

Alain Buffard

talking with Jennifer Monson

Alain Buffard: It works?

Jennifer Monson: I tested it.

AB: The first interview... I made it with a very famous French writer, and it was chaos. A blessing, I mean to have this... huge interview at this place, and it took maybe 2 hours... an hour and a half or something, and I get home and try to listen, and there's nothing on the tape. So, I call him... "I'm very sorry." I was so stressed... that was my first interview, and I said, "Could you please just record 1/2 an hour to replace everything?" He said, "ok."

JM: When did you make this piece?

AB: First meeting with all of the European choreographers was in 2003 for the Montpellier festival, that we opened the ball of the big huge strike... the artist strike there. So, we were the first company to decide to be on strike. All the festival and all the theaters from June to Christmas time, cancelled everything.

JM: Wow!

AB: So, it was kind of a tricky thing because we rehearsed maybe one day. I was nervous because all were famous people and some of them didn't know each other, or even speak each other, so we made it one day, and then we just talked and talked about, "are we going to do this strike or not?" And we did; and that's it. So, after this we did... I was pretty happy with that... it was in a festival in Dijon in France, and I presented the 3 versions: *Good Boy*, the solo, *Good for...* the quartet, and *Mauvais genre*, the group work, and audience could get tickets for a free performance in different little spaces, and we had only two days to do *Mauvais genre*.

JM: And was it the same cast as the ones that went on strike?

AB: Most of them were the same, but we had only one day, so it was very quick and fast. I always remember for the opening night we were still trying to find the end of it, and I tried out everything and nothing really worked. The audience was just behind the door, waiting for us. We'll do this, and I remember the director of the Festival d'Automne in Paris came for the opening, and I was so ashamed because I knew it wasn't so good for the end. So I told him, "I'm very sorry, but I'm still working on it."

JM: So your own process, you hadn't conceptualized the whole piece when you taught it to them.

AB: Well first, I'd like to talk the solo work, *Good Boy*... you haven't seen it. I made this solo work in '98. It was just after my first meeting with Anna Halprin, and so the question was very simple, "What can I do with my body, which has not been trained for years and years?" Because I quit dance during 6 years.

JM: Can I ask why you quit dancing?

AB: Well, I was just fed up with doing movement with no reason for it, and when I asked the choreographers I worked with, I didn't have any kind of response to it, so... And there's also a kind of delay of how I reacted to my HIV status, and something was wrong... It's a funny disease, because I've never been really sick. You have your count of T cells (your sad songs), boo hoo

you're doing bad. (laughs) Why? I feel so okay. It was very psychological... it's a kind of wrong thing inside your body, and I just couldn't make it... I think at that time I had this silly idea of dancing, even if you are doing ugly things... there's something in regards to grace, or something, that was very pure, and very... yes, like a kid. And so, I couldn't manage the issue.

JM: How did you find Anna Halprin?

AB: First it was through Yvonne Rainer. I met her in '96. At that time it was during my long lack of dancing time. I was a manager for dance, theater, and music companies, and I was also an assistant in a contemporary arts gallery in Paris. So, at that time, I was managing a small group called Quatuor Knust and they work with Labanotation, so they did very historical pieces from the early modern choreographers like Doris Humphrey. And, we decided to work on *Continuous Project - altered daily*, from Yvonne. She made this piece in the 70s. We had kind of material from notation, from film and mainly from her book, *Works*. It was also for the Montpellier Festival, and we worked with her for two weeks, and it was... All the questions I had asked of those French choreographers... that piece from the 70s... everything was just given to me, so obvious. And she's so witty, so clever, so gentle, and so I really love her. I knew at the time that she had been training with Anna and I had never heard of this name before. Nothing was available in France to try to pick some information. So I found that she did very important work in the 50s and 60s, and at that time she was running a workshop for life with cancer and AIDS, and I said, "Oh, I have to know much more about it, and about her and her work." So, I decided to go to San Francisco. I applied for a grant, and I got it. Just before that I went to a huge workshop in Germany, for 150 people or something like this, in a gymnasium. And among all those people, we had connecting eyes or something, I don't know what. I saw her solo during the second day of the workshop dedicated to her grandfather...

JM: I saw that.

AB: So you know she wears...

JM: his pajamas.

