



# Biennale de la Danse de Lyon

Lyon, France • September 9–October 3, 2010 • Reviewed by Wendy Perron

Where else does a dance festival overtake an entire city? With 40 companies spread out over 34 venues (plus three outdoor sites), this year's Biennale de la Danse was the main event in the second-largest city in France. It attracted 95,000 spectators, young and old (not counting the even larger number that showed up for the *défilé* that opens the festival). Tickets are moderately priced, and most shows were sold out; even a national transit strike didn't put a dent in attendance. Performances routinely ended with rhythmic clapping, especially for Lyon's favorites like Bill T. Jones, Deborah Colker, and Compagnie Käfig.

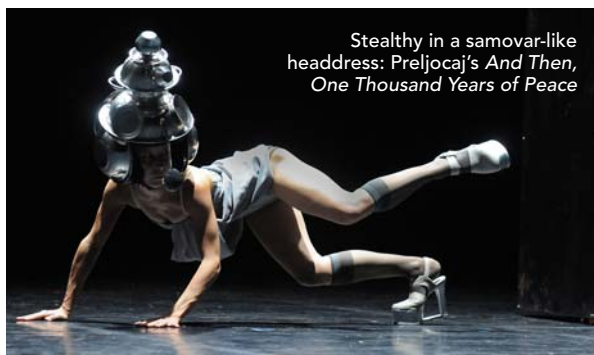
My week (as a guest of the festival) started off with a bang. Pina Bausch's *Nelken* (1982), gorgeous and giddy, planted the dancers of Tanztheater Wuppertal in a field of carnations—as intoxicating as a field of poppies. They played a raucous street game led by the droll Lutz Förster in a dress. Their antics exposed the power plays of children—or, rather, children as played by adults—with hilarity mounting. In a later episode, Dominique Mercy yelled in French, “You want to see a manège? I'll show you a manège,” and furiously tossed off leaps and turns in a circle. “You want to see entrechat six? I'll show you...” and he executed a few perfect sixes. He exhausted himself, and yet he was still willing, and it was terribly entertaining. Mercy has the gift of being funny and sad at once.

Of the commissioned works, the greatest achievement was *Lieu d'Être*—utterly delightful from the first meanderings to the last airborne swoops. A site-specific work masterminded by Lyon's Annick Charlot, it combined her five luscious dancers (herself included) with 55 residents of an apartment building in the commercial center of Lyon. One of the dancers' tasks was to lead the crowd to the right place; another was to gently embrace a resident of the building; and another was to shepherd residents in tableaux on the terraces high up. Every danced conversation

was infused with charm, wit, sensuality, and humanity.

Some of the big guns misfired. Angelin Preljocaj's elaborate collaboration with Bolshoi dancers, *And Then, One Thousand Years of Peace*, was so hard-edged that it didn't seem to be about collaboration at all. (The year 2010 was designated the “French-Russian year” by the cultural ministries of both countries.) In one scene, all dancers (more than 20) had their heads wrapped in flags of many different countries. Perhaps it was meant as a statement about the blindness of nationalism—though a slightly sinister way of expressing that.

The duets were more human than the group sections. For those of us who had been to the press conference and heard Preljocaj say that every duet united one French and one Russian dancer, it helped. Plus the duets had a touch of vulnerability, which was lacking in the group sections. In one of them, two men alternated violence and tenderness, and ended up in a locked kiss. (The Bolshoi authorities couldn't have been too happy about that.) In a sexy, slinky hetero duet, each partner



Stealthy in a samovar-like headdress: Preljocaj's *And Then, One Thousand Years of Peace*

Top: Michiel Cavalla. Bottom: © Christian Garnat. Both Courtesy Lyon

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pinned the other against a wall. But the loveliest section was for three women moving stealthily with what looked like samovars on their heads.

The musical high point of the week was the Debussy String Quartet, which played selections from its classical repertoire for Compagnie Käfig's *Boxe Boxe*. Dipping into his past as a boxer, artistic director Mourad Merzouki wove an unlikely mix of hip hop, boxing, and classical music (Schubert, Ravel, Mendelssohn, etc.). Although the skit-like bits with red boxing gloves and punching bags were too literal and too long, the whole amalgam, with some nice interaction between the dancers and musicians, was admirable. My favorite moment came during a Philip Glass section where three dancers (including, in the center, the sole woman), wearing silky white boxer robes, moved through ghostly versions of hip hop or boxing warm-ups. But the extended peak moment was Teddy Verardo's intense solo to Schubert's *Death and the Maiden*, showing the agony and the ecstasy of a prizefighter. In a coda, the musicians fiddled fast while the dancers pulled out all their hip hop tricks, making us wildly happy.

