Movement Research/Critical Correspondence **10/13/06**

Boris Charmatz
interviewed by Chase Granoff

Chase Granoff: The work that you are bringing, *À Bras-le-corps*,—I understand this is one of the first choreographies that you ever made.

Boris Charmatz: Yes, it is.

Chase: I'm curious what the interest is in bringing this specific work to New York.

Boris: When we did this duet between me and Dimitri Chamblas—we are two choreographers and two dancers—Dimitri Chamblas was seventeen and I was nineteen. So, at that time, the question was not "why do you bring this very, very old piece to New York," but "do you think you are old enough to make an interesting piece?" [laughs.] And we said, "well, you don't have to wait to mature to make work, and you can be at the same time a student, a dancer, a potential choreographer, a reader, a listener—of course you do the work at nineteen that is a work done at nineteen years old, and at sixty you do the work… But, you don't have to wait until you are mature enough.

The first year, we performed *À Bras-le-corps* only three times. By that time, we wanted to work with other choreographers, and wished to go on with our studies (my studies in Art History, for example). We didn't want to found a new company and become "Choreographers" with a big 'C.'

So we thought that we'd do this project, and then, even if we wouldn't tour it a lot, that would not be a problem, we would perform it anyway, and get old in it. So we would just go on and see how it looks like to be thirty, forty, fifty years old and keep on doing this old piece. We thought and still think there must be an alternative system to that of the repertory . Repertory is often limited to ballet companies —then you always have young dancers performing old pieces? In an average contemporary dance company you make a new production each year, sometimes two productions a year. In a way, you forget about your own history. We think it is very important for all dancers to keep a sense of what is our own culture, and our own history: we thus will keep performing *À Bras-le-corps* until… Well… thirteen years ago is already quite a lot… But we can't wait to see what will become of it (and mostly of us) in coming twenty or thirty years !

Actually, after just three months, we could have changed the piece completely… The gestures that are written in this piece were not our gestures any more, in a way. But we decided not to spend time changing the gestures or the writing, but to keep it and make it really a game about how these gestures can still be ours, or how can we play with that—inside or outside of it. How can this piece evolve when we perform it in a church, in a gymnasium, outdoors, in the sunlight, in the night, in this or that theater, and see how we can deal with that.

Chase: I read somewhere that in the piece originally, when you guys were students, had double tours.

Boris: Oh, we are still trying to do the double *tours*!

[Laughs]

Chase: Can you still do them?

Boris: Well, Dimitri is pretty good at keeping his double *tours*. For myself, there is very strange diagonal angle with my body, so people are always afraid I will land on my head! It becomes a very funny part and we really enjoy playing with that!

Chase: I guess I'm curious, as your bodies age, and as the work ages, I'm thinking your relationship to dance, and to choreography, as it continues to change. Is the piece still the same piece that it was thirteen years ago?

Boris: It's a metaphysical question because…I don't know! I could say yes, because the piece is quite "written"—it's not an improvised piece. So, I could say that almost no movement has changed, the lights are more or less the same, the set is the same, the costumes are the same. But then, of course…the dance is not something that is outside of the body that does this dance.

Chase: Right.

Boris: So, in a way, the piece has completely changed, and you can't recognize it, and we can't recognize it and, of course, it's completely different. But I would say also, it's not only different through the time because we are older; it's also different because we started to perform it in the living room of Villa Gillet in Lyon, a public space dedicated to poetry and philosophy. We then performed it in a convent from Le Corbusier, and then we performed it on grass, and then we performed it…
So it was also the goal of this piece, to bring a square of chairs or benches in any kind of space, and take the time to be changed by it. Warming up amongst flowers, lying on grass or on a seventeenth century church's huge stones brings a different feeling to each movement. This piece taught us how different the same gestures, the same movements could be : very funny, really violent, extremely deep, etc.
It's a pretty open game that we are playing: sometimes we start and people are thinking, "oh, it's funny to have those two boys in front of your nose," then after that, we tied it completely and maybe the piece is completely dry after that, because we think that it should not be too funny. Or sometimes we start in a way that is too violent, or violent, and then maybe we go on, or maybe not, so it's very open. We've performed *À Bras-le-corps* in a convent for people concerned with AIDS, for example, so there were mostly parents who had lost their child, people whose friend had aids, doctors… In a way, they wouldn't think that somebody could laugh during this piece, because it was connected with what they had experienced the day before. We once performed it for children, and they laughed so much…
I like this idea that the piece is very precise: it is strict, but at the same time, completely open to how we take it, how we see it.

