Soul Train of Fous de danse...

Indeed. But the truth is, the starting point is even older. When I was a child, I was fascinated by the chronophotography of Etienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge. Chronophotography is both movement and still image - a contradiction that has always interested me. I have delivered workshops offering dancers the opportunity to continue the movement of the previous dancer. At the time of Musée de la danse and the PHOTO exhibition, I dreamt of a room designed as a living chronophotography exhibition. In the case of *Sea Change*, it is not about fixed positions. There will be around 50 stations on our choreographic line - but the bodies will not be frozen, they will evolve. The material of their movement will gradually change, a bit like in *Levée des Conflicts*.

The idea of *Levée des Conflicts* is that by looking for a second at what is happening on stage, you can see the whole piece - almost in one flash. In *Sea Change*, it is almost the opposite: the dancers do not move, they do not transfer movements to each other, they do not pass the baton: it is the audience's gaze whilst they are in motion that does this instead. They see the piece unfold as they move, while the dancers embody only one piece of this choreography - the whole of which cannot be seen. Or rather, you can only see the whole thing piece by piece, like a chronophotograph: and if you accelerate - by running - the sum of these pieces creates the continuity. The Musée de la danse exhibitions required movement on the part of the public - but visitors were able to move around as they wished. In these exhibitions, the movement itself was not subject to a choreographic principle. In *Sea Change* the movement is an integral part of the choreography - since it sets it in motion.

We are going to work on this with groups of amateur dancers from Manchester and professionals, creating a moving landscape in

which the choreographic development of the piece is gradually revealed to the moving spectator. In terms of the material of the movements themselves, I will work with elements that I know. We will walk through familiar materials from *Levée des Conflicts*, *10,000 Gestures*, *Night Dancing* - and will invent others as we go.

This idea of a race reminds me of a scene from Godard, in Bande à part, where the characters start running at full speed through the Louvre...

I haven't seen this scene but I love the principle. When we look whilst running, we pass quickly, we only retain fragments. It is a vision with holes, it's incomplete. We have hardly seen a dancer before we are already at the next one. This idea of speed appeals to me because it transforms the way we look at dance: it undoes the comfort of vision that we can have in a theatre. In order to see, you have to set yourself in motion, make an effort, sweat; you have to accept being late, not being able to see everything. We could instead suggest staying in front of each dancer for a long time, taking the time to watch them. But I like the idea of a quick glance, which is also an active glance: it's about catching movement on the fly - similar to the video by Richard Serra where a hand tries to catch falling objects...

With this project, we see some of the ideas at the heart of [terrain], namely to occupy urban space as a place of choreographic and collective experimentation. How are you going to respond to Manchester and involve its people?

Distilling movement within the urban fabric is indeed one of the driving principles of [terrain] - something that has been on stand-by for a year. With *Sea Change*, we will be arranging our choreographic line in a street - like a moving line crossing the city. In Manchester, this line will only cross a small portion of the city, of course. But in future I would like to design a version in a small town, so that it literally crosses the whole town. In addition, we are very keen to work with the people of Manchester. But how can you work with amateur dancers without bringing them together? We're going to have to work with them one by one - with the goal of creating collective choreography. All of this is due to public health restrictions, but at the same time it's what I like to do in general: situating myself between the individual, the singular and the collective. We will be working with each amateur to see is possible. I imagine this will be a durational project - lasting about 3 hours, so that a large enough number of audience have the opportunity to walk / run along this choreography. Therefore, I think the dancers will take turns, not only because 3 hours is a long time, but also because repeating the same thing for 3 hours is very

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tiring. There will probably be 3 people allocated to each of the 40 positions, which will make about 120 dancers - plus 18 professionals, performing 9 positions interspersed along the line. In total, this will make about 50 movements for 140 dancers. Obviously, everything can still move...

Is there an ideal speed for performing the movements - and a speed for running - so that the flip-book effect occurs? Or does the principle work regardless of the speed?

It's completely experimental, and we're going to need to test it by doing it. Even in France, at the moment, it is impossible to bring 50 people together and line them up in a street to test this choreographic principle. It remains crazy. I believe that it will be possible to observe this line by walking, although the flip book effect will probably be less noticeable. It will be a slow-motion flip book. In my head, it is a SINGLE body that transforms; a body made up of 140 bodies which take turns to create one continuous movement. I'd had the idea of creating a piece where the costume would be scattered among the dancers: a costume made of trousers, a shirt, a cap, socks, underwear, a scarf, etc. Each dancer would wear just one part of the costume - like a recomposed multiple body. I tested this costume idea and it didn't work out very well. But in the case of *Sea Change*, I would like viewers to have the perception of a single organism, one single continuous movement made by the many, with each participant singularly embodying a piece.

Where does this title, Sea Change come from?

We were looking for a title that corresponded to *Tempête*. But in England, 'Tempest' is associated with Shakespeare. Tim Etchells told me it wouldn't work. So, he suggested *Sea*

Change; it's a term that appears in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in a poem that describes the transformation of a body on the bottom of the sea.

Full fathom five
thy father lies,
Of his bones are
coral made,
Those are pearls
that were his
eyes,
Nothing of him
that doth fade,
But doth suffer
a sea-change,
into something
rich and
strange,
Sea-nymphs
hourly ring his
knell,
Ding-dong.
Hark! now I hear
them, ding-dong,
bell¹.

This process of transformation is described as a "sea change" - a marine change. A transformation caused by the action of the sea. Due to Shakespeare, this term has now become common parlance. A "sea change" is an act of radical transformation; the term can be used to describe the subprime mortgage crisis or Brexit, for example. So, I wanted to keep this title - which is very beautiful and very poetic, but which can also at the same time refer to very concrete events. This opening event could therefore almost be called a "tipping point" - which I feel corresponds quite well to what we are going to do - but also to the moment we are going through.

1 "Five fathoms under the water your father is lying / His bones have turned to coral / His eyes have become two pearls / Nothing of him has withered / But everything in the sea has undergone a change / Into something rich and from time to time /

From hour to hour the sea nymphs sound their knell / Listen, I hear them: ding dong, knell. »Shakespeare - Complete works, translation Didier Guizot, 1864.