Dance, dance, or we are lost

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People have always danced, as far as we can tell. Cave paintings from prehistoric times already show people dancing, never individually, but always together, in a circle or in a row. When dancing to rhythm and music, people can enter a spiritual, even transcendent state, in which they lose their individuality and become part of a greater whole. Across the world and in all cultures, dance is a core component of rituals.

The dancing body also has a unique strength. A person who dances is free, and temporarily escapes the structures of control over the body, such as those of the state, the family, or the police. Dance is a way to be yourself, or to play around with identity, feeling connected to others and managing to have fun, even in dark times. Perhaps that is why new, influential dance forms often originate from oppressed communities. For example, vogue was developed by trans and queer people of colour in New York; and pantsula sprung from Black townships in South Africa in the 1950s, as a reaction to violent land seizures. Dancing communities are often feared by those in power. One of the first measures taken by Italy's current president Giorgia Meloni was to ban raves, spontaneous parties at which large groups of people dance to electronic music.

Chapters of Celebration, a show for six performers, six choreographers and seven musicians, is an ode to the power of dance, and a celebration of the dancing community down the centuries. The performance seeks to emphasise that now more than ever, at a time in which there is so much cause for concern, it is important to keep on dancing, because dance can be a powerful instrument for resistance and social transformation. In a certain sense, the performance is already the result of a transformation, because the performers all have a different background.

Every 'chapter' is a proposal by a different choreographer to conciliate this incredible diversity and transform it into a collective. The six choreographers involved, Toni Jodar, Lasseindra Ninja, Cherish Menzo, Jeremy Nedd, Michele Rizzo and Iker Karrera, each work from their own practice too, shaped by dance cultures such as vogue, pantsula, Spanish traditional dance or techno. These styles sometimes appear as blueprints in their choreographies.

Bailar o danzar?

Director Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe set to work with this diverse material, and in collaboration with the dancers, has created a compelling, energetic piece, a fascinating succession of cultures, eras and styles. For Meirhaeghe, the theatre is the perfect place for past, present and future to coalesce. He also sees Chapters of Celebration as a 'museum of festivities' in which age-old dance steps can overflow into pumping club dance or court ballet. Here, history is not an unrelenting timeline, but an open space, an arena of which we are all a part, and which we keep alive through the body and music. Visual art also plays a role in this arena: the scenography is by Pieter Chanterie, a painter who normally paints miniatures, but who for Chapters works on bigger scale.

The chapters are punctuated by intense solos from the performers, in which they reveal something of their own (dance) history and individuality. These scenes create an intriguing friction with the collectivity that forms the starting point of the performance. It is only in the solo that the performer can truly express themselves freely, whilst for the ensembles they are obliged to adapt themselves to the whole and to the choreographer's dream. Is the individual therefore more important than the collective?



In Spanish there are two words for the verb 'to dance': 'bailar', which means dancing freely like you would dance in your living room, and 'danzar', which tends to be used for dancing in an artistic context, where the movements are devised in advance and are the result of training. During the rehearsals, the dancers experienced a contradiction between bailar and danzar, because with Chapters of Celebration they want to express something about 'bailar', but in order to be able to do that they must 'danzar'. Can the two be reconciled? In their monologue, performer Alphonse Eklou Uwantege suggests that it is ultimately about allowing the body to speak. In that light, losing count is also dance; therein lies the beauty of this performance.

Nonsense

The music is the beating heart of Chapters of Celebration. At the invitation of Europalia Festival and DE SINGEL, Wouter Deltour drew inspiration from one of the oldest preserved and most popular musical motifs in Western music, La Folía, dance music from the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal). Over the centuries, no fewer than 150 composers have made their own version of La Folía, including Bach, Vivaldi and
Rachmaninov; La Folía thus pulses through almost the entire history of classical music. Deltour draws freely from that corpus: he arranged several of the compositions for the musicians of B'Rock Orchestra into a fluid whole, and adds his own material to this - a jazzy fragment here, a beat there - without losing sight of the harmony of the original Folies d'Espagne. In the orchestra, the idea of history as an arena is also expressed. For example, the string players perform using instruments from historical performance practice, but an electronic bass guitarist is also part of the mix.

We do not know how the first La Folía sounded in the fifteenth century; no notations have been preserved. In any case, it was a wild affair. La Folía was the loud, energetic music of folk celebrations.

Dressed as women, young men climbed onto the shoulders of street porters, and accompanied by tambourines they danced in circles until the extasy drove them to madness. Hence the name of the dance, which means 'madness' or 'empty headedness'. In the century after that, from a rousing folk dance, la Folía was transformed into a more restrained, somewhat melancholic Baroque dance in 3/4 time in which the guitar was indispensable.
in this timeless musical material, Deltour and Meirhaeghe - who previously met as creative partners in the performance Madrigals - recognise the core of what they wish to express: rousing music that makes people melt into a bigger whole, an archaeological trace of the (pre-modern) appreciation for wildness, music, transformation and togetherness. Thus ritual echoes of exuberance from all eras resound in Chapters of Celebration, perhaps enticing us to join in, and to never forget to keep dancing.



