

**Jérôme Bel**

in conversation with Becky Hilton

Becky Hilton: So Jerome, your trip was good?

Jérôme Bel: Bangkok was all right.

BH: Were you doing *Pichet* in Bangkok?

JB: Yeah we did a new version of *Pichet*.

BH: How was it new?

JB: With eight Thai dancers performing onstage with costumes and music.

BH: You're joking!

JB: Yeah, no it was very nice.

BH: Did it work?

JB: It was his idea to change the piece. It's called *About Khon*. The second part is not there anymore---when he questions me. I question him and then the performance starts. The real performance...

BH: Of his work or of traditional?

JB: Yeah, of his work---of traditional. He doesn't do it anymore. He wants to pass it on, but to make it visible he wants to direct it in a way the people could understand it now.

BH: People in Bangkok? Don't they already understand it?

JB: They don't understand it anymore. They're out of their own art form. They lost the code, you know, like we lost the code of the ballet. When I go to the ballet I know what it is about but I can't read all of the signs that they are doing.

BH: Really?

JB: Because they're doing things with the gestures.

BH: But it's just like terrible mime. I always think all of that stuff is just there as padding so you can watch them do the tricks. Don't you think?

JB: I don't understand your point.

BH: Well, I don't connect ballet to our culture in the same way that I would think about what Thai classical dance means to Thai culture or what Indonesian dance means to Indonesian culture. You think ballet is the equivalent in western culture?

JB: Hhhhhmmm. . . ahhh. . . no it's very difficult to compare with other culture. This is the most difficult thing to understand-how an art form, or a performative art form, is related to the people.

BH: Right.

JB: You're inside. This is something which is just around you. You don't even learn it, it's around. You cannot compare this experience to you spending, for example, two years in a country. For example Bharathanatyam when I was in India. In a way it was a little bit like ballet because the little girls of the bourgeoisie, they had to go to class to Bharathanatyam.

BH: Yeah, to learn it...

JB: I don't know now, do they prefer to do kung fu or painting? I don't know, but I realized there was a kind of similarity of the practice for the dancer and, of course, only a few became professional dancers---most of them stop at the age of 12 or 'it's boring', and they're right, or they're not talented. I mean this has to be studied.

BH: Yes, cultural study.

JB: How kinesthetic physical practice is spread and how it influences your knowledge. Ballet, in Europe, I can recognize it in a second. I don't know if they have this in Australia but in France usually they have the ballet on TV around Christmas.

BH: *The Nutcracker*.

JB: Christmas time you have *Swan Lake* on TV, you have *Cinderella*.

BH: Yeah, it's not on TV here in Australia. In America it is I think. Australia, no, there's cricket at that time of year. It's all sports. It's the season for sporting activities.

JB: I love this story: what is related to hobby, relaxation? And there is many parameters. But also during Christmas and New Year's Eve you have the *Folies Bergere* and *Lido* on TV.

BH: Yeah, we don't have that.

JB: All things that are sexy and woo, party! It's interesting that all these bodies are coming up at that time. It's supposed to be holidays. So, ok, the body is appearing again.

BH: Yeah, what is that?

JB: It's entertainment, and also the children---ballet can be for children. We don't have contemporary dance. We don't have Pina Bausch on TV or Cunningham.

BH: Cunningham. A very Cunningham Christmas.

JB: What is so interesting is 15 days before people are not going to the theater anymore. They go to their family, they go to the countryside to make big dinner.

BH: Eat and drink and holiday.

JB: I think it's about not thinking. I think it's about filling your body with food. And so that's why I think ballet and the *Lido* are on TV too, because the body's very slack.

BH: Jerome, when you were here I remember we were talking about the audiences--I'm completely changing the subject now--for *The Show Must Go On*. You know, how the audience responses were different in different countries---your socio-cultural study of the world. And you said your favorite audience was the New York audience and I didn't really get to ask you why. So now I am.