Chase: I feel like you are talking about a narrative that the audience can apply to the piece. I don't mean like a strict narrative.

Boris: Yeah, not that strict, just…

CG: … like a feeling.

Boris: Yes, a feeling that movement could bring, you know?

Chase: Are you considering how the audiences in New York might respond to it, and what you want to bring out in it?

Boris: I don't know…first of all, I love that piece, Dimitri and I are great friends and we love to perform together. Some people talk to me and say, "How is it possible not to present one of the new works?" For me, anyway there is a gap between what we do here in Europe—what you can see in Europe, what you can do in Europe, the kind of very heavy projects we can have in Europe—and what we are able to present here in the United States. I accept this gap. In a way, there is a gap between this old piece and us, a gap between the United States and France, or a gap between the audience here and the audience there. We assume it, and I'm just waiting to see what people will say.

Chase: Can you articulate what you think that gap is between audiences here and in Paris?

Boris: I think it is a question of education… As an artist who was educated in schools, I have a different approach to art if I am trained in Paris Ecole de l'Opéra or in New York City Ballet school…. But I think one is also very much educated through what one sees : what you can see right now in Paris, and what you can see right now in New York is really different. The economical situation is completely different, the social situation is completely different, the technical conditions of performances are drastically different, the way companies are supported or not, the social system for artists is completely different. If we see some American artists performing in Paris, we cannot know what is going on in New York, you know? We have the chance that, "Ok, a young Ann Liv Young is coming to Paris," or suddenly Richard Maxwell, the theater director, comes to Paris, and we are like, "Oh! This is what is happening in New York." But, it's only two or three people coming, so you could say, I still don't know what is going on. We see so little, and of course, we see what is able to travel.
For example, one of the projects I did in the last years was Bocal—it was a nomadic and temporary school, and we went to ten different places in Europe with fifteen students over more than one year. Of course for me and for a lot of people in Europe this was a truly important project, but of course it would have been completely impossible to take sixteen students and come to New York, explain what we are inventing, and show something, because it is just a project you could not bring to New York. And many things are like that. Bringing one performance of one dance company is not enough to have an understanding of what is going on …
There is this gap—though I am in contact with many, many American artists, for example, I am performing with Meg Stuart—she is American, but she has been living in Europe for a very long time. I also performed with Jennifer Lacey, who has now been in Europe for quite a while, but when I performed with her, she had recently arrived in Europe. And even though I am performing with American artists, like Steve Paxton, I could also say that I have no concrete idea of what is going on in New York.
In Paris right now, you have so many theaters that you could choose maybe eight professional dance performances per week, performing in eight different places, and I would say, international standouts. Even for myself, it's so amazing how many pieces you can see, in Paris, and even if you are a fan of dance and you want to see everything going on in Paris, you can't.

Chase: You mentioned Bocal—your project, Bocal—and it's good, because I wanted to try and talk about that project. I've read a lot about it, and I find it a very interesting project. Can you talk about how that project is important to your research, to your production of choreography?

Boris: Yes. Just so that you know, I'm really not a usual teacher—usually I say I am not "a teacher" because I'm not trained as a teacher. When I started dance professionally, I said to myself that I didn't want to teach. Very often, you have to teach to have money, to make choreographies; I thought, no, I don't teach, because I want to take classes and workshops, to be part of research, but I am not able—or I don't want to—give knowledge that I don't have yet.