AB: His pajamas and these huge boots. She was 75 at that time, and she's doing this kind of Russian dance, really physical, and I said, "Wow, what's that girl?" So I decided to go to San Francisco, and I stayed there for three months. I first did this sea ranch retreat, and it was very great for me because usually they just ask for colleagues and students, and it never works really, so they said, "Ok, go, you're nice." That was my first trip to California, and all those people I didn't know... with my poor English... During three weeks, just out from the cities, from all the social habits. We improvised a lot on the beach and in the forest, and I'll always remember... we just have to collect some material, whatever, the seaweed... I remember that I was working with a huge seaweed, and from time to time she came to me and said, "Hmm, that's very nice. Very pretty." And I knew it was just fake and very French way to do it. Ok, I realized that I really didn't know how to get into her work, and the first week it was, "Oh, I should go back to France, I just don't understand what she's doing." Finally at the very end, we started with auto-portrait, and the first day we finished with another one... it could also be a group piece if you want to... and it came time for performance in the woods, and I don't know what I did, but I have this fear of what people will think, or a kind of judgment, so I did kind of a wild thing... screaming and I don't know. I stayed at her place to do a workshop in hospitals with AIDS people and cancer people, and all the labels you can imagine, and when I came back to France, I said "Ok, I should do something... I don't know what." And I didn't expect to present it in public... just for me to work in the studio. And just before that I saw Yvonne a second time and I asked her, "Would you make a solo for me?" And do you know what she answered? "Well, I think you better go to a studio and find your own material." Thanks, that's just right. I'm very grateful for that.

At that time in France the political and aesthetic context was a very weird thing. It was a response of *Still/Here*, you know that piece by Bill T. Jones. I was so pissed off when I saw this piece. I

mean, two screens of the workshops he made with the people in very different ways of surviving, and then you saw these beautiful, healthy bodies doing arabesques or whatever, and I was so angry when I get out of this theater. I said, "I should do something about AIDS here in France." Never did before, in France. So, I just decided to present this work to a few friends around me, and all of them went out crying, so I thought, "Hmm, there must be something there." I don't know exactly what. I would never perform like this now. I mean, I put everything, my whole life up on stage. Now I've got quite distant.

But the idea of the very beginning... it's actually the very end of what happened. All the layers of underpants, and just to make the movements of the dance impossible. And how to get out of this situation, it was like a metaphor. And so I tried and it didn't work because I couldn't breathe anymore. So I said, "Ok, now I want to go to that point; let's try something else." Mainly all of the solo was made with only one movement, just do it three times... this stretch with my elbow. The idea was to make this solo without the things that you usually would use for performance: lights, costumes, music. Well, the music was kind of in-between, but just to say that body is really enough to tell a story, whatever the story is.

JM: Is *Good Boy* very different from *Mauvais genre*?

AB: Well, it's exactly the same material.

JM: But you just had more people do it?

AB: Yes, I had some people, but the climax is totally different. *Good Boy* is so dramatic, it's kind of a tragedy, and it's very dark. That was the thing with both the quartet version and the version with both women and men... ok, you can get material, like an arabesque, and you can do it a very different way, so I mean the skeleton is more or less the same, and the material as well, except the floor section.

JM: There's something very compelling about seeing all of these different people do it. For me, most of the people in the performance here in New York are very good friends of mine, so I have this very intimate relationship, especially the very first time that I saw it, watching their bodies and seeing their personal choices within this very rich context of the piece. I felt like the phrasing and the simplicity of the events that were happening, and the way they built towards each other was very powerful. And it's interesting to hear that it comes from this very personal place, but then there's something about seeing it opened up. I found that I was able to resonate with images in both a very intimate and a sort of larger way. How was it to work with the New York cast versus the French cast? Have you done it in other countries besides France?

AB: Yeah, last November in Brazil, and last summer in Vienna, Austria, and Germany. Each time it was totally different. Here, it's too soon to tell exactly what I felt, but I would say it was more up. I really feel... I don't know what the difference is, but even in the very, very beginning, the way people walk... I didn't really see it well, except during the rehearsal, but there's a slight difference how to get into a space. Matthieu [Doze] and I, we are the only French here, and we are used to do this piece, and Matthieu is my assistant on *Good Boy*, so he's done *Good Boy* I don't know how many times. Very, not relaxed, but just walking into a space. I can see some of the New Yorkers having this attitude to be really prepared before you get in the space, and you have to fight. Do you see what I mean? Because even if Paris is worse and worse and very stressful now, we don't have to fight so much to be an artist. Maybe I'm totally wrong, but this is my very personal understanding of this. Even for this *Good Boy* part with the boxes and high heels... It's always very difficult. We start facing each other, the male and female group, and it's kind of a catwalk, you have to be a little bit bitchy. And I know even in France, the word "bitchy," the wide range of meaning... I know it is not a good word because it could be really bitchy for some of us, and the others are more behind...