JB: Oh, well, I don't know. It's a really odd feeling because I'm behind so I cannot see the faces of the audience, but I see their back and I felt that something---I mean what I was expecting from an audience. What my goal was to produce in the audience was achieved in the performance in New York. Huh, for which reasons? First, the music I'm using is mainly American. So this is very important for the understanding of the cultural-political context of the songs. So it's more precise in New York than in Madrid or in Hong Kong.

BH: What about other cities in America?

JB: It was kind of the same response. If I make a proposition to the audience, the answer of the audience is globally always the same within the country. Of course, inside there are little differences and the more I perform in the country the more I see differences. But when I did NY, Columbus, Minneapolis, it was kind of the same. Because this is a culture and the definition of culture is what people share. That's culture. It's the thing which links us.

BH: Hmm.

JB: Then there are different venues, different education of the audience, different experiences of the audience. And this for example I can analyze France. I know France better than any other country. So here I see more and more differences the more we tour in France. And also through time. It was not the same when I did it six years ago than when we do it now because my recognition is bigger so people trust me more--they respect me more.

BH: But originally it was a big scandal.

JB: Paris was a big scandal. Paris was a huge, uh, trauma for the company.

BH: Did the performers get really upset?

JB: They were shocked. I mean, when you come on stage for the premiere and you have people yelling at you and you cannot hear the lyrics anymore. All the audience is shouting...

BH: Oh my god! And did that happen every night of the run?

JB: Well, the night after I cut the difficult scenes. The original version, which we don't do anymore, was 1 hour 30 minutes and three days later it was only 1 hour. So I cut 30 minutes to try to survive.

BH: So you pulled out all the challenging moments.

JB: Yeah, exactly.

BH: That must have been awful.

JB: When people are allowed to--where I give them time and space they took it for an aggressive purpose. Not for what is my wish that they just become conscious of their position, of their action of audience.

BH: And behavior as an audience.

JB: What are they representing, how many are they? What does it mean to be in rows sitting all together from 8:30 to 10?

BH: I've had so many discussions about your show, here.

JB: Yeah? What do they think about it?

BH: Well, it's kind of interesting for me 'cause it seems particularly Australian. When I was in that audience, it felt like people really decided that they got it and were grasping it, so they really wanted to show you and the performers that they were really getting it. It's this kind of ego. So when you tell them well, fine, whatever response you have is fine but really the intention is that you become aware of the space and the fact that you are in an audience they get really upset because they felt like they were behaving the way you wanted them to. Someone was crying cause she'd had such an intensely beautiful communal experience that she couldn't believe that's not what you would want.

JB: After six, seven years now, I want maybe... I mean, when she said that she had this feeling of community, this is exactly what I want to produce. So I wouldn't blame her at all.

BH: No no. no no.

JB: No really. For example let's say New York/Melbourne. When in New York, or later in Paris also it happens when we bring the show back. London or Brussels or a few cities like this.

BH: The large, sophisticated cities of the world.

JB: Yes, the cities where they see a lot of work and I can produce this work because I've seen other work. I've seen Pina Bausch. I've seen Bob Wilson. And if you have seen them--because I belong to the audience I have the same education what it's possible to do on stage today. All these people are trying to pull the limits of what theater can be. There is this knowledge, there is a kind of behavior of each culture. It's my fourth time in Australia and I always spend no more than one week, so I cannot say I know Australia, but I know there is something in the people which is very warm.

BH: Warm?

JB: They say Hello! How are you? Da da da, smiling. It is not the case for example in Paris. It is bonjour.

BH: Or New York?

JB: There is a kind of body behavior. That's not a good word. Let's say it's a behavior, which is warmer. So that's why to represent community in Melbourne people are going to smile and dance all together in the theater. I've never seen so many people dancing.

BH: Yeah, but I've never seen them do that before.

JB: The goal is to be linked with people without demonstrating. Getting linked in the silence. In the nothingness. In New York I got this. But it was a very small theater.

