

## Tanz im August 2010

### Interview with the curators

#### Ulrike Becker, Dr. Pirkko Husemann und André Theriault

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**Elena Philipp:** *Tanz im August 2010 will be presenting a focus on human rights. It is a complex and very abstract subject. What does dance have to say to this subject and how do the choreographies approach this complexity?*

**Ulrike Becker:** We are happy that these subjects are entering into dance more and more. Human rights abuses, the unequal treatment of women or the repression of minorities often have physical effects, sometimes drastically in the case of torture or imprisonment or the veiling of the body by wearing a burqa. Thus it appears almost a matter of course for someone who creates choreographies or theater based on the body to deal with issues of human rights. The subject of recognizing human rights is a current and controversial issue, and the artists we have invited have each had a reason to produce a piece from their own context's perspective. In Hela Fattoumi's case, they were personal reasons – she grew up in Tunisia in an Arab-Muslim context – as well as political ones that have to do with the current burqa debate in France. Alain Platel took on the subject of sexual freedom and a self-determined sexual identity, while Lemi Ponifasio deals with human rights abuses in New Zealand and Samoa that led to political independence movements.

**André Theriault:** The subjects stemming from human rights were already present in dance, but now they are approached in a different way and have a closer relationship to current events. Aesthetics are no longer at the focus; social debates, politics, religion and cultures are being targeted. It is less a question of disappearing identities as such, and more one of the loss of national or personal identity, gender identity. Lemi Ponifasio is concerned with uprooting and colonialism, Hélé Fattoumi and Éric Lamoureux observed that movement limitation also has psychological effects and can form personalities. Wearing a burqa sets limits on how one can participate in society.

**Pirkko Husemann:** One production gave the cue for this focus: the performative installation "Human Writes" by William Forsythe that he developed with the legal scholar Kendall Thomas from Columbia University in the City of New York. "Human Writes" is about how human rights can be realized at all. Among other things, Kendall Thomas does research on the relationship between human rights and culture. He poses the question whether the law is always the most appropriate means for enforcing human rights or whether there may be other ways, e.g., culture work with adolescents, to develop a sensitivity for the responsible and humane approach to others. Thomas and Forsythe translated this fundamental question into visual and performative practice: dancers try to write down words from the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" with their hands tied and sometimes in almost impossible positions. As a result of a variety of limitations, they need the audience's help. The whole thing is an allegory for the difficult, but constantly necessary, attempt at enforcing human rights; this means guaranteeing the entitlement to recognition, security and freedom for all people.

**AT:** A lot is being talked and written about such topics as women's rights, religion and society, etc. We show a different perspective: the artistic one. During discussions the audience will have the opportunity to hear different voices and to participate in order to increase the spectrum of opinions and ideas. One discussion's title is "Veiled Identity": here legal scholars, teachers in the cultural field and artists will talk about the burqa.

**EP:** *Last year's topic "Listen!" was also investigated in discussions and lectures. Did these formats prove successful?*

**UB:** At Tanz im August we always made a point of having formats beyond those of simple public discussions in which you could delve into subjects that didn't just have a direct relationship to the pieces. When you place a political topic at the center of the festival, as we do this year, then it is natural to create a framework of talks – whereby it is important to us that we always involve artists in the discussions in order to tie the artistic perspectives to the political, religious or feminist ones.

**PH:** One thing stands out this year: some of the artists we invited were forced to recognize that they could only really approach a big topic by offering other perspectives beyond those inherent in a stage piece. Simone Aughterlony, for example, developed a project with the filmmaker Jorge León that has four parts: a stage piece, a documentary film and an installation in an apartment house where a discussion between scholars and activists takes place. "To Serve" is concerned with female labor migration, or more precisely, with maids from Indonesia who go to foreign countries to work and leave their own children and families for two or three years. In the process, they often enter into completely inhumane conditions for sake of their relatives.

**EP:** *Ulrike Becker mentioned that the productions are often motivated from a personal background.*

**AT:** I also have the impression that the choreographers not only deal with these topics because they find them interesting, but because they are topics that they feel directly affected by. When Lemi Ponifasio talks about environmental disasters, then it is his environment, his island, that disappears. For Héra Fattoumi it's something that she experienced in her childhood and that she is now experiencing again in the French burqa debate – a nightmare.

