

Neige

provisional title

MICHELE ANNE DE MEY

New work 2009



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Music

the 7th Symphony

Ludwig Van Beethoven

NEIGE

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New work 2009 – Michèle Anne De Mey

Piece for 6 performers and 1 scenographer

Cast in preparation

Concept and choreography Michèle Anne De Mey



This dossier brings together in reverse chronological order notes of various kinds taken in parallel with the development of *Neige*, the next choreographic work by Michèle Anne De Mey, which will be performed in public for the first time in November 2009 on the occasion of the Charleroi/Danses Biennale. It describes how the project came into being and retraces the course it took en route from the initial idea (a premonition of the work) to its final realisation. Moving backwards, thus, we retrace the course of its creation, occasionally taking detours or turning off to one side or the other: looking at the choices made, the paths abandoned, the discoveries made. Moving upstream, in other words, from what has just been completed to the original wellsprings. This will allow us to assess the road travelled.

These initial notes were written down between June and December 2008, a period during which Michèle Anne De Mey, in a dialogue with Grégory Grosjean, Sylvie Olive, and Nicolas Olivier, sketched out the premises of the work; it was also during this period that the first technical try-outs took place onstage at Charleroi/Danses's venue Les Ecuries.

This dossier, envisaged above all as a tool, will be added to as many times as necessary as the project is further researched and transformed. It sets out, for a particular time frame, to give as accurate an idea as possible of what will finish up as *Neige*. It could, accordingly, be seen as a logbook or as an inside account of a work's gestation. For *Neige* took shape through dialogue, through listening to each other, and observation. Those involved have been free and encouraged to have their say; their often acute observations have helped and are helping to make of *Neige* – this multi-faceted object, patiently polished over time – the crystal that Michèle Anne De Mey dreamed of. A magical, distorting prism into which everyone can project his or her own phantasmagoria.



Neige is like a fairy tale: enchanting and terrifying. Universal and yet designating everybody by name. A fable questioning both our shared humanity and our uniqueness. A pantheist panorama, full of sound and fury, offset here and there by sunny patches.

A parable, in short, raising questions about humanity's place in the universe. A body confronted with the natural elements, whose appearance on the scene says much about its transgressions. Hail, storm, rain...snow: so many "markers" by means of which questions are raised, in turn, about the body's presence and absence in a constant to-and-fro between dance and set design. Bodies that sweep across the landscape, leaving their imprint on it, but also bodies that reel and totter in response to the fluctuations of the weather. And the choreographic style emerges from all this incessant coming and going.

Under our eyes, accordingly, there takes shape an ode to nature and to its unbridled luxuriance. A song in the form of a dance, carried along by a legendary score, that of Beethoven's 7th Symphony. A work in four movements – like so many seasons – presented again and again in different forms (for string quartet, for piano, for two pianos, etc.) in the course of a succession of scenes. Scenes that answer each other, lead into each other, and blend in a process of incessant transformation that leads to a virtuous cycle: harmony and chaos, perpetual movement, and the magical character of the elements. *Neige* is a dreamlike breaking wave.

We are in fact in fairyland territory. Fantastic silhouettes overrun this shadow theatre, "unveiling" our imagination and sweeping us into the abysses of the dream – where one can see that artifice has more impact than reality.



More precisely, what Michèle Anne de Mey is raising questions about now, as is becoming clearer the more we think about it, is the question of the body, of its presence, and, as a consequence, of its corollary, absence. The absolute presence of the body, first of all, in its most essential, most basic, weakest expression. The body totally occupies the space, is its sole centre of interest and the focus of all our attention: the navel of the world, perhaps. It is, in any case, the sole emanation of life, which is presented through its movement.

Imperceptibly, then, this universe is populated. A succession of strokes reveals this (myriads of particles, flakes, petals). A kind of pointillism that proceeds to invest the space, flesh it out, and give it body and depth. And in this ongoing organic contamination the body finds itself surrounded, put into perspective, given dimension. During a transitional passage that reaches a point of balance, the body becomes a milestone, a yardstick, an object that sends us back to the relative proportions of the universe. The human, so small and yet a substantial intruder into a harmony (a chaos?) established since all eternity.

The relationship is shown, but is doomed to disappear as a result of this poetic proliferation of the elements. Burial and disappearance are now programmed in an irresistible process that is fantastical in nature.

So we enter an empire infinite in nature, stretching as far as the eye can see; a landscape with no bearings, almost abstract (Rothko?). An absence of scale in a diagram without limits, immemorial infinity. Only texture, light, and matter have rights here. No articulate dialogue: the narration is now confined to the image. A succession of scenes that answer each other, lead into each other, and blend in a process of incessant transformation leading to a virtuous cycle: harmony and chaos, chaos and harmony, perpetual movement, and the magical character of the elements. It is the elements that generate the dance.