BH: Yeah, that must make a big difference.

JB: That community is smaller so it's easier to be together in doing nothing and not even breathing. In the scene "the sound of silence" there was people trying to not breathe, trying not to move in their chair and this was...

BH: It was beautiful.

JB: Not like in Melbourne, where the demonstration of being together was singing together and dancing together, which was also very beautiful, I have to say.

BH: Really? I found it annoying.

JB: Because they were doing it 'cause it was perfectly what happened. And they were performing the community.

BH: They were, but they were *performing* it. It wasn't *my* community. They were getting up and expressing themselves and destroying my moment. By doing that they were shattering my community.

JB: I always think it's more real that people are not all together.

BH: Do you know Leigh Bowery, performance artist? Lucian Freud painted him and he worked with Michael Clark a lot. He's from Australia.

JB: Yeah, yeah I know of him.

BH: Anyway, I worked with him a little bit when I danced with Michael. He was very funny, Leigh. He was kind of mean but funny. You know, really bitchy. I was very young. He said to me "you're really talented but you suffer from that terrible, terrible Australian blight. That thing that never makes Australians decent artists." And I was like 'oh, really Leigh, what is that?' and he said "Optimism." He thought he could see my optimism in my performing and that is why I'd never really be a good performer. I mean there are all those cultural stereotypes.

JB: I think the show is mirroring this.

BH: Which is amazing! I thought it generated a really good level of discussion not only about the work but about how you respond to work. How audiences respond. I thought it was excellent 'cause I didn't think it was fine and I'm sure there were people in the audience that did.

JB: So that's a misunderstanding about *The Show Must Go On*. Also that's why it's kind of a success because we keep on touring it since all these years. When you have a good performance there is always a misunderstanding. When it works there is always a misunderstanding. There is a level when you can see it like funny word games. *Jeux de mots*, ah ha ha ha ha. And then there are also people who can see what is articulated in the performance.

BH: It completely reveals that moment where you go from looking to conceiving. But it's like this simple door into a very complicated world. It's a great piece. But I think we should talk about *Pichet* because that's what you're going to do in New York and I was thinking, having seen almost all of your work in chronological order, it's like the work itself is explaining the work more and more and with *Pichet* it's reached this. Now I'm like what in the hell are you gonna do next? You understand the perspective I'm looking at it from?

JB: Yes.

BH: And now you've made this piece that is you sitting there talking about your work.

JB: This was not expected. It was in Thailand, I was totally jetlagged and I was not understanding what I was doing here and I wanted to go on an island on holidays.

BH: Why did you say you would go?

JB: Oh, it was an invitation from a curator, it was not my desire. Now I'm working with curators because otherwise I would not do anything. I have time enough to do what I want so it's always people calling me like 'okay, I want you for 2010 and I want you for 2009, and it's a long time I didn't see your work so do something'. And I say 'okay', I'm still thinking about what to do but the problem is I love to think about what to do, but I don't like to make them.

BH: You don't like to do it.

JB: Yeah, you have to do the thing and meet the dancers and find a rehearsal and all this terrible, boring...

BH: But this is a structure. Did you make *Pichet* before or after the Paris Opera piece [Véronique Doisneau]?

JB: Just after. *Pichet* was supposed to be exactly the same concept as the Paris Opera. Véronique Doisneau in Paris Opera is explaining to the audience what is the work as a dancer in this company for 30 minutes. She speaks of course about ballet, and the idea was this guy would also do the same thing about the Thai traditional dance called Khon. The fact that I couldn't reach him in Bangkok because I missed many rehearsals because I didn't hear the clock because I was jetlagged and then I couldn't find the rehearsals because the taxi didn't speak English... I couldn't find it and there were traffic jams blahblahblah. I didn't have time to make the solo for him so I was forced to perform the meeting onstage. Normally in the beginning we talk. We didn't have this time so this performance is about presentation. This was by chance in a way. I would never have done this in Europe for example.