**PH:** It's similar for Alain Platel. His musical "Gardenia", developed together with Frank Van Laecke, is about realizing queer biographies. The point of departure is defined by the biographies of the performers who are aged between 59 and 67. They dealt with their personal "gender trouble" at a time when a life as a transvestite or transsexual wasn't generally accepted.

**AT:** Platel and his performers are not focused on gay rights: this discussion has already occurred. It's about daily life and the reality of such a life. Fattoumi works as a representative for many Islamic women as a group that is losing its gender identity, and Niv Sheinfeld and Oren Laor focus on identities within masses, about how one can or has to assimilate to a society.

**EP:** *Could one say in general that dance's focus is shifting? From the individual to the society in which the individual moves?*

**UB:** I think that there is this shift of interest, just like in politics and in society in general, since the controversial questions have also changed. It's not so much about questioning individual sensitivities or self-discovery; instead, the events in the last few years have made clear that we have to ask ourselves, how we can live together at all, how we can get a handle on environmental protection or deal with globalization. This is also entering dance and is opening up new worlds: on the one hand, you can see a dance piece, and on the other, you pose general and fundamental questions about human ethics or societal values. This is especially central for Lemi Ponifasio, who works with responsibility as part of his understanding of art. He grew up in a

Samoa village. In his family he is continuing the tradition of the High Chiefs – he himself is a High Chief. This requires him to accept completely different duties and responsibilities than those that one considers as a part of family traditions in the West. He brings the focus that is set on the community in Samoa into his works. At the same time, he has lived in Asia and Europe and had a western education. He combines these perspectives and comes to the conclusion that art is anchored in society, art is political responsibility.

**EP:** *In Ponifasio's work, elements of an indigenous culture mix with western education and knowledge of a western Lebenswelt. Jecko Siompo, who comes from Indonesia, does something similar.*

**PH:** What's remarkable in both cases is a radical eclecticism, i.e., mixing different sources and influences. Jecko Siompo developed a very hybrid language of movement that, on the one hand, is based on traditional dance from Indonesia, the so-called kangaroo dance, and on the other, on HipHop's popping and locking that he saw on Brooklyn's streets and immediately integrated into his work. Other animal movements and a basic body tension that he calls "jungle instinct" are also included. This mixture is also the fascinating aspect of his piece "Terima Kost": here young people's attitude towards life in the Indonesian metropolis Jakarta is focused on. You can find similar mixtures in Ponifasio's movements, whereby numerous other western sources such as Benjamin's "angel of history" or Shakespeare's "The Tempest" serve as points of reference.

**EP:** *Did you – explicitly in comparison to last year – search for international productions in a different way, rethink what one can present here, how accessible it has to be and what the invited artists can tell about themselves and about us in the West?*

**AT:** One difference is that last year's African productions told us a lot about their reality at home. This year people from other cultures tell us about phenomena that not only they experience, but can also be observed by us here. Women's veils is not just a topic in Canada and Europe, the Near East and North Africa, – "Manta" by HÉla Fattoumi and Éric Lamoureux comes from Caen in France and approaches this subject. Ponifasio is inspired by his tradition, without "Tempest: Without a Body" being folkloristic. It is a highly modern piece, in which Ponifasio not only reports about what happened in Samoa in the past or how one lives in New Zealand today, but also about how he and his performers see the world.

**UB:** One could perhaps say that the piece was created from a different perspective. Ponifasio had a very broad education and training, and got to know many different approaches to art. In "Tempest: Without a Body", elements of butoh also appear. But whatever he uses, he uses it with an awareness: it's all contemporary, it all belongs to our present society that came into contact with European culture through colonialism.

**EP:** *Is it the case that the European and North American influences on dance are slowly becoming less important, and that local and regional currents from other continents are developing a new confidence? Or has it always been the case and we are finally realizing it?*

**PH:** We can always just try to escape our Eurocentric viewpoint by opening up to artists and productions from other regions. Already the question alone, whether new centers of contemporary dance are crystallizing outside of Europe and the USA, demonstrates a western perspective and history. The global dance market is by no means free of imperial influences that are, to an extent, supported by western

institutions and support structures' cultural politics of development. At the same time, Jecko Siompo, who has worked in Indonesia for over ten years and is thus no amateur, would never have come to Germany without the help of the Goethe Institute.