Chromatic palette

At the chromatic level, black and white predominate at first, echoing the uncompromising sobriety of the opening scene. But a black and white charged with magic, carrying an array of references. Recalling the enchanting silver palette employed by Henri Alekan in *La Belle et la bête*. A not entirely innocent reference to films whose fantasy has marked the collective memory with the stubbornness of persistence of vision.

We are indeed in the territory of fairy tales and of dreamlike narrative. Archetypes of the genre parade and follow each other, gradually evoking, in just a few gestures, whole fairy-tale worlds. Their characteristics determine their body language; above all, these figures are vehicles of a certain kind of movement.

And yet, colour is not absent from the story. An allegory of nature reclaiming its rights, it insinuates itself and spreads through the surrounding materials and fluids, conferring on them their seasonal semantics. Green, for example, for spring, which flourishes within each particle before pervading the entire field of vision, indicating the rebirth of life.

Naturalism and abstraction

Through a process of trial and error, it became possible to better delimit, by definition, the object of the quest; its contours became easier to distinguish. The concern for realism sustained by the romantic nature of the idea, or even the naturalism originally envisaged, are no longer the set-design or stylistic premises that govern the creation of the new work. The road travelled has meant that the clear need for an ever more pronounced shift towards abstraction has come to be accepted in a completely "natural" way. The will to fit in with reality, while presenting it by means of abstract material, was soon replaced by the logical apprehension of the diagram, the economy of line.

For from this diagram emerge all the possibilities and all the changes can fit in with it. As a result, one can take advantage of every accident. Chance is domesticated. Chaos will be organised, because nothing is fortuitous: neither the materials, nor their properties. Gravity and lightness confront each other in a tumble, a precipitous, permanent fall. The bodies, once buried (or fled) leave behind them limitless scope for interpretation. Each observer can project into this his or her own dreams and meanings. A daydream conveyed by successive scenes that take us into a symbolist phantasmagoria supported and realised by Sylvie Olive's know-how.



The next production of Michèle Anne De Mey can be seen as a homage to nature, a tableau recalling the Romantics' vision of an all-powerful nature, its forces unleashed in a sudden outburst, sweeping away everything in its path, reshaping the face of what we thought was our world. A theatre in which the natural elements receive a powerful summons so we are better able to confront the ephemeral character and the fragility of our lives.

These are natural elements that by rising up in this way become the beacons of our itineraries, our trajectories, our wanderings: a kind of instantaneous tracking of our attempts, our errors, of the pitfalls on the way. Snow soaking up our wanderings like some surreptitious blotting paper, a mute witness. Hail, a storm, the wind and the rain also, to disfigure us, blast us, remind us that we belong to the world.

Torment of vast proportions hurling the body down in a quivering ballet, bringing home to us the fact that we belong to chaos. Our inner chaos even. To our entropy also, that leads us to organise ourselves, to set ourselves up so we can more readily free ourselves and reach out once more towards new combinations. A figure in perpetual mutation unfolding in space, endlessly creating new figures. An exchange mechanism that is queried again and again. And it is up to us to help in this invigorating surge.

Meteorological artifice and effect for the mystification of the real

In order to serve the subject matter, it is the imagery of enchantment with its panoply of symbols and effects that are invoked here in an approach that fully takes on board the impressionist character of its aesthetic. An approach leading, in fact, to the paradox that we use many a scenographic and physical artifice (devices for smoke and mist, tulle, shower of petals, etc.) in order to demonstrate our attachment to nature. Yet how else can nature be represented in a theatrical context? The point here is to pull the wool over people's eyes through illusion. And it becomes apparent that artifice has a greater impact than something that is real. Still more, we find ourselves going round in circles in this treatment of the real, since reference is made to the cinematographic world, itself an imitation of life. Life that is both imprisoned, domesticated for the needs of the stage and contents in a dome that acts as the world in its totality, yet which finds portrayal in an outburst that is the most unrestrained and most magical possible.

Sound score and choreographic writing

Music is not, of course, absent from the stage. As a relevant auxiliary it will help to construct the issue the work is dealing with. For it is from an attentive dissection of the movements, of the rhythmic and harmonic aspects, that the choreographic score will be born and will be implicitly portrayed. The music creates movement through its architecture, its rhythmic profile, and similarly it is the correspondence of choreographic phrase with musical theme that will be highlighted in order to feed the choreographic writing.

Each voice, each movement will find its pendant, its echo in the figures sketched out by the performers. It is Michèle Anne De Mey who, with the close collaboration of Grégory Grosjean, will be at the source of the choreographic writing, producing phrases and movements without any referential judgement. Then and only then will the transmission to the dancer become the essential basis of the process.