BH: And did you jump to that--you just kind of said 'okay, we'll do half about you and then you just ask me stuff'?

JB: Yeah, because he didn't know anything about me so I tried to be polite and say 'Hello I'm Jerome and I do this and it's a little bit strange but I try to explain to you'. It's like meeting. It's like when you're being introduced to somebody. Of course it's a bit more specific. But this is exactly why for me it was not a piece. It was not theatrical material.

BH: But then everyone liked it?

JB: Then another curator said come to Europe. I said no. (Becky laughs) I said no, of course not. How dare you invite me to present this talk? I mean the performance was longer than the rehearsals... But it's true that in the piece I was not conscious at all what it was producing.

BH: The first time you did it?

JB: It was my coming back onstage. Normally I'm onstage in the beginning and then I get out and I watch what I've produced.

BH: And what's it like performing for you again? Did that become interesting to you again?

JB: Well, it's becoming interesting because there is concealedness of performance in it as of how to communicate most precisely the things we think. And I realize that it was highly communicated in this piece. The most communicative one I ever made. That's my goal since 12 years---to communicate a few things that I believe are interesting, might be interesting for contemporary thinking people. After 12 years there is kind of expertise and I hope that all the things I've been discovering or thinking during these 12 years can be useful to other members of my society.

BH: Community, yeah.

JB: That these things can represent tools for them in their own fields. It comes from the desire of the audience, not from me at all. I didn't push anything. I didn't want to perform it, and slowly it grows. And it's a piece, a classical one, with a fourth wall. Normally my works are without fourth walls. It's like the audience is all about knowing that you're here. We don't hide that we're not in another space than in this theater right now, together with you.

BH: You talk about that inside the piece, don't you, the fourth wall?

JB: Yeah, exactly.

BH: When you're describing *The Show Must Go On*, you talk about how there isn't one even though there is one.

JB: It's very interesting because we are talking about the audience pretending they're not there. This is my favorite thing. There is a twist here. It's like saying they're not here because we're not in the theater, but they are. I love this little...

BH: But the key is we know that you're pretending that we're not here. So there's something real in the mechanism.

JB: Yeah, but that's what I'm talking about. I love this.

BH: How does Pichet feel cause when he performs he really looks out at the audience doesn't he?

JB: He really looks out?

BH: I'm just wondering how is that experience for him. Does he enjoy it as much as you do? To not engage with the audience?

JB: Yeah, I think so, because he accepts to go on tour. We invite him every time we have invitations and a few were in India. He didn't want to go. But what is very interesting with Pichet is all the difficulties he has to cross the borders. You know I'm French, I go straight through. There's no problem. I don't need a visa and I always have to wait like 20 minutes for him to come--First World and Third World. Everybody is supposing that he comes to these countries to stay and not come back. This is a quick supposing. Of course we usually are invited in the First World countries. But I've been talking with him and I think he's very proud to be able to talk about his practice.

BH: I bet.

JB: Because his artistic project is this one and this performance is a very good tool for him to present his culture and what he wants to do with it because he wants to be an agent of his culture which is dying.

BH: Right, agent for the survival of Khon.

JB: He has to make an action in this culture. That's what he tries to do to keep it alive; not so much alive, but understandable. Culture, an art form is only interesting if it's understandable.

BH: Yeah, if it's relatable.

JB: It makes you 'think this is from the past and we have to respect it without understanding it anymore' and that's a real problem. For me ballet is like this. Ballet is not useful at all anymore for the society... I mean the prince and the princess...

BH: It's like a museum.

JB: Well, museum is different because museum you can recontextualize and the work is exactly the same as it has been painted 500 years ago. So this is the same object.

BH: But you can't do that with ballet?

JB: The opera seems very old too, like 200 years ago, but every time you take the opera you bring a new vision. A director is trying to make from the old form something new with different interpretations, different direction. Ballet is not. Ballet is staying the same.