**UB:** It makes no sense to transfer choreographies to Germany that don't seek this context just to show exotic productions or so that the world becomes one. Instead, we make an effort to invite productions that are created from a necessity, a need, to be presented here.

**PH:** It's important to us that the pieces are either interesting in a choreographic sense or present us with a topic, as the case is this year, that we can take up and turn into a focus.

**EP:** *Couldn't it happen that productions are co-opted under a Tanz im August subject?*

**PH:** As curators we have a practice-oriented approach. This means that we don't set a subject and then look for artists or pieces that fit to it. Instead, we observe what dance focuses on and take it up and create a topic from it. In this we avoid placing productions in a context that they wouldn't have placed themselves.

**UB:** This year we didn't have the feeling that we were looking for a subject; the subject was just there. Nobody deals with the burqa ban or works on stage with an activist from a Samoan independence movement if he doesn't also want to be seen in a political, socially critical context... if it also wasn't a personal issue.

**AT:** The focus of Tanz im August is, above all, an offer to the public to see the productions from this perspective – but of course, one can see the pieces from numerous other perspectives as well.

**EP:** *The emphasis on human rights is not the only point of crystallization at Tanz im August 2010. A further focus is dance history. What developments, questions or even problems would you like to highlight?*

**PH:** One question is at the center: how does dance deal with its own history? That hasn't just been a current issue since Merce Cunningham and Pina Bausch's deaths in 2009 once again demonstrated the finite nature of choreographic works. Passing on a choreographic heritage is, after all, based on physical memory and verbal communication. That is the challenge that dancers and choreographers have been considering for quite some time.

**AT:** In "An Introduction", Olga de Soto searches for the traces that Kurt Jooss' "Der Grüne Tisch" has left behind in its almost 80 year history. Boris Charmatz turns a photo archive of Merce Cunningham's work into movement.

**UB:** The factor of time, of a historical character, is practically written into the images. The passing of time is also a subject, since Charmatz works with ex-Cunningham dancers of different ages. Not only Cunningham's work is shown in fast motion: the dancers' bodies also represent the various work phases. In a way, it's a new interpretation with the same – but altered – performers.

**EP:** *Can one explain this move towards dance history with an increased importance of dance? Has the idea finally prevailed that archiving is important so that certain works or pieces – the "heritage" – remain existent?*

**PH:** In principle, it can always only be a question of updating a heritage, of a repositioning in relation to a piece. You can't freeze the experience of seeing a performance, you can only reconstruct it, place it in new contexts, confront it with another artistic vision and thus attempt to gain a new perspective on past works. This means that dealing with dance history is always a reflection on the possibilities of approaching history; it is never a pure reproduction.

**AT:** The confrontation with other works also has to do with one's own artistic origins. Cunningham played an important role for Boris Charmatz, perhaps more than one could have expected after his first works came out. For the two oldest dancers in his group, Cunningham is a choreographer with whom they worked for many years and who had great influence on their dance identity and the identity of their art. Charmatz was inspired by Cunningham's work to create a piece that is clearly a Charmatz.

**UB:** Cunningham is an international star who is well known far beyond the field of dance. That didn't exist for a long time in contemporary dance, but now a moment has been reached at which history or scholarship retrospectively can determine: those were the big names, those were the influential personalities, they were important beyond the dance scene. Merce Cunningham worked with Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage and brought media together that were more recognized and had created bigger names. Thus dance was moved into a different spotlight, and so the increasing shift of choreographers to dance history has something to do with dance's increasing importance.

**EP:** *Is the specific nature of dance also acknowledged? You said earlier that in two pieces an expert or artist joined up with a choreographer – Kendall Thomas and Jorge León specifically looked for a choreographer.*

**UB:** I would say yes, choreographers are being more recognized as important figures in contemporary art. Dance is an equal medium, like film, painting or theater.

