

Ready... Steady ? ...



Mer plastique Rehearsal, Tidiani N'Diaye

Danse élargie takes back its original turf – which it hadn't since 2016 – at Théâtre de la Ville–Sarah Bernhardt, on the grand stage imbued with the memory of the greatest names in performing arts since 1968. After seven editions, this is the age of reason, the time to take stock on this phase in a crazy adventure that saw the light of day in 2010, an adventure imagined by Boris Charmatz and Emmanuel Demarcy-Mota, without any inkling it would last this long. Fully rooted today in the landscape of dance, in every sense, it would seem downright odd to stop, even according to its initial detractors. And, actually, Danse élargie is one of its kind, the only global, cross-arts platform that is an experimental lab for emerging makers.

Committed partners from the beginning, Fondation d'entreprise Hermès (the Hermès Foundation) and SACD (the Society of Dramatic Authors and Composers) have both encouraged the longevity of the competition, and its renewal, with each edition bringing forth a new feature. The principle of co-organisation enhances the scope of the platform: this time, thanks to Cndc-Angers (national centre for contemporary dance) – with its director Noé Soulier, winner of the very first edition of Danse élargie in 2010 – and La Comédie de Valence/CDN Drôme-Ardèche (one of the national centres for theatre), with its director Marc Lainé.

Bringing this exceptional weekend to life, however, requires formidable organisational work. The submitted applications – numbering 366 this year, representing 68 different nationalities from 48 countries – are verified in advance for the selection committee's meeting. In February, the partner organisations assemble – for what you could truly call a conclave! – to study all the artistic pitches. After three intense days, the final list materialises.

As a viewer from the very first editions of Danse élargie, Claire Roussarie, deputy director of La Comédie de Valence, has been keen about this condensed dose of creative energy: "It is an opportunity to discover the first steps taken on stage by young makers, perhaps those who will count tomorrow... When Théâtre de la Ville invited us to be a part of the 2024 edition, we were happy that La Comédie should be earmarked as an iconic space for transdisciplinary art-making. There is a great deal of trust between us, partners and organisers, even if we have different perspectives. We bring a fresh gaze to the table, and can also play the role of "disrupters" in the deliberations. Our impassioned discussions result in a selection that celebrates the diversity in our respective thought processes."

It is also this creative flurry that Quentin Guisgand of Fondation d'entreprise Hermès recalls: "When we come to Danse élargie, it isn't shows calibrated to the last inch that we come to watch, but potential. The inventive spirit that shaped the launch of the competition continues to spur us, along with the challenge of balancing – in happy proportions – meticulous organisation and wildness of spirit. I remember the closing ceremony of 2018, when one of the winners volunteered to be the DJ, after missing their train. There was magic at work: everyone began dancing, in a lovely surge of improvisation and togetherness, totally in the spirit of Danse élargie!"

Once the selections are done, everything has to be orchestrated; a programme has to be devised factoring in all the technical requirements and constraints, without overlooking the audience, which should get to sample the overall diversity within 90-minute capsules.

Aline Jobert, technical director of Danse élargie since 2022, explains: "For the preparatory work, I function as relay between the artists and the crew of the theatre, each tech request drawing on different skillsets: stage equipment, video, sound, lights... I register the needs, which could prove to be atypical, and sometimes, a bit complex. For one project, we needed a 5-metre-long bamboo pole whose diameter did not exceed 15 mm. It was an item that had been easily available for the group, which came from India. But to find it in Paris was another kettle of fish altogether! To set up 20 shows in a single day, we need a general framework compatible with all the projects, so everyone is on an equal footing, and avails of the same working time with our crews. An equation of trust gets established in that moment. Then comes show time, which demands coordination and synchronization, a beautiful team effort, an intense experience of solidarity and competition. There is something almost magical in the thought that so many different shows will bloom out of the same tools offered to the companies."

Danse élargie implies an unusual experience for artists as well, one that shifts their gaze and shakes up their praxes. It's something the late Ousmane Sy noted in 2018: "The beauty of Danse élargie lies in the intersection of worlds. There are plenty of projects that I would not even have imagined possible, ones I found arresting. It opened my eyes to dance." Yair Barelli, finalist of the very first edition in 2010, remembers the hitherto unseen event: "What I really enjoyed about this competition was how we could experiment with our projects, hijack the situation, take risks and exit the setting of dance. It was also an invitation to the impossible!" Since its founding, Danse élargie has had its artistic and geographic boundaries extended incessantly. The competition is a time for encounters and interactions, all the more so for international groups, who do not always have access to this kind of plurality.

Amit Noy, who came from New Zealand in 2022 – then aged twenty – to present his very first work, *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*, shares his impressions: "Danse élargie was an experience that completely transformed my life, and the way I make work. It's an enormous initiative which, at every level, is motivated by great attention to, and deep interest in, the work of artists, and that, very much in advance. The support, the trust and the encouragement we receive, long after the competition, all that was very unusual for me. It showed me how much French institutions respect and value dance and performing arts."

A human, unifying, adventure that – once the curtain falls – continues and transforms. A post-competition programme could be devised, and has materialised, thanks to two new, indispensable, partners: the Île-de-France county and the Caisse des Dépôts. This new contribution has facilitated the development of residencies and fostered the promotion of almost all the finalists from 2022.

According to Céline Gaubert, coordinator of the 2022 edition, "the accompaniment of artists became necessary, on its own, at first informally with some institutions. The follow-up now has become an official part of the process thanks to attentive partners. We do try to build ties, to be attentive to the career paths and needs of each person. No two support systems will be similar, they are all personalized. It's also about long-term investment. Danse élargie is a kind of throttle lever for talent, a grand festival to celebrate human connections.

It is this close bond, tightening and deepening between artists and institutions after the competition, which makes it so singular. For Dalila Belaza, what mattered "was really the faithful and constant support from Théâtre de la Ville and Fondation Hermès. Thanks to this support, my horizon widened, I could meet other partners, forge new ties. This life after the competition has allowed me to develop my approach further."



This year, in particular, when Danse élargie cohabits with the imminent Olympic Games, the idea of assembly, of a truce, appeared necessary. In September 2023, the call for submissions already encouraged such an approach: “flight and displacement today seem more than necessary in our world shaken by war, by the rise of extremisms, and the hardening of irreconcilable positions.” The concept of hospitality has never resonated more, making the support of Institut français and its units abroad vital. Quite literally as well, because at this juncture when the French capital will be taken by storm, we must welcome and house no fewer than 54 foreign artists, with the largest groups often coming from the most distant countries. Hospitality is also shown towards viewers: free entry, without reservation, during the two days of the event and direct open broadcast across the world. And a novelty in 2024: Danse élargie extends outwards on to the Place du Châtelet, where finalists old and new will gather together.

On stage, more artists and more disciplines will flourish and mingle. Dance is connected to theatre with or without spoken word, to puppetry, to visual arts from performance to photography, to sound design and music, to fashion, to sport, but also to social, political and cultural history. Weaving past, present and future, some projects renew our gaze on tradition and folklore, while others (in)directly tackle burningly current world issues. Whether they are on-line, within the line, or tracing steps sideways as pas de deux, or rather, as trios and more, these projects reveal bodies made ready, alert, bodies as vocal and sonic instruments, bodies that resist, that exult, that transcend. These artistic progressions will be, always a little further, geographically, culturally, aesthetically, politically. A new edition of Danse élargie for a new journey, eyes wide open on the emerging art of the world!

Malika Baaziz



Crash Test, 2022