

Dancing a crack through the catastrophe

A Portrait of Choreographer Zoë Demoustier

by Hans Depelchin

The sunlight pours over a square in Marseille. Choreographer and theatre maker Zoë Demoustier (°1995) looks up at the opera house, an architectural gem in neoclassical style. As she gazes at it, she thinks of that other opera house, in Paris. “My greatest dream,” she muses, “is to storm the Bastille.” Perhaps that dream is less far away than she thinks. Later she adds a nuance: “I mean my greatest professional dream.” Beneath the advancing spring of southern France, we talk about her artistic trajectory, her private dreams, and her longing for a place of grounding.

Waves

For several years now, Demoustier’s name has been resonating throughout the contemporary dance landscape. She has established herself with provocative and unconventional performances such as *Unfolding an Archive*, *What Remains*, and the youth production *Beating Choir / Cœur Battant*. In just under ten months, on 12 February 2026, her next work, *Hear the Silence*, will premiere. Despite the large-scale production by laGeste, in collaboration with Ultima Vez, KVS and STUK, she remains remarkably calm about it.

“I find it important to give each project the time it needs,” she says. Yet her schedule is filling up smoothly through 2027: after *Hear the Silence* come *The Wave* and *State of Emergency*.”

“Is Belgium still on the map as a dance country?” she asks aloud. “Is the Bastille really waiting for work by young Belgian creators? In the 1980s and 1990s, it certainly was. That’s what *The Wave* is about. In that piece, I explore the lasting influence of the *Flemish Wave* on contemporary theatre, and the way canonical works by artists such as Wim Vandekeybus and Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker have been archived in the bodies of performers and audiences. As a young creator, I need to position myself in relation to that generation. At the same time, I want to respond, to put something in return. Eventually, new choreographers will emerge who may position themselves in relation to me. That continuous movement of incorporating and reacting fascinates me because it also gives artists a shared ground, a kind of channel trough which we can flow. The connections between past, present, and future are narrative connections. I create new stories within existing frameworks and give my dancers the opportunity to create their own stories within my framework. That builds a network of stories. It’s an incredible richness, and the choice of which story to show is always political.”

Demoustier studied mime at the Academy for Theatre and Dance in Amsterdam. There she was introduced to the movement techniques of Étienne Decroux. His *zéro*, the zero point, is always the body itself. But even at that zero point, a body carries meaning; it is never neutral. That fascinates her. In no choreography does she use dancers instrumentally. They help tell the story, even when they are standing still.

The tagline of *Hear the Silence* is a quote from Bertolt Brecht: “*In the dark times, will there also be singing? Yes, there will also be singing. About the dark times.*” For Zoë, it is a plea for the political importance of art and its subversive power in turbulent times.

“As a creator, whether you like it or not, you are embedded in a world that shapes, influences, and guides you. The story you choose to tell is both a personal and a political decision, and

it has an impact on reality. Whether your audience is thousands in an opera house or a hundred in a cultural center in Flanders, in essence, that doesn't matter. What matters is that you have touched people with your story. We need to hold onto each other more, both literally and figuratively."

The arts can offer a counterbalance. They can be a lifeline. They catch us when everything falls apart. But stories can also hurt. A foundation can be fragile, slippery, and unstable. With *Hear the Silence*, Zoë delves deeper into the themes first explored in *Unfolding an Archive*: war, disruption, destruction, and the search for new ways to represent the world. This quest is enhanced by the use of sound and a precise, industrial scenography. Imagination has been an essential part of her artistic practice from the very beginning.

To bounce back

As a child, Demoustier saw *Full Moon* by Pina Bausch and knew she wanted to dance.

"In my memory, I was sitting in the front row. On stage, a woman was spinning in circles. Her hair flew around, and there was water on the stage, which splashed onto my face as she whirled. The effect of theater, and of empathy in general, has a lot to do with mirror neurons. The intense movement I witnessed triggered something in my own body. I began to spin myself, almost as if I became her. By watching that woman, I became that woman. That's when I knew I wanted to be a dancer. I realize now that such a moment is constructed post factum. Memories are always unreliable. I explored this theme in *What Remains*. For that piece, I investigate the traces humans leave behind as we approach the end of our lives. I work with performers aged 4 to 74. In the youngest, I recognize a part of myself, from when I first began. And then I tell this story. Perhaps one day, they will realize their own dream because they saw someone like me, hair flying in circles."

Demoustier took classes in Leuven at the dance school of Aike Raes. At the age of eight, she performed with Kabinet K and Fabuleus. She created works in which her brother Misha and sister Lahja also danced. After graduating from the directing program at RITCS, she created *Unfolding an Archive*, in which she embodies her father's war archive. For a modest girl who almost accidentally ended up at an audition by taking someone else's place, she has surprisingly strong love for the stage.

"I have more self-confidence on stage than in a nightclub. On stage, I choose to be watched. On the dance floor, the rules and expectations are less clear, the directions less defined. Not that I become a wallflower, but the threshold feels much higher. Then the shy girl comes back to the surface. It's also about control. On stage, I know roughly what will happen. Everyday life is far less predictable. That makes it exciting, of course, but also frightening."

Demoustier's conviction to dance was strengthened by encountering role models at key moments; women like Pina Bausch, Berlinde De Bruyckere, PJ Harvey, and Frida Kahlo. She met Frida Kahlo when she fell during a dance class; a pivotal moment. Her body began to protest. She decided to treat what is generally seen as a limitation as an asset. That fall marked the beginning of a process that would lead to her first solo and eventually to Amsterdam. Increasingly, she understood that any body can be the starting point for a story or a performance—not only the perfect, highly trained dance body. Even in her early work, the body appears as an archive: where is pain stored, and how does a body transform certain traumas into movement? The body is fragile and constantly in transformation.

"Since that fall, my prejudices about the dance world began to become clear. For years, I had been confronted with a certain standard, a form of perfection I was supposed to strive for. But there is no beauty in perfection. I started looking differently at the rigid language of ballet and wanted to focus on authenticity and vulnerability."

Her choice is also an artistic statement: by working with both older people and children, with professional and semi-professional dancers, Demoustier takes a stand against an art world that can sometimes become disconnected from reality. She creates art that embraces the world, allowing light to enter. As Walter Benjamin put it: "*to make a crack in the continuum of catastrophe.*" "*There's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in,*" sings Leonard Cohen.

For *Hear the Silence*, she is working exclusively with professional dancers for the first time. Yet even in this piece, she seeks a starting point that audiences can recognize and relate to.

"The starting point is the relationship between war and music. Beyond Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*, I drew inspiration during the research phase from the work of Galina Ustvolskaya, the Russian 'woman with the hammer,' whose compositions are extremely disruptive. Through them, I arrived at the French composer Maurice Ravel, with his *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand*, written for a friend who had lost an arm at the front. But Ravel also wrote a *Waltz*. The waltz is a dance that everyone has an image of a cliché dance, representing the prosperity and hope of nineteenth-century Europe. That dance became a symbol of the end of an era, a Europe shattered by World War I. Can we still waltz among the ruins? That question led me to the contemporary club scene. Even in war zones, people continue to dance, for example, in nightclubs in Kiev and Beirut. People always find a way to be resilient and celebrate life. In the movements, I explore ways to deconstruct the waltz, letting it transform into rhythms more suited to the frenzy of a club. Music and sound therefore play a fundamental role. Even though I cannot fully imagine the experience of a war victim, I recognize that same resilience in myself when faced with setbacks. That resilience emerges in connection with others."

Growing

Where there is connection, there is community. Demoustier regards everyone involved in her performances - the performers, the artistic team, the partners - the audience-as mini-communities, each with dynamics of mutual dependence and freedom.

"During the process of *What Remains*, it was wonderful to witness a friendship developing between a 4-year-old child and a 74-year-old man. Performers often embark on a long-term journey, and I find it immensely rewarding to see the bonds between them grow. More than box office numbers, what matters to me is giving performers and audiences an experience they will never forget."

She also gives concrete form to the importance of care and connection in the sector on a structural level. To bridge the gap between arts education and the professional artistic field, a gap she personally experienced upon graduating, she co-founded *Platform In De Maak*, a non-profit organization that provides a stage for emerging artists. They are given the opportunity to share expertise, ask questions, meet people, and break the isolation that often comes with creating art.

"At art schools, emerging artists are often told that no one is waiting for them. So we thought: if no one is waiting for us, we'll do it ourselves. This creates space to create

and share unfinished work with an audience. In this way, emerging artists can embed themselves in a kind of collective, a safe and stimulating environment."

Demoustier is very entrepreneurial and also involves friends and family in her artistic projects. Yet she considers it important to keep entrepreneurship and artistry separate.

"Perhaps I am always an artist, but not always an entrepreneur. I want to make time to cook for friends and family, without constantly being in a professional mode. I need to be able to get bored sometimes, to feel the spontaneity and playfulness of creating again, without any sense of purpose. Conversely, I can sometimes feel a sense of purpose in things unrelated to the performing arts, for example, the urge to create a travel guide. That energy is part of who I am as a person. It stems from the desire to make the most of life, both personally and professionally. My hope for a flourishing career and my belief in the idyll of a loving family life do not exclude each other. But despite my optimism and resilience, I know it's important to pause occasionally before taking the next step. Otherwise, drive can start to feel like performance pressure, and that restlessness turns into tension. Things need space to move."

Demoustier turns thirty this year. She feels that she is growing up alongside her work. While her first pieces were rooted in the anecdotes of her own life, her perspective has now broadened. The starting point for an artistic exploration is increasingly shaped by current events, combined with an ongoing investigation into how experiences and stories are stored in bodies and transmitted through them. Does her own birthday also mark a turning point in her work?

"What Remains set in motion elements that define my artistic practice and that I plan to explore more deeply in the coming years. I want to create performances that stem from my artistic vision, while also being able to move an audience."

She understands "moving" in the broadest sense. *What Remains* begins with an emotional theme