

# Interview with **BORIS CHARMATZ**

EXTRACTS – the full interview is available online in French at [www.danse-elargie.com](http://www.danse-elargie.com)

**CÉLINE ROUX – DANSE ÉLARGIE TAKES THE FORM OF A COMPETITION REVIVING THE PRINCIPLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL CHOREOGRAPHY COMPETITION HELD IN BAGNOLET IN THE 1970s AND 80s – BUT TWO DECADES ON. WHAT ARE YOU HOPING TO ACHIEVE BY REVIVING THIS FORMAT TODAY?**

**Boris Charmatz** – I wanted to stage an event under the title 'Concours de Bagnolet!'. The best way to examine the nature of history is to think in terms of processes of reassembly, reconstruction and 'repertorisation' of all kinds. Above all, history should act as a lever for action in the present. A great deal of work remains to be done on historic protocols for the creation and presentation of art. Reviving an obsolete set of rules – bringing them 'out of limbo', as it were – allows us, I believe, to reexamine one of the 'untouchable' sacred monsters of the 1980s while at the same time highlighting a very contemporary crisis in the arts: one that challenges dance and other forms to embrace a more diverse vision of the life of a theatre, or any cultural institution. In reviving the competition format we are creating an opportunity for completely new art, because the same rules won't produce the same results in an altered context and zeitgeist. So this new 'competition' is, potentially, a fresh, thoroughly contemporary opportunity to engage with a highly controversial, historic type of 'ready-made'. [...]

**CR – AT THE MUSÉE DE LA DANSE, YOU ALREADY COMMISSION NEW WORK AND ISSUE CALLS FOR PROJECTS. WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO THE COMPETITION FORMAT? HOW CAN ARTISTS ENGAGE WITH THIS FORMAT?**

**BC** – The history and etymology of the word 'competition' express all the ambiguity of the term, and its core issues: a competition is a shared act, a pooling of talent. If we think about the French term *concours*, we see that there is an important element of 'concurrency'. And a sense of tension, too, between rival potentialities. Above all, I think a *concours* is an opportunity to share a space, to experience the stage together, rather than a mechanical process of selection and 'election'. I'm convinced that the competition format can be a forum for sharing and collective endeavour, rather than neo-liberal competitiveness. Also, that a competition like this has the power to alter significantly the forms of artwork we present onstage in the theatre.

The term has an inherent double meaning, and what interests me most is the wide margin of interpretation afforded by the competition format. In this era of TV talent shows and so many other competitive human cattle markets, we should remember that Sophocles won a tragedy competition in his day, and that Kurt Jooss's ballet *The Green Table* was a competition piece!

**CR – THE SELECTION WILL BE BASED ON A SET OF RULES. HOW WERE THE RULES DRAWN UP? HAVE YOU TAKEN ANY ELEMENTS FROM THE RULES OF THE CONCOURS DE BAGNOLET?**

**BC** – We deliberately chose an outmoded form, as a key element in our examination of the competition format. I'm conscious that we have taken a particular interest in the history of dance, but we have concentrated less on the history of formats such as this. What does reviving an old format tell us about our own era? How should we define a set of rules for a contemporary context? Once we have accepted the 'ten minutes, three performers' rule as a set of parameters defining a context, a whole host of options are made possible.

In developing the project, in association with Emmanuel Demarcy-Mota, we wanted to highlight the Théâtre de la Ville as an enticing space, and see how it would respond to such a specific context.

Danse Élargie revisits an absurd form, whose parameters are defined by a minimum number of people onstage, and a maximum length. Together, these two restrictions authorize a whole host of variations. We say 'up to ten minutes', which means you can do a piece that lasts for one minute and involves forty participants. We don't say 'it has to fit into ten minutes, rather than half an hour or an hour.' The resulting work shouldn't feel compressed or constricted. We're looking at time restrictions 'the other way around'. And there again, it all depends on your point of view. It only takes one minute to stage a huge flash mob! The competition rules allow for the creation of a prototype work for one spectator at a time, for example. This kind of approach is what interests me today. I think there are plenty of people who will spot the relevance of a set of rules like this, and engage with it. But there are plenty, too, who won't feel it's for them at all. It's up to us to get out there and find them! For us, Danse Élargie is an outreach opportunity... [...]

The competition is an opportunity to stage prototypes, potential projects, and complete, finished productions that set the stage alight. One thing is certain: the project is, in essence, closely related to conceptual art, which can resonate with works that have been staged, described, unstaged, staged by other people. Art is free expression, hence inimical to 'framing' of any kind. And so? Schools, museums, competitions.... I would like to find other ways of sharing these controversial and symbolic spaces. [...]

**CR — DANSE ÉLARGIE IS AN EVENT THAT REFLECTS THE WIDER APPROACH OF THE MUSÉE DE LA DANSE. HOW DO YOU SEE IT FITTING WITH THE REST OF THE MUSEUM'S PROGRAMME?**

**BC** – In its own way, the Musée de la danse tries to generate specific frameworks for its activities, and the competition is just one facet of that. We are launching an active, three-year review of the nature of a dancing museum today.

Danse Élargie is quite simply part of a contrasting, emerging landscape of polemic. The concept behind Danse Élargie is shaping the museum's activities far beyond the scope of the competition itself: the concept and practice of dance should be extended to embrace conceptual art, feminist and post-feminist issues, colonial and post-colonial issues, contemporary political issues related to the movements of migrant peoples... It's a concept of 'dance extended' to every form of modern media, too. That's what 'dance extended' means for me: a broader vision embracing the medium, its history and its core concepts. In the context of the Musée de la danse, there is also in this competition the idea of openness – as for new works commissioned, calls for projects, 'think tanks'. A commission can be a terrible thing for an artist, and it should not be the dominant channel for the emergence of new work. But it can be an effective lever for new things that wouldn't get done otherwise. The same is true of the competition! For me, it works because it's taking place in a wider context. *Expo zéro* is a group currently exploring the concept of an exhibition devoid of objects, the complete opposite of any form of competition. I find myself held in balance between actions that are more or less completely opposed. It seems necessary to me to short-circuit these practices. The idea of the competition is not an 'anti-think tank', it's a way of exploring and thinking about things in a different format: for the audience, the participants, the jury and the organisers.

**Céline Roux** MARCH 2010