The musical score draws from three sound sources: the interference generated by the theatrical machinery used to create the 'naturalist' feel, the music chosen to illustrate the choreographic elements, and finally the tape : all three intermix to form a composite sound matter. A combination taking the project to the fringes of Romanticism and Impressionism.

Methodology

As this is a scenography centred on the restitution of the natural by means of artificial effects, it is practice that will determine the final choices. It is desirable, as is clear from a whole host of trials, to compress the field of possibilities in order to focus more closely on the requisite impressionist effect. This empirical approach is made possible by a singularly exceptional and favourable context : the availability of the stage of the Écuries de Charleroi/Danses transformed for the nonce into an experimental laboratory. It is an exploratory field also served by a crucial encounter : that of Michèle Anne De Mey with Sylvie Olive, a scenographer and decorator working regularly for the cinema. The lighting designer Nicolas Olivier will also be making a valuable contribution to the definition of the outlines of this vision. A confrontation of various practices and worlds for some choral writing.

It will then be possible to establish a dialogue between choreographic writing and scenographic space that will give rise to dramaturgy. A permanent dialogue in which the one is continually relating to the other : bodies sweeping through space, scarring the landscape, leaving their marks on it, but also bodies that sway, vibrate and oscillate through meteorological fluctuation, the incessant to-and-fro that generates a naturalist symphony.



It was on the set of Jaco Van Dormael's latest film that I met Michèle Anne. She was struck by the setting – a little house in Watermael-Boitsfort that curiously recalled her childhood home. It clicked between us and she wanted to see me again. We ate together; she told me she wanted it to snow. To snow onstage. So we began to discuss that idea. For my part, when someone gives me a keyword, a host of images come into my head. So we started to ring the changes on this concept of snow. Snow: hostile, cold. The immaculate snow of snowstorms, of harsh winters, of infinite spaces. But also the snowfall of spring, of petals – or even the snowfall of autumn, of leaves.

We had in fact moved on to talking in terms of what has fallen, of falling... One word echoed another, one sensation another. More general concepts came up, such as those of climate and atmosphere. At one point, the material was at the heart of the matter: to represent what is natural, to suggest it – or to wrong-foot it – we thought of effects. Why not substitute ping-pong balls for the snow crystals? We would have to try things out, to test all our runaway imaginings against reality.

We moved on to a second phase; the idea was to use a whole range of effects to see how they would work out. And we weren't disappointed. We were like children. Four of us, to be exact – for Grégory and Nicolas had joined us. We let ourselves go, naturally, without preconceptions or any kind of censorship guiding us. And, best of all, we always finished up agreeing. No matter how arbitrary the choices made, this group harmony led us towards the same things. Afterwards, quite the opposite of the cinema where the script sets out a very precise framework of the author's intentions, it was necessary to narrow the spectrum so as to avoid an exponential effect whereby the list of things to be tried out would have been infinite, with one effect suggesting another.

It was only then that the script began to take shape, step by step, between us. It was great the way everybody spoke up and came up with ideas and a kind of improvisation developed – a bit like in music or film. We explored, but we concentrated on deciding on the paths to take, on identifying them, on recognising them in line with our intuitions. Each time, intuition led us back to enchantment. Everything one saw onstage plunged us into the world of fairytales.

So we persevered with our research until we arrived at a language that was more manufactured, more sophisticated. At a certain stage we even said to ourselves that the body couldn't simply be there, dancing – it would have to have a role of generating, of inventing something... Until we reached a breaking point. And then things took a radical turn. A different language emerged: things that were very simple, very obvious came to us.

When we were starting on this business of fairy tales, I had begun to reread Alice in Wonderland and I watched Cocteau's La belle et la bête again and one thing had really struck me: in all these stories the body and its dimensions come up, a bit like when you are dreaming and you take on strange proportions... As the stage is a box par excellence, the dancer can easily change proportions there. So we thought of systems of steps, of windows that open and divide the space: effects worthy of the early days of the cinema, when they were exploiting the effects of the black box. Very simple effects, actually: a sheet of plastic, a projector, some water, a phenomenon of diffraction...and the magic appears.

The images are actually stronger than us. The most powerful are those we had not planned or calculated. But when they appear they stimulate our imagination in an incredible way and seem so obvious that we get caught up in them. Truly beautiful moments of jubilation.

