

# A Fine Line

The choreographer Robyn Orlin on theatre as a question of humanity

Text: Esther Boldt

*Her piece “we wear our wheels with pride and slap your streets with color ... we said ‘bonjour’ to satan ...” was supposed to have been shown at Tanz im August two years ago. Now at last it can come to Berlin. In this portrait from 2020 Robyn Orlin talks about her critical work and about theatre as a question of humanity.*

Her works are visually powerful yet unpretentious. They are both playful and questioning, but always with a touch of irony. Robyn Orlin’s output oscillates between film and dance, visual art and music. She is motivated by questions of power relationships, the primacy of the West, post-colonialism. A meeting with an exceptional artist.

Robyn Orlin has lived in Berlin for over twenty years. Her new piece has one of her typically long titles, “We wear our wheels with pride and slap your streets with color – we said ‘bonjour’ to satan in 1820 ...”, and includes a ten-strong Zulu choir. As with many of her previous works, the starting point for “We wear our wheels with pride ...” was a personal memory.

“At the moment, I keep on going back to memories about where I come from, and how it shaped or did not shape my consciousness,” says Robyn Orlin. In “We wear our wheels with pride ...” she remembers the rickshaw pullers of her childhood. Orlin grew up on Johannesburg, the daughter of Jewish emigrants who had fled from Europe to South Africa between the two world wars. “We were never accepted there, because we were Jews,” she says. The question of belonging has preoccupied her to this day, and it keeps coming up in conversation. “I have never found a place for myself,” she says at some point, simply. She left South Africa when she no longer saw an artistic future for herself there, and came to Berlin in a roundabout way. But spending the rest of her life in Germany or elsewhere in Europe isn’t something the 67-year-old can imagine.

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Even as a child Orlin couldn’t get used to apartheid. “I found it very difficult. I never understood the separation. Luckily, my mother explained a lot to me when I was very young.” The cityscape then was characterised by rickshaws – vehicles pulled by black men to transport both goods and people – usually white people. “It was a transport system that came pretty much out of the colonial system, but it became an important structure because it was a source of income for many unemployed people,” says Orlin. The Zulu pullers decorated their rickshaws and wore splendid clothes and lavish headgear of feathers, buttons and seeds, and endowed with two, four or even six cow horns. The horns were interpreted as a sign of the dignity and strength of

those who wore them – and also of course indicated their status as human beasts of burden, in Orlin’s view. Today, after the motorisation of South Africa, the colourful rickshaws are primarily tourist attractions.

Robyn Orlin vividly recalls the rickshaw pullers because she was inspired by two forms of traditional African dance, that of the mine dancers, and that of the rickshaw pullers. “Watching these dances, the beauty and the energy of these dances, I was in awe.” Her mother, also a professional choreographer, took her along to the mine dances on Sundays. These were organised as competitions so as to prevent the workers from drinking and fighting on their day off. Attending these dances, says Orlin, influenced her politically from a very young age. Now she would like to create a memorial to these unknown heroes – but without glorifying the colonial era: “I have to be careful; I don’t want to glorify colonialism. That could be a trap”, she says. “It’s a very fine line.”

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Today Robyn Orlin is one of Africa’s most important choreographers. She studied dance at the London Contemporary Dance School and visual art in Chicago. She became well known for politically committed, trans-disciplinary work that frequently examined social issues such as apartheid and post-colonialism. At Tanz im August in 2018 she presented “Oh Louis ... We move from the ballroom to hell while we have to tell ourselves stories at night so that we can sleep ...”, which looked at the Sun King, Louis XIV, art-lover and inventor of the classical ballet. But in 1685, as Orlin reminds us in her piece, Louis also passed the Code noir, a decree to regulate the treatment of slaves. Orlin’s stage is covered with a sea of crackling gold foil, a powerful image that playfully jumps from the 17th century to the present, recalling the rescue blankets used to protect refugees and others against hypothermia. The evening opens with the fabulous Benjamin Pech, danseur étoile of the Paris Opera Ballet, greeting the audience with jokes and banter for minutes on end as they take their seats in the front rows, making comments on their clothing and drawing them directly into the show.

Orlin’s pieces often begin in the audience, as she aims to invalidate hierarchies – or at least to question them. “I try to break down the border between stage and public. It’s a point of humanity to find a way to get the audience to participate more freely in the piece.” Her audience shouldn’t adopt the role of passive consumers, and neither should her performers become mere objects on view. This can lead to the audience dissolving into a dancing crowd – as in “although I live inside ... my hair will always reach towards the sun ...” (2004), an outdoor performance in which the charismatic dancer Sophiatou Kossoko beguiled the audience into removing their shoes, washing their feet in a river of paddling pools and dancing.





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The creative process itself also frequently becomes the subject matter of Robyn Orlin's works – when the performers bring up her wishes and ideas on stage, for example, or even make jokes at her expense. "I've taken this approach for a long time," she explains. "The point is to reveal who has the power, who makes the decisions, why decisions are important – those things. It's important to me that the audience understands how we made the piece." This is often associated with a raw quality, with improvised moments, a certain provisionality. The works refuse to be completed, and insist on a fundamental openness. Yet they are still always entertaining, full of wit and irony and a lightness rare in contemporary dance. "It's important to be with the audience, to laugh with them and to entertain them," says Orlin. "I still have this old-fashioned, almost kitschy notion of entertainment. I am drawn to this kind of work because it has humanity and vitality."

Perhaps this lively wit is also a part of Orlin's artistic aspiration. For aside from the question of belonging and not belonging, our conversation is pervaded by another issue: that of humanity. For Robyn Orlin this is the most important aspect of dance and theatre in general: "I think we have one theme we have to hold onto, and it's humanity." A humanity that determines the relationship between choreographer and performers, between performers and audience, between the work and the world. 🗡️

*Übersetzt aus dem Deutschen von Michael Turnbull.*

**Robyn Orlin / City Theater & Dance Group**  
**We wear our wheels with pride ...**  
 17.+18.8., 19:00 | Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz  
 Deutschlandpremiere