So, during the first 10 years of my professional life, I almost didn't teach. But then, I thought, "Ok, I'll do only one—I'll do a one-year teaching project." Instead of having taught one month per year, I did it all in one year. There is such a gap between what is going on onstage in Europe and what is going on in the schools, that I thought we should do something that is a kind of "filling the gap" project, where artists could be involved in a pedagogical project. The main idea of Bocal was that we wouldn't have "real" teachers teaching lessons, because the goal of this so-called "school" was that we invented the school. We invented the daily practice, we invented our discussions, our theories, our performances, our techniques. Maybe the methods we were inventing were not good, but the act of inventing them was such a good exercise!

It was a crazy idea to think : we will not build a program for this school, we will not ask ourselves 'who do we invite to teach what?.' Instead, we discussed within the group to find out ways to build our daily life, our techniques, our practice, and this act of inventing our school. That's what the basic part was, and it's also the idea that you always think of schools for twenty-five years, you build walls, you bring teachers from outside… I was thinking, no! A school could be a thriving school, a school could be a learning school, a school is in your head, so a school should incorporate all of the nightmares you always had about school.

It was a very strange and intensive and rich project, and actually, I'm still thinking about it. These days I'm finishing a text : after Bocal, I spent two months on my computer and wrote 200 pages to free myself from the project. But in a way, I know will never be over with this project… I hope such a text reduced to one hundred pages could be published after that. It was very, very rich, and also very difficult to go on day after day, we really burned ourselves. But we tried so many things: for example, just one line of our work was to find out how we can reconnect reading and training, literature or reading, text and books, and training. It was one of our lines of work, and we invented exercises about reading and warm-ups, reading warm-ups. And we just had so much fun—it was so interesting, so I hope what we tried can be helpful for others, or just give ideas to make other work.

I hope Bocal can go on through the text I am writing and, of course, it goes on because the students are becoming fantastic artists, and that's the main goal.

Chase: Did you see your role within that project as being a student?

Boris: Actually, my role was a problematic part. I'm kind of organizing the project, leading it, and I called the students "Bocalists,". They were students and I was a student too, because I think a student is the best thing to be. But we could always discuss why one suffers if you think you are a student. Is it enough? Don't you prefer to see yourself as "an artist?" Or a "studying artist?"

My role in the school was always discussed: was I too directive? Not directive enough? It was a complex part. In a way, I chose to be alone with them—not to have an assistant, not to have two or three people directing the project—but to have no interference, nobody between the students and myself. We would work day and night all together. And I would assume that if they had a problem with me…I would assume that.

Chase: I understand that you are going to be a guest lecturer at the University of the Arts in Berlin, is that correct?

Boris: Yes, but it is for a new program that doesn't exist yet. I'm not teaching yet, and it's a collective project, so I am not the leader of a new school. But it will be a university-based project, and there will be a B.A. and M.A. They asked me to be part of this new program. So we have to invent the conditions of this new curriculum, and I am very happy because I love Berlin—it's a very interesting city, though there's not much money for dance there, it's difficult. But it's also a very cheap city, so artists can survive there easily. There's a joke about Berlin right now, because the city is bankrupt, you know? The city has a huge economical crisis, and so you could think it's not good for artists, but in fact it's great for artists because prices to rent a flat are very cheap, to get a place to work in is cheap. Then, somebody told me, "But you know? In New York, the best time was when the city was completely bankrupt—it was in the '70s!"