BH: That's not true though. I think they do the same thing with ballet. Like they do a modern interpretation of Swan Lake or they do a... It's horrible.

JB: The only thing I knew when I was on the plane to Bangkok was that it wouldn't be about fusion. It wouldn't be about Thai and contemporary dance together. This comes from my childhood; I've been raised in Africa and Middle East until 18 years old.

BH: I didn't know that.

JB: I was raised with kids of different cultures. African or Middle Eastern, and we were close until a certain point. We had the same education, we were in school all together, dadada. But then if you go digging in the relationships there were always limits. I mean, all these years believing that I was sharing the life of these people that I was not. I was infinitively French and they were infinitively Iranian or Moroccan, you know. There was some culture thing that didn't change. This was sad but I know this is a reality. So I when I arrived in Bangkok, I think I made this statement, saying 'okay, it will be about differences because I know that's at the end of it'.

BH: I'm dying to know what it was like without your half in Bangkok. It sounds like it would be completely strange.

JB: No, no, it was very clear. You're talking about the new version right? This is Pichet's project. He wants me to go back to Hong Kong soon. But we are also invited in Jakarta and so maybe we can connect the two venues. What is also interesting with Pichet is now [that] it will be three years, we are [being] invited in the Third World.

BH: That's a different link for you.

JB: Yeah. It's bringing me some new experiences. We were invited in Africa and we were invited in Teheran in Iran. With my own work I would never be invited there.

BH: It's interesting 'cause some of these places you grew up in. You're not completely unfamiliar with them.

JB: Yeah, true! It's very strange. Yeah, you're right! But these are places where I come from-- GASP! I didn't think about it

BH: Finally we're getting somewhere.

JB: Yeah when you get somewhere you should stop. (laughter) That's my technique.

BH: Oh we must stop and let that echo, let that echo...

JB: You have some more questions?

BH: I have this whole list of things but it's too late. Do you want to hear my list? It's good. It's like a poem. Are you ready?

JB: Okay, yeah.

BH: *Enfant Terrible*. I'm like, 'he's way too old to be an *enfant terrible*,' but they still call you that.



JB: I think it's okay. I was complaining, resenting, like 'shit, I'm 43'. And I was saying 'why do they call me *enfant terrible* I'm 43!' We can think that Mr. John Cage was always avant-garde...

BH: Avant-garde or provocateur, I think is good.

JB: It's not related to your age. It's related to the age of the work, the ambition of the work. In a way it could be the wise old man, like Merce. I mean he's an *enfant terrible*. He's free and--the way he walks and...

BH: He's like a big child.

JB: I would prefer to become like him than other people who are my age and who are already doing these lessons about life and being sure of themselves and of what art is.

BH: What else is here? Accessibility. You know, it seems to me your work is. . . well, it's funny.

JB: Well this is maybe the biggest *mystere* in my work because I don't try to be funny.

BH: You are very funny.

JB: Yeah I know, and I enjoy to see the work. I love to see the whole audience like one person laughing together.

BH: In *Pichet and Myself* it's very clear that you enjoy that.

JB: Yeah. I think theater has to--when I talk about theater of course it's the place, it's not the practice, but *Pichet* is kind of theater-- there is in theater a level of perception which is 'what is the actor doing for me?'

BH: Right.

JB: There is the meaning of the text of the situation, but also there is another level of pleasure for the audience in how the guy is pretending things. How is he able to give me something? This is quite exciting. And you use this word before which I like very much.

BH: Which word?

JB: Communicative. How to make it more purposeful? How can we bring powerful experiences within this structure, which is the theater? People sitting in rows in that darkness.

BH: In front of people pretending.

JB: In front of people standing in the light.

BH: But I think that's why I always liked dance more than theater. 'Cause it's hard to pretend when you're dancing. It's just doing an action, finally. So there aren't these layers of fake emotion.

