

jours blancs: interview

with Saskia Hölbling

by Gilles Amalvi for the Rencontres Chorégraphiques Internationales de Seine-Saint-Denis

Up to now, all of your pieces have been based on something that you call "corps-matiere" or the physical body. Does "Jour Blancs" take another approach to the physical body – where is this approach different?

The body is always present in its physical form, however with this piece, I wanted to try something else. During the process of working on my previous pieces, the physical issue was always at the center of focus – meaning the decisions in connection with the staging, and the music accompanying the physical performance. For "jour blancs," in contrast, I started with research, which encompassed all these parameters. I thought about what space the piece should be performed in, what might be suitable for providing the sound landscape, the colors, the corpus.... My principal interest was in positioning the "physical body," that is, contextualizing it. This context is concrete enough; it is my Viennese context. I've tried to ask about this context in the form of a question – to find out: what is the context that I know well? And on top of that, there is my distance to it. It isn't "me in my context." It is about "her," a woman's body exposed like a question mark – not like a response. The Viennese context partially comprises clichés, the "reverse-turn waltz," the rules of polite society and the aspect of being "proper," itself. But beneath all that, there is a fiery terrain, which could lead to a real explosion. It is sufficient to have a look at Austrian art... there you will find enough violent explosions. I ask myself where this violence comes from; how it was formed... and I've tried to explore it.

Your work with the "physical body" has mobilized a physical composition, which is in search of the body's memories. Has the staging of your performance in a context modified your physical composition?

Putting the body into context has led me to come into contact with areas in which I don't normally work. The task of having reduced this apartment to the absolute minimum – the essence of an apartment – up to the colors – of installing this impersonal environment in which the body is completely exposed – that enabled me to approach my outermost limits. For the physical aspect to be so direct and so essential, it was necessary to find the exact place for each sequence, each movement and each gesture. It was necessary to find these places in the room and in my body – where are they situated regarding this woman? What is her connection to the objects and the empty space – or the space between the objects? Where is the center of her body, where does it flow – and where doesn't it flow? Where is it hot, and where is it completely abandoned? In a certain sense, her body is totally divided; it has a center but it doesn't really radiate. All the rest of her body is strange, awkward.... On the one hand, it is repetitive actions that she is performing – pleasantly executed; and then there are the danger zones she falls into – where she loses herself.... All throughout the piece, she lets herself be led more and more strongly by her needs. She is a strong woman – not a weak woman at all – she dares to go there....

"The physical body" allows you to eliminate all psychology. This woman is almost a personality, an identity. How did you work on that frontier?

"She" is it already. It's about "her," but she doesn't have a name. She doesn't have a character. She exists in this apartment, isolated and ready to do what she has to do, ready to let herself go, if necessary. Her physical and psychological needs are difficult to separate.... I don't believe in a duality between the body and the spirit. The interesting thing is really at which point the psychology and the "physical body" interact while they enter into conflict with each other.

Finally, and this is more a question of the interpretation: It's about "her," but you are not trying to show why she acts like this.

I don't interpret. She is. There isn't any specific social context, certain circumstances that formed.... That follows another phenomenology. That doesn't depend on any particular explanations, but on a much more general basis. And although I am interested in this Viennese background, it doesn't restrain the sense in this context.

Yes, Freud invented psychoanalysis in Vienna, but that doesn't mean it isn't of any value anywhere but in Vienna....

On the subject of psychoanalysis.... It would be very easy to put what "she" does into a pigeonhole, to close it, and to distance yourself from it. I've tried to make sure that the people in the audience really cannot distance themselves, that they cannot put her into a pigeonhole, rather that they remain concerned instead.

Did you want to show that she did a good job of overcoming the limits that she constantly finds herself faced with?

Everything appears proper on the surface.... Maybe that's what takes her further and further away in this cycle, which repeats itself, but never ends. Throughout the duration of the piece, she loses herself and she discovers more and more of herself - in the little everyday rituals, but also in the danger zones. Maybe it is during the moments, which would appear to be the most "bizarre," that she comes closest to being herself. But the one aspect does not go without the other, the one is not subordinate to the other; everything is necessary all together. The ensemble of actions is needed; repetition is needed; depth is needed; it needs to be uninhibited.... It's this entire universe, which forms a necessity. Maybe it will be an external event that is able to change this repetitive cycle. But she doesn't allow anyone or anything to enter. It's her choice.

Did you want to show us a different view of feminine sexuality?

Given that she is completely alone, that she doesn't have anyone with her – and above all, that there isn't any man present – all of her actions, her desires, her existing sexuality is developed in a solitary manner, differently. It is a woman's view of the feminine body – I don't know what the male reception of it will be like. Through this woman, I would like to ask the question of desire, but the word "désir" is something too "sensual" in French, and the word "envie," or urge, is too weak. Actually it's the German word "Lust," meaning to be in the mood. This "Lust" is present throughout the piece. There are certain moments, quite violent moments, where this "Lust" takes form, it expresses itself; it may subside again, seemingly no longer present, but it's like a subterranean fire, like a burning fuse, which bring everything to an explosion. I really must say that "she" has discovered a certain rapport with her body, which I hadn't known before. I don't really know "who" I am, when I am there on stage; I only know that it has to be done, that the process has to advance, that it's necessary.