Interviewed by Ivo Ghizzardi - La Raffinerie / Brussels



MICHELE ANNE DE MEY

Michèle Anne De Mey (Brussels - 1959) is a Belgian choreographer and former student at Mudra (from 1976 to 1979), the school founded by Maurice Béjart (Brussels). She pointed contemporary dance in a new direction with her first choreographies : *Passé Simple* (1981) and the duos *Ballatum* (1984) and *Face à Face* (1986). At the same time, she worked with Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker for six years on the creation and interpretation of several of her choreographies, namely *Fase* (1982), *Rosas danst Rosas* (1983), *Elena's Aria* (1984) and *Ottone, ottone* (1988). Although special consideration is always given to the relationship between dance and music, the choreographic structure of Michèle Anne De Mey's creations cultivates a strong theatrical content and places the dancer in a specific and innovative relationship between stage and audience. In 1990, she founded her company on the occasion of *Sinfonia Eroica*. Following this, there were 15 other creations which met with international acclaim, among them *Raining Dogs* (2002), *Utopie* (2001), *Katamenia* (1997), *Pulcinella* (1994), *Love Sonnets* (1994), *Châteaux en Espagne* (1991), *Cahier* (1995), etc. Her pedagogical contribution has also been significant (in Amsterdam, at INSAS in Brussels, CNDC in Angers and École en Couleurs). For three years, she worked with the children at École en Couleurs on the elaboration of *Sacre en Couleurs*, a creation presented on the occasion of Bruxelles/ Brussel 2000. Her choreographic work has been the starting point for several films, such as *Love Sonnets* and *21 Études à danser* by Thierry De Mey, and *Face à Face* by Eric Pauwels. Using the force of music to create her choreographic universe, she worked with the renowned *Face* by Eric Pauwels. Using the force of music to create her choreographic universe, she worked with the renowned composers Thierry De Mey, Robert Wyatt and Jonathan Harvey. For several years, she has been working in close collaboration with other artists such as artist-scenographer Simon Siegmann and the filmmaker-composer Thierry De Mey.

Since July 2005, Michèle Anne De Mey is artistic director of Charleroi/Danses, Choreographic Centre of the French Community, along with Thierry De Mey, Pierre Droulers and Vincent Thirion. In June 2006, she revived *Sinfonia Eroica* for nine dancers, sixteen years after the creation. Since then, the piece has been performed more than 100 times all over the world.

In December 2007, she created *P.L.U.G.* wich dealt with the mysteries of the mechanics of homo sapiens's mating.

Michèle Anne De Mey is now working on *Neige*, her new creation which will be presented in November 2009 as part of the Charleroi/Danses Biennale. She is also working on a solo dance for a woman *Koma*, creation in the frame of *Korean Screens - Four solo dances*, varied evening programme as part of *Made in Korea* produced by Bozar.

GREGORY GROSJEAN

After studying at the Conservatoire National Supérieur in Paris, Grégory Grosjean pursued a career as a dancer with a number of different companies and at the Paris Opéra. He joined Michèle Anne De Mey in 2001; he has participated in creating six new works with her, both as a dancer and as an artistic advisor. Over the same period he also collaborated with Stefan Dreher on two pieces, including *Station to station* in 2005. Since 2005 he has coordinated the Training Programme of the Centre Chorégraphique de la Communauté française de Belgique Charleroi/Danses.

SYLVIE OLIVE

Having built up a reputation as a chief set designer in advertising, in television, and, above all, in film – she has worked on a number of feature films – Sylvie Olive has been one of the most highly regarded professionals in her sector ever since the early 1990s. A Frenchwoman, her record has included working with directors such as Christian Vincent (*La Discrète*, 1990), Christine Pascal (*Adultère mode d'emploi*, 1994), Michel Spinoza (*La Parenthèse enchantée*, 1999), and Jaco Van Dormael (on his next film to be released, *Mr Nobody*, 2008).

NICOLAS OLIVIER

After briefly, in the early 1990s, studying communication at the IHECS and painting – a discipline he has been fascinated by since his adolescence – at the 75, Nicolas Olivier trained in set design and stage direction at the INFAC. His meeting in 1993 with the stage director Daniel Scahaise was decisive for his career, with Scahaise steering him towards lighting direction. Between 1993 and 1999 he built up experience as a technician and/or lighting expert in the fields of theatre, events, and music. During this period he developed a mastery of the tools of lighting. In 1999 he joined the Charleroi / Danses company, run by Frédéric Flamand. He was responsible for the lighting of Flamand's shows from 1999 to 2006, at Charleroi/Danses and at the Ballet National de Marseille. Over the same period he also worked for other companies, including Ultima Vez and Mossoux/Bonté. Nicolas Olivier's lighting designs can be seen more as architectural constructions than as staging design in the strict sense. In them he demonstrates a constantly renewed interest in bringing together bodies, dance, and architecture. Since 2005 he has worked on the choreographies of Michèle Anne De Mey and Pierre Droulers. He is delighted at the opportunity to work on this new work by Michèle Anne De Mey and to discover a new world through his collaboration with the film set designer Sylvie Olive.



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