Always in the process of my work, if you don't really find the right word, it doesn't work. I remember my second piece, we were doing with Matthieu, and he got these pantyhose with little balls of polystyrene to make him very fat. At the very beginning he came up and there was just a touch on the belly... and I didn't find the right words. I don't know in English what the word is. He was doing exactly the same movements, but we could really see—the other dancers and I—a total difference. It was so amazing: just the power of the words. And always in my process, again, we're speaking a lot during the process. And I know this is really important for me. It's the beginning of sharing. This idea of *Mauvais genre* was to get out of my own story; to share, and to give to the others. And now we are more or less 60 people who have already performed this piece. So, big family, and I hope it will still grow a lot.

JM: When I think about when I came to NY in the 80s and moved through the AIDS epidemic here, and a lot of the people who were also performing with you here in NY. All of us were very, very involved in Act Up, and it really shifted our relationship to art-making. And it's really compelling for me to see it come back as a theme and as material. And this relationship to the body. And both its interiority and exteriority in some way. The improvised section, when there's the 4 different places that they're going, and you can see people dealing very much with the external surface of their body, but then at the same time, I felt like, because I'm so familiar with these people, I can also feel their internal relationships to the piece as a whole happening. Could you talk about this? it seems clearly related to what moved you to make this piece, but how did you make it?

AB: Because you saw the first and the last performance, there was a real journey. The last performance, I remember the 4 spaces and 4 activities was very simple, concerning the skin and the inside-out. So we have rubbing, slapping, breathing, and this whatever with the back of the neck. And with the breathing, I remember it was very smooth and light breathing on the skin of someone, all along the body. And for me, it's very important to give a place of this non-event, which is very important as well.

I remember during a rehearsal, it was quite complicated to ask them don't do so much. Even from the very beginning, just to stand and face the audience, which is my favorite moment. And it's so strong to see all those different bodies. And you can really get inside body and soul. And the way they put on the underpants... "Be more simple." For some of them, it was so complicated to just do this. It's not daily... you don't put your underpants on in the morning like this, I'm sure, but we're on stage, we're not in the locker room with some jokes around. So, for me it was very compelling, because even though I've not been trained in New York, I came here a few times in the 80s. I studied with [Alwin] Nikolais and Viola Farber and Yvonne and Anna, and so I can say I'm an American dancer in a way... Well, my training at least. And I've been so involved in the history of Judson. I mean that's the main... I don't know how to say this in English... "knot" in my way of thinking about dancing. And so to come back here... And Yvonne saw the performance, and she liked it. I was so moved by that.

JM: I also felt very welcomed in to a sort of ritual, and the sound of the piece was very beautiful, when they start walking around the whole space. What I know of Anna Halprin's work is that it does have a ritual aspect to it, and it has healed many people. Was that also on your mind as you were making it, or creating?

AB: It was also to say, I don't need music to make music with my body, which is really important, especially in the improvised part. And the thought is certainly the most important of any kind of movement that you are doing. And that's the way we linked all together and that's the moment where we start to build a group from here. And I think that's very clear with the walking. I love the walking.

JM: And the boxes falling... clearing the boxes.

AB: Yes, each movement. I talk about this stretch with the elbow... it was so strong. I remember the first time I did it, people... it was in kind of a garage with a big echo and b-kow! And then stop. And then do two times again. I think I just could do this for 30 seconds, it could be a real performance. So I said, "Oh, yeah, I can really do something with body sounds." It's a very fun part as well. This section in *Mauvais genre* really shifts from the solo. I really love it.

JM: I was curious about the end: your choice of *New York, New York*.

AB: That's from the very beginning, the *New York, New York* version with the car horns, screaming from *Good Boy*... *Good Boy* is so dark, I just wanted to make this, not hilarious, but... I've got these tons and tons of underpants around me... and the image, because the light is coming from behind me... It's kind of a diaper, kind of tutu of Alain doing this kind of classical thing. *New York, New York* is for me a tribute, first, to musicals, I think, because I like them. I always remember when I was a teenager I saw *Cabaret*, and it was so important for me, this movie. And then, it's also about the story about trying to be on stage in New York and it's so difficult. And it's exactly the same for dancers. Well, I didn't choose what happened, but it was very special here to do this. That was a question in 2003; should I keep or not "New York, New York?" There's only one version, the German, where we didn't sing the song, but I invited a very famous singer [Georgette Dee]. She's a he-to-she singer, and she didn't want to sing that song, so I said, "Ok, I just need a song that all Germans know. So we sang a kind of kids' song about a story of a young girl who really liked to dress, and each different chorus is like "my green skirt," "my blue skirt," etc. Georgette changed all the words and was talking from her point of view about the lovers, and the lovers could be a sailor or a priest or whatever. So it was kind of a tricky thing, because everyone knew the melody and couldn't recognize the words. It was so funny. She was wearing saris of different colors; it was great.