**EP:** *Tanz im August isn't just about the world famous or arrived works and artists. You also back young artists.*

**AT:** This is the second year in which Tanz im August would like to present new talent. We do so in two projects, funded at the European level with the participation of the HAU and the TanzWerkstatt Berlin: LOOPING and then the P.A.R.T.S. (Brussels) support for up-and-coming artists. It's interesting for the audience because they see at least two choreographers in one evening in a dense format who wouldn't otherwise get this attention at such a big festival. It is a nice addition to the festival experience. They are new voices, and for us as curators it's important to see what the new trends are on the level of movement and on the level of content or topics. What can a possible development of contemporary dance look like? If we repeatedly emphasize that we start with the artists' works, then we also have to see and show works by younger artists who have something to tell us that we should consider for future editions of the festival.

**UB:** The LOOPING artists are still very young and in search of their modes of expression. Last year the expectations may have been a bit too high.

**PH:** This is why we are showing the choreographers in their own program – mostly at two locations and six days in a row. This way we reduce the pressure on the artists that exists at such a well-known international festival like Tanz im August. In addition, in both programs we are also presenting two support models for up-and-coming

artists that are international in scope and enable the artist to start a professional career.

**EP:** *Do these models have an effect? Can one say, in reference to last year, that it worked and that you can see these choreographers at large venues?*

**AT:** Three artists involved in LOOPING last year had further chances to show their work as well as having residencies offered to them, for example, at the 104 production house in Paris. Of course, we hope that this year it will have a similar effect.

**PH:** An example for a quantum leap are Pieter Ampe and Guilherme Garrido who were presented with their first work "Still Difficult Duet" in 2009 in the framework of the young artist program; this year they are invited with the follow-up piece. They are planning a quartet for 2012; this is a sure sign that they have gotten into business. Then there are exceptional talents like Daniel Linehan who was invited to the festival with a solo last year and who, as we now know, is still at student at P.A.R.T.S. He managed to be internationally present during his studies – an exception, of course.

**EP:** *André Theriault, you spoke earlier about developments that one could see in support programs for young artists. What are the innovations and trends that the audience can expect to see?*

**AT:** Seventeen young choreographers will be at Tanz im August 2010. We don't want to generalize, but what I hear from some choreographers is that they distance themselves from what we have seen in the last ten years. They are working more with movement in the more recent works, though without ignoring the instruments used in the last ten years, whether they be speech, non-movement or media. Other young choreographers have told me that they are less interested in abstract or purely aesthetic contents, but rather in what affects them in their daily life. But those are, like I said, individual voices.

**PH:** At P.A.R.T.S., of course as a result of Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker's influence, one can sense a strong influence of composition and choreography. One can see in this year's class that they are working elementarily with movement through space and time, which often has a minimalistic appearance. But at second glance, it becomes clear that the pieces are composed with quite some complexity and work with an expanded concept of dance. For example, Noé Suller choreographs movements that one would assume to be wildly improvised. Then, in the course of the piece, it becomes clear that every little swerve is precisely determined and reproducible.

**EP:** *OK, now we have heard about the three emphases. What else will Tanz im August 2010 offer us?*

**EB:** We will show diverse productions that don't fit into one of the three subjects. Pieces by famous choreographers such as Meg Stuart, Philipp Gehmacher, Xavier Le Roy, Eszter Salamon and the SlovaKs, but also Niv Sheinfeld, Oren Laor and Keren Levi from Israel or Irina Müller or Andros Zins-Browne. We will show portraits or documentaries about famous choreographers such as the films by Tacita Dean about Merce Cunningham and by Ruedi Gerber about Anna Halprin, whose life and work will be the subject of a podium discussion. Once again there will be two dance workshops by Ivo Dimchev and Jecko Siompo, since last year people missed the workshops. In addition, we will continue with the workshops for the public, since it seems to be more and more important to communicate about the works and enable the audience to have access to them. In cooperation with tanzscout Berlin, you can get information

about how the pieces were created and in what context they should be placed in three audience workshops beforehand.

**AT:** The sommer.bar, curated by Kerstin Schroth, will be open every day during the festival. It is the meeting place for the scene with productions that, in the majority of cases, were created by the artists who are invited to the festival – not necessarily dance productions, also films, installations, concerts.

**UB:** The sommer.bar creates a feeling of community that is important to us for the festival.