The hip hop dancer who stole my heart, however, was Artem Orlov, who appeared in *Na Grani* ("no boundaries") by Mickaël Le Mer. Another effort to bring together dancers from France (Le Mer's Compagnie S'poart) and Russia (guests from Ekaterinburg), this piece combined contemporary and hip hop. Orlov's virtuosity broke through the dim lighting. His speed, precision, sensitivity, and soaring energy captivated. Even when standing dead still, his charisma and focus were startling. *Na Grani* used a set of large movable blocks (by Guillaume Cousin) to suggest an urban environment. The performers climbed on top of the blocks as though they were city rooftops. We waited because the choreography seemed on the verge of taking off, but never really did.

Algerian choreographer Nacera Belaza's extremely simple trio *Le Temps Scellé* ("fixed time") required even more



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NaTalia Johnson photographed by Jacob Pritchard



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Lauren Fadeley photographed by Eduardo Patino



Apartment building as stage: Annick Charlot's *Lieu d'Être*

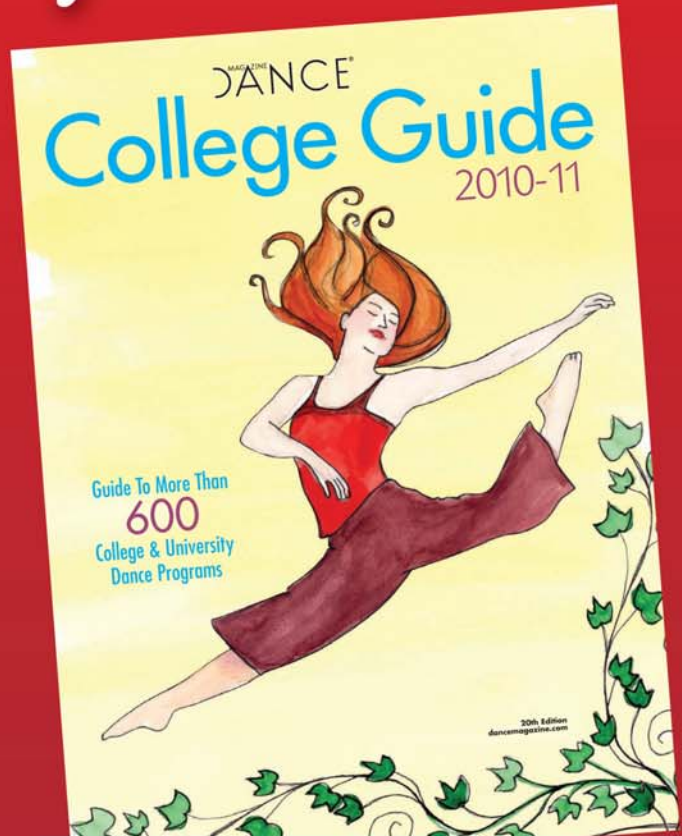
patience. A super-gradual fade from darkness to visibility wrapped us in a meditative experience. But once we absorbed the lushness of Belaza's movement, there was nothing else to take in. A second performer danced in a similar uninflected vein, and then a third, all separate. At the end, the three danced together briefly. But our patience went unrewarded.

At the Maison de la Danse, an 1,100-seat house just for dance, Bill T. Jones presented the European premiere of *Fondly Do We Hope...Fervently Do We Pray* (see "Reviews," Dec. 2009). Though his text was spoken in English (subtitles were projected high above), and the subject matter was very American (Lincoln and the Civil War), the French audience responded warmly.

The Lyon festival has had a long relationship with Brazilian artists, and this year Deborah Colker brought 12 young dancers from shantytowns she's been working with. They performed her snappy three-part *Partida* with precision, humor, and great exuberance. Popular tunes by Stevie Wonder, the Rolling Stones, and Lou Reed helped make the piece both exhilarating and touching.

I missed major performances, including the Lyon Opera Ballet's Forsythe evening, Hofesh Shechter, Ailey II, Maguy Marin and a clutch of other French choreographers. The only part of the Trisha Brown tribute I caught was the

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Heather Morris from *Glee* photographed by Joe Toreno

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exhibition at Musée d'Art Contemporain, which included her drawings as well as posters and films—more evidence of Lyon's commitment to the artists it loves.

Sadly, this was the last biennale directed by Guy Darnet, who built the festival into the glory that it is.

## Akram Khan Company

Sadler's Wells  
London, England  
October 5–9, 2010  
Reviewed by Barbara Newman

What would happen to modern dance if program notes vanished? Wouldn't every work then have to stand on its own feet and define itself purely in movement?

Created to mark his company's 10th anniversary, Akram Khan's latest piece, *Vertical Road*, opens with a shadowy figure, backlit behind a plastic scrim at the rear of the stage, punching the scrim and drawing mysterious patterns on it. After a blackout, seven figures in front of the scrim rise slowly from a floor strewn with fine sand and begin a long unison dance of juddering contractions and flailing arms. Clouds of sand fly off their bodies as they jerk and twist, and the quiet tick of a metronome grows steadily into a pounding roar of drums.

Identically clad in long, draped tunics over loose trousers, these eight dancers remain onstage for 70 minutes, mostly moving in perfect unison despite their complex contortions. Their configuration changes, from a wedge to lines to a circle, and occasionally they pass a phrase between them, once, beautifully, whipping it from body to body with such intensity that its path acquires depth and shape.

A brief, fascinating battle develops between two men who seldom touch; the whiplash force of their energy renders each dominant in turn. A couple steps into a loose embrace, slides to the ground, and rolls in slow motion, always remaining at arms' length. A man stands behind a woman, holding her by the neck and the back of her tunic, and flings her around in front of him like a rag doll, yanking her in all directions at will.

However, this violent activity yields few clues to the choreographer's overall



Mysterious meanings: Salah El Brogy and Paul Zivkovich in Khan's *Vertical Road*

intention. Although Khan has rearranged the dancers skillfully in space, the propulsive, fragmented vocabulary repeats almost obsessively without developing. As the relatively short evening began feeling long, my concentration sometimes abandoned the dancers and shifted to Nitin Sawhney's commissioned score, a compelling blend of ferocious rhythmic drumming, gentle passages for solo piano, and the sort of hypnotic tuneless phrases that often accompany Indian dancing.


*Vertical Road* could be read as an apocalyptic vision of the end of the world or an exploration of fanaticism and religious ecstasy—at moments it resembles *Rite of Spring*—or a nightmare of demonic possession. A program note called the piece “a meditation on the journey from gravity to grace.” Khan's explanation claimed that he was “in search of what it might mean to be connected not just spiritually, but also vertically.” So what exactly were we watching?

### REVIEWS ON THE WEB

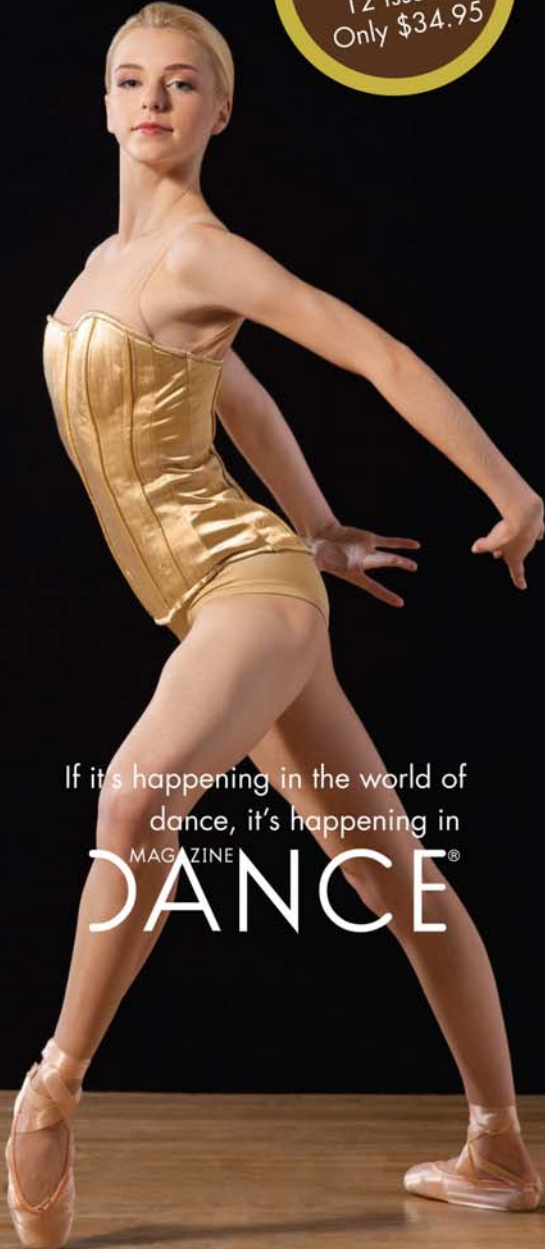
Read about Victor Quijada's premiere for Hubbard Street (below, with Jessica Tong), Hope Stone, and more at [www.dancemagazine.com](http://www.dancemagazine.com).



Top: © Richard Haughton, Courtesy Khan. Bottom: Todd Rosenberg, Courtesy HSDC



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