JM: Have you ever done it [the piece] with transgendered bodies?

AB: Not really, no. I've been... I don't know transgendered bodies [who are] real dancer/performers. And even though this performance is very simple, you need to be trained in a way, be aware of your body, so I didn't ask. I know one in Holland... in The Netherlands... but she wasn't available at that time, so...

JM: Tell me more about the differences of doing the piece, say in Brazil or Austria.

AB: Well, in Brazil it was very different. We were 5 of the original cast and 10 Brazilians. Most of them were very, very young, coming from the "favelas." It's this word for very, very poor. It's not even a house where you're living... in a cupboard or I don't know. And those people saw them. It was the first time they performed. They had come just out of school. We didn't have any money, so I just paid them for the bus ticket, which is nothing really... 45 cents or 25. I can't remember, and I bought some food for the break. I knew that they would never use the money for the bus ticket. They would just walk the kilometers from the suburbs to where we were performing.

I just love Brazil, everything is so different. You live almost naked all the time, so you get used to the bodies, and it's so warm. You can be sure that people are gazing at you, they just do it. In France, especially in Paris, when you are taking the Metro, everybody stares like this [demonstration]. To look at someone, it would be interpreted as an aggression, which is not a mistake here. For example, I didn't ask for classical stance, I just wanted to make a well-known and recognized kind of dance... it could be jazz or samba or whatever. You can't imagine what happened; it was great. One of the girls did this kind of... it wasn't samba, it was... subculture samba... I don't know. It was very specific to that part of Brazil, and it was great... very, very different.

JM: So they were doing samba, and you were doing kind of...

AB: I'm always doing the same every time. The fourth section, I never teach my own movement because it's just not possible... I mean, due to the length of... it just doesn't work. It was more wide, the improvisation part. I don't know if it's wider, but very unexpected things happened.

JM: Did they know it was an AIDS piece? Were any of them HIV-positive?

AB: That was the second time I went there, so I presented *Mauvais genre* in two different situations. It was different things. The situation there with AIDS is worse than here. Nobody goes to the doctor because they don't have money. AIDS is a huge national problem, and at the same time Brazil is only country who's making generic (prescriptions). There's a real program for that, but we can't imagine how poor they are. It's just like Africa. And at the same time you have very rich people who instead of taking their car, they take helicopters. You have millions of helicopters in the San Paulo sky. And everything is like this there. It's a huge country.

JM: I love seeing the older bodies. As I get older, maybe I just appreciate different kinds of bodies more and more.

AB: So do I.

JM: And what's your next project?

AB: Oh, don't ask. I've got a project that. I don't know if I should cancel and pick another project, or find someone else for the cast. This German singer, Georgette—I used one of her songs in my last project. The last piece was pretty new in my work, more narrative... theatrical... so, I wish to continue more in that way. I try to be inspired by *The bitter tears of Petra Van Kant*, of Fassbinder, but I don't want to use the text or anything, just the context. Georgette is a man that's kind of a woman on stage, a very famous Dutch actress with kind of a very strong character, and then Vera Mantero, so a trio of women looking at gender issues and love, kind of lesbian, but really lesbian due to Georgette. And I want to make very camp things, but I can't do it, so maybe the next one... I want 2-3 different things for inspiration, which is the very glam Hollywood cinema, like *Sunset Boulevard* and things like this.... more political like [Fassbinder], and doing a musical tragedy with that. So, a lot of songs and music, which I never did before... maximum there's 2-3 tracks of music in each project. When I arrived in New York, I received an email from Georgette, and she said, "Well, I hate..." because I've changed my mind about six times now because I first had this idea of [Fassbinder]... "I just hate this movie. Well, I'm a gay man; I'm a woman of the stage. I'm an alien for a straight man and woman, for gay people... I'm nowhere." I said, "I know that's why I want to make material for a performer that you don't know." She said, "I mean Vera and Lillian are also very good singers, and I'm sure if you ask one of them to sing *Be my husband*, for example... just nothing the whole idea, and that's what I want to do... just using very well-known standards from jazz... even classical, because Georgette is able to... the last piece I used a Schubert piece instead of the piano, she's playing the electric guitar, and it's just, "Whoa, I never... I love Schubert, but I never heard this." So, a real large scale of possibilities of music with all these three performers. She didn't answer me from my last mail, so I don't know. I'm not waiting. I have to decide because it's starting to be very late for production.

JM: Well, I hope it happens. It sounds fantastic.