

The possibilities of an island

By Cécile Dalla Torre, Le Courrier, August 30th 2018

At the La Bâtie festival, unclassifiable choreographer La Ribot reinvents the phantasmagorical world of Madeira with an inclusive dance company in *Happy Island*.

La Ribot's studio in Coulouvrenière, Geneva, was the only one in the building to have pillars obstructing the space. Nobody wanted it. She made it her own and loves it for what it is, for its difference, and would not change it for the world. But this is not where she created *Happy Island*, one of the standouts of the La Bâtie festival, and a piece that tackles nothing other than otherness.

Happy Island is the story of an island, Madeira, where a dream of dancing was born some 15 years ago with different bodies. These bodies, including some with Down syndrome, motor deficiencies, blindness, deafness, autism, or Alzheimer's, do not fit the ballet mould.

Fauna à la Westwood

Under the direction of Henrique Amoedo, Portuguese company *Dançando com a Diferença* fights for the rights of its dancers, in particular so that they get paid when they appear onstage. "It's a big struggle, they were losing their status as disabled people once they arrived on a set. It has something of Noah giving back life and autonomy to all," enthused La Ribot, who did not hesitate to embark on the adventure when she was invited to create a piece for the company's performers. The end result has been co-produced among others by La Ribot's company, the Théâtre du Grütli and La Bâtie. "It's a magnificent extravagance, as is all new creation," she said in her softly accented French. "I fell in love with the island, its people, everything. I was touched by the company, the location of Madeira."

It all takes place in the Fanal, an "ancient forest where erosion, moisture, and twisted trees form the most wondrous setting ever." Five disparate characters, including a "modern fauna à la Vivienne Westwood" and a sleeping beauty in silver knickers emerge from a Brueghelian landscape. "It's a very busy, baroque piece, which brings to life their dreams and desires on stage." It is a piece that dances to difference.

Between laughter and tears

A video of the company's thirty-odd members, shot by Portuguese filmmaker Raquel Freire, plays in the background. Filmed entirely in the dense fog of Madeira's laurel forest, it plays with a unique world of sunless days. "It is completely fantastic, in both senses of the word. A film that floods the retina," she says.

La Ribot first travelled to Madeira to meet the dancers in June 2017. She returned home with her heart overcome, between laughter and tears, and the idea of a title: *Happy Island*. “From this title I found on my return, everything started to make sense; an ironic, or rather paradoxical title.” She returned several times between November and May, where the piece premiered at municipal theatre and contemporary art museum Casa das Mudas.

Happy Island is a reflection on the concept of an island and isolation. The Geneva-based choreographer from Madrid notes that this “isolation can be much greater for someone living with Down syndrome.” La Ribot, née Maria Ribot, an intuitive and ingenious creator, listened to the desires of her five performers, for whom she also composed solos.

The intelligence of bodies

“I worked with their fantasies, their dreams. There is a lot of them in this performance, although there is also a lot of me. We rehearsed with erotic objects; they would spend two or three hours improvising, super-concentrated, with a complete stage intelligence.”

She recounts with passion the genesis of Maria’s solo, which opens the piece in snakeskin lycra. “After arriving at the studio, a place of research, in a wheelchair, Maria took ten minutes to get on the floor, poetically, alone, beautiful, completely independent.” At that moment, La Ribot knew that *Happy Island* would start with this solo. “For me, dance began to be dance when we touched the ground, in the twentieth century. The ground, plastic, not dangerous, places the disciplines horizontally. It is also a place of sharing. Maria suddenly revealed my way of thinking. This overwhelmed me.”

In the wake of her piece *40 Espontáneos*, created with amateurs in 2004, La Ribot continued to examine our understanding of the other. “We all have an intelligent body, hidden by codes, fears, desires. This body had to be found. I thought I had found something quite fundamental at the time, but I still had to refine my ideas with *Happy Island*.”

“It is in problems that one has to eke out the possible. I worked in the same way with the Ballet de Lorraine and its wonderful dancers. I had to communicate with them and make a piece in a given timeframe. The research is the same with classical bodies, amateurs, or the members of my company.” The question she asks is where in the body resides the intelligence to say and to speak on stage. The answer will come naturally from this Wednesday.