Chase: I'm interested in how—I know you don't know what your role will be at this university yet—

Boris: Well, I know it's completely different from Bocal. Since it's a university project, it has to go on, and it can't be crazy like Bocal. Bocal could burst, it could explode each day. This program has to go on, and it's very good that I am not alone there. It's a program that theaters, independent organizations, the city of Berlin, the federal state of Germany, and two universities joined together to make possible. It comes from the concept around the idea that Berlin needs a new educational program. Then, the B.A., for example, is organized by Gisella Müller, who I would say is a real pedagogue, and there is Franz Anton Kramer, who is real historian and critic—a writer—and me. Also, Eva Maria Hoerster, she coordinates the program on the administrative side, but she is also very much involved in the art world.
And the four of us, with our differences, are trained to be in this program, and we will all teach, and of course we will invite many people there.

Chase: That's great.

Boris: So my role is double: to organize the program and also to teach, because I just want to try a little bit more after Bocal—a second chance.

Chase: Do you think you will still be a student within that?

Boris: Oh, no, no, no. In my contract, it's clearly written: "guest teacher!" But, right now I am trying to be enrolled as a student in Paris VIII University, to pass a master degree on behalf of the research process of Bocal, and the text I'm writing. So, I keep being a student, and I think it's fantastic if teachers can remain students in their heads; students should also assume that they can be teachers. In Bocal, we would think that even if you have no experience, the act of teaching can be very instructive. To try to teach yourself and others is a way to assume your power, your abilities—to expand your abilities. Also, your physical abilities, because as soon as you try to explain a movement to somebody else—as soon as you have strength to transmit it—you may move more easily, have a better understanding of what you are doing, and rearticulate the ideas you had before starting the transmission…

I always hope that in our head there is room to keep being a student, and always being a potential teacher, and always being a potential artist, and always being able to collaborate. It's interesting to observe how differently you enact a given movement if you are in such different postures as the student's one, the teacher's one, the viewer's one and so on… Because the posture is a key parameter to define your performance qualities, and modify them.

Chase: The choreographic work that you make—and these projects like Bocal—do you see a difference between them? Do you know what I mean?

Boris: Mmmm…Of course because, for example, in Bocal I worked only with people I would not work with in a usual—I would say "choreographic"—piece. There were people that didn't know my work and there was no problem if somebody didn't like my work, but wanted to do Bocal because we joined in these specific ideas about school. So, it was a much more open project than if I was doing a piece with three people: who would I choose? And how? It was a completely different way to choose people to work with.

But then Bocal leads to theater-space projects, also; there are correspondences. I like to divide also, not to say that everything is the same. I like to be a dancer for different choreographers, and that's different than when I do a piece. I do a piece only every three years, maybe, and it's different than projects like Bocal, or the project of writing a book about Bocal. I like to have a various range of activities because it's how I feel free, and happy.

Chase: Do you still dance in other choreographers' work?

Boris: Yes, quite a lot. First, I improvise, and when I am improvising, I always think as if I was a dancer for somebody else. But there is no "somebody else," there is no such thing as a "choreographer." In a way, when you improvise you dedicate yourself to what is going on, what is happening, though you are not here as an author, or as a choreographer. So I have the kind of pleasure that I had when I used to perform frequently for a choreographer.

Also, right now, in Berlin, I am performing with Meg Stuart, as a dancer. It's not a collaborative work, though of course, she's not designing all of my gestures, but still she is the author and I am one of the performers.

Chase: Right.

Boris: I always try and I love to perform for others. I love this. It's connected to *À Bras-le-corps* when we started: usually you think that you are a student, then you become a dancer, then you become a choreographer, and in France, you always end as an inspector in the ministry of culture. [Laughs] You know? And I think it's good that when we started we said, "No, we can be…we are nineteen, but we can be a choreographer, we can be a dancer for others at the same time."

Chase: Do you think that's rare in Paris? That you can function on such a high level as a choreographer, but still be involved in other choreographers' work?

Boris: I would say that when we started *À Bras-le-corps,* it was not so common, but maybe now the scene is really open and I would say that some people are doing that right now.

Chase: You were talking about *À Bras-le-corps* where the audience is arranged in a square, and about how the piece resonates differently in different spaces. I'm wondering how the arrangement of the audience is part of the piece? And you can talk about it not just with that piece, but also with other work that you've made.