JB: I don't how it is in Australia but in France there is a very big influence of dance on theater now. All the directors are coming to see our show and then you see the work and there is a lot of--exactly what you're saying, this presence.

BH: You don't need all these other layers. I think that's the powerful thing about dance and the thing that you hardly ever see in fact.

JB: This is clear. There is something special, specific with dance. With, let's say with contemporary dance because if you resort to ballet it's the same--they all pretend.

BH: Yes, yes and it's so strange it's like 'Just speak! Please just say it! Stop doing this terrible mime!' Alright more--I'm just going down my list: Failure.

JB: Failure?

BH: Yeah, like, the piece might exist and be really successful on certain terms but in other terms like from where you generate it from can it be, you know, not successful?

JB: Yeah.

BH: Like with *The Show Must Go On 2*, that was a terrible failure, wasn't it?

JB: Terrible? Not so terrible now any more. When I started to understand why I failed it's ok. I mean in the beginning yes because I didn't make a good performance I felt like something was not working. So it was my first failure, I mean personally, because a lot of people think all my work are failures. But then I started to analyze with time and I know now why it's a failure.

BH: It failed right.

JB: The reasons are clear, so now it's not anymore a failure. It's a no way direction. Like a bad track. The failure was to perform it in front of people knowing that's it's not exactly what I wanted to bring on stage. And to lie to myself. Yeah, this was a big failure. 'Cause I did only falsities and then even though there was a tour for two years I cancelled the tour. I said to my producer 'okay this is finished. I don't want to perform it anymore'. Of course everybody didn't understand. Even all the people who invited the piece in their own festivals and theaters. And I had to write many letters explaining because for them it was okay. But I said 'no, for me it's not and if it's not okay for me how can we?' I don't think my work is getting better. I don't believe in evolution at all.

BH: You don't believe in evolution?

JB: I have different problems and I try to solve them, but they are different ones and the pieces are different but they're not; it's not the latest which is the best. Not at all. Pieces are interesting for their problematization, not for the fact that there is a new one.

BH: Yeah yeah yeah. But there's something about getting to perform them so much probably. They stay alive in this way.

JB: They're alive because I'm killing my life trying to work them every time and to speak with the performers after and saying do you remember in 1994 we did this and people said this...

BH: But do you like that aspect?

JB: No, I don't like this anymore.

BH: You're sick of it?

JB: I feel more like the curator of Le Louvre than a contemporary artist. I keep works alive but I'm exhausted with this. I have more and more repertory and it leaves less and less time for new things.

BH: Yeah.

JB: I just gave *The Show Must Go On* to the Lyon Opera Ballet and it was so refreshing. It was like 'Oh, thank god!' They were so excited and willing to do these things. So the whole company will go take part, so now we do this and the performers are going to travel and teach the piece around the world to companies who want to have it. I think it's a good way to share, especially this piece. This piece is about the middle. It's about no quality, nothing exceptional. So even the exceptional people, they can also do it.

BH: I think that would be hard for ballet dancers to do.

JB: Hmm, the Lyon Opera Ballet are ballet dancers but they are dancing Forsythe, they're dancing Trisha, they're dancing Cunningham so they are very ok with different aesthetics. *The Show Must Go On* is about differences, how people are different, the cast is very different and it was also, you can imagine that the ballet company are more formulated, formatted. So it's the same body, more and more. I went to a fashion show recently in Paris and there was all famous top models one after the other and I was not of course watching their dresses because I don't know anything about it, but I was watching their faces and I realized that I could absolutely do *The Show Must Go On* with only models--because they wore the same clothes but the faces are different. I could see individuality everywhere. So this was ok, whatever company does this it will be--there is nothing more different than another human being.

BH: Right, that's the beauty of the piece.

JB: You know there is this personality, there is the strange, this incredible, uh, possibility of difference. Different face--it's so reduced, uh? Two eyes, two ears...

BH: Yeah, two legs...

JB: it's incredible to experience that no body is the same.