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Dance

A Dance Festival Leader Focuses on Creation

Dominique Hervieu Leads Her First Lyon Dance Biennial



JC Carbonne

“Ce que j’appelle oubli,” by Ballet Preljocaj, reflected an increased focus on new work at the Lyon Dance Biennial in France.

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LYON, France — Every two years for the last 28 years the [Lyon Dance Biennial](#) has arrived in mid-September in this busy, bustling city with a certain amount of fanfare. It begins with the Défilé, a carnival-like procession that regularly draws more than 300,000 revelers to the streets, and continues for around three weeks with a dense pileup of performances, public balls, meetings with artists, films and talks, which seem to use every one of Lyon’s 30-odd theaters.



Stephane Rambaud

Dominique Hervieu

This year's biennial began on Thursday, and it is different in only one important way. For the first time in its history, it is not directed by Guy Darnet, an avuncular genial presence indissolubly associated with the festival since its inception in 1984. Instead, there is a woman at the helm, the choreographer Dominique Hervieu, who was running the National Theater of Chaillot in Paris when Mr. Darnet called to ask if she might like the job.

"Being the director of a national theater is a very official position, and the minister of culture was not very happy about me leaving," said Ms. Hervieu, speaking in French. "But I told him I could be as useful in Lyon as in Paris. Theater has more important centers in France; so does cinema. But if Lyon has claims to be a cultural capital, it's because of dance."

That's probably the right line to adopt in a country that takes its national display of culture as seriously as France does. On Saturday the front and subsequent inside pages of the newspaper *Libération* were entirely devoted to an extensive analysis of a 3 percent (yes, 3 percent) cut in the national culture budget. Ms. Hervieu, 49, won't know until October what the 2014 biennial budget will look like. For this year she inherited a slightly reduced amount that was compensated for by an increase in private sponsorship. She decided to increase spending on new works and on education programs, and compensate by reducing the number of shows (35 compared with 40 in 2010). She has also extended the biennial beyond Lyon to neighboring towns, which, she said, cuts costs and reaches new audiences.

"I didn't want to revolutionize anything," Ms. Hervieu said. "But I also want to shift the focus of the biennial from an international display of work to a kind of factory for creating work."

To that end she invited eight companies — Sankai Juku, Maguy Marin and Rachid Ouramdane among them — to spend several preperformance weeks in Lyon, refining and working on the pieces they would present.

"It's important in this time of economic crisis to give the artists a stable place to work," she said. "And it creates a relationship with the public, because during that time we have open rehearsals, meetings and debates, which create interest and bring people to the theaters."

Ms. Hervieu's background as a choreographer is clearly an important factor in her willingness to prioritize the creative process. (From 1981 to 2011 she collaborated with José Montalvo, her co-director at Chaillot.) Mr. Darmet, looking very off-duty in an orange polo shirt as he chatted in the foyer of the Maison de la Danse on Sunday, said as much.

"Dominique is an artist; that brings a completely different angle to the festival," he said. "But Papa is happy. Sometimes you have to know when to let your child leave home."

On the face of it the 2012 Dance Biennial has not entirely left home. The program still shows a characteristically democratic mix of international and homegrown companies, big and lesser-known names, and a range of styles from ballet to breaking. But there are subtle differences, notably a more multidisciplinary approach, with theater, circus and the visual arts all part of the program, and an increased focus on new work, with 19 premieres during the festival's 18-day run.

One of those was Angelin Preljocaj's "Ce que j'appelle oubli" ("That which I call forgetting"), which opened at the beautiful Célestins Theater on Saturday. The piece is drawn from a book of the same name by Laurent Mauvignier, a fictionalized account of a real event, which happens to have taken place in Lyon: a young man beaten to death by security guards after his arrest for drinking a can of beer in a supermarket.

"Ce que j'appelle" is entirely unlike Mr. Preljocaj's last Lyon premiere, the Gaultier-designed, slick and showy "Snow White." Here, instead, is a grim re-enactment of the text, given an impassioned delivery by Laurent Cazanave. Mr. Preljocaj is too experienced a choreographer to be entirely literal in his depiction of the narrative, but he isn't too far off. Through the dark-hued 90 minutes of the work, the pace remains relentlessly slow, and the movement remains a muted accessory to the text, rarely creating a parallel world that might amplify or extend its tragedy.

Also new was Ushio Amagatsu's "[Umusuna](#)," for his company, Sankai Juku. Seen on Saturday at the Lyon Opera House, its Butoh-inspired, slow-moving beauty and exquisite lighting were marred only by the heavy-on-the-emotion score.

But if Butoh or serious contemporary dance wasn't your thing, there was no shortage of genres on the first biennial weekend. There were joyous performances of traditional music, dance and theater by a troupe from Sebatu, a Balinese village; Jan Fabre's "Preparatio Mortis," an overwrought solo danced by Lisa May that deployed a great deal of flowers; Mourad Merzouki's infectiously cheery "Yo Gee Ti," which used Taiwanese contemporary dancers alongside his virtuoso hip-hoppers; and the preening, flamboyant Israel Galván, whose attempt in "La Curva" to take flamenco out of its traditional setting was fascinating and annoying in equal measure.

But that's the joy of the Dance Biennial: whether you love or desperately hate a show, there is another coming at you from around the corner. Ms. Hervieu has two years to expand on the initial changes she has brought to the festival. Keep that 3 percent cut away! Vive la France!

The Lyon Dance Biennial runs through Sept. 30 at locations in and near Lyon, France; biennaledeladanse.com.