Boris: Well, for example, the last piece is a trio with Raimund Hoghe, who is a fantastic artist—I think you don't know him in New York, he used to be a dramaturg for Pina Bausch—and the major things in it is that we use machines to make choreography. The machines design a choreography for inert bodies. So we don't use our muscles or expend energy, we just wait as the machines pick you up, or make you roll, or organize the meeting between two people.

Of course, if I come back to *À Bras-le-corps,* I think, "Wow, we use so much muscle, so much energy, and of course there is no machine, and it is so simple compared to what we just did, we are so far away [from it now]." At the same time, I think that there is something that goes on. At the time of *À Bras-le-corps* we had been students in dance for about ten years before (because I started when I was 7 or so, and Dimitri also started very young), so we were really, I would say, traditional, young dancers. And we thought that we didn't want to be in a studio again, or to perform in a theater, and that's why we chose a living room. And we also chose this very intimate space of one square, and the dimensions are that from the original space left in the middle of a beautiful living room.

Usually, when you think about the set—when you make an intimate set, you think about an intimate dance. You know? You have a set where the people are close to you, and this enables you to do small gestures, intimate gestures. We thought: most of the space that almost has no limits, or plays with limits. It's really, in a way, a tension between the intimate space designed by this row of benches, and the actual dance that we are doing. When we do this double *tour en l'air*, usually one sees this kind of gesture at a distance. The dancers are onstage and you don't hear the noise when you land on the ground. But in *À Bras-le-corps,* whatever gesture you do, you hear the noise, you see the fragilities, you smell the bodies, you see the sweat, you see the hesitations—all of these things that are wrong in a "clean dance," and that you don't usually see onstage.

We thought this is what is good in this set—the judgment, the distance—because when you see from far away, you could say, "Oh, the double tour is well done, or not well done," but when you see it in front of you, the judgment falls down. You cannot judge; you cannot say it's stupid. There's no point in saying, "it was well done," or, "it was not well done." It's what we like about this very strict frame in the square of dance: the judgment would just fall, in a way. At least that's what we are trying to do.

Then, one last thing. At the time, now I forgot, but at the time we were thinking about what Merce Cunningham said: if you take a movement from one point of view, one angle, you see it, and if you just turn… I mean, if the dancers are making a little turn of forty-five degrees, then if they do the same gesture, what you see is completely different. You know? It's something he wrote in The Dancer and the Dance.

We thought that in *A Bras-le-corps* of course people are not looking at the same thing because they are all around us. But we thought that the most important thing is not only the picture you have of the movement—and of course the picture they have is different if they are sitting on this or that side of the square—but we thought that the most important thing was how invest ourselves into the movement, or not. The way we use our bodies to grab the other, to find energy, to find abilities, to turn and to grasp the other. So, more or less, you can sit on one side or the other—it will not change your perception of what we are doing, because it's not so much about the picture, but about the investment; how we invest ourselves, or not, in what we are doing.

Chase: Real quick: do you think that as a student coming from the Paris Opera School—do you think the creation of this piece, to really show the effort behind the movement, do you think that it was a response to…

Boris: It was a piece to free ourselves from the student years. It was done in two weeks; everything we proposed, we kept. It was not a piece to choose the pure, beautiful, new, new movement—it was the piece to get rid of all of the movement's faults, also. In a way, I would say *A Bras-le-corps* was a good piece to get rid of… I would say that the choreography for inert bodies—the use of machines to design choreography for inert bodies—is maybe what I wanted to do. But *A Bras-le-corps* also has the movement that we don't want to do anymore, but we do…we get rid of it inside *A Bras-le-corps*; it's something like that.

You have old stuff and new stuff, you have really cool stuff, and I hope also beautiful stuff, but I don't know [laughs]. Anyhow… we don't care, in a way, it's what needs to be done in order to get rid of it, yes, get it out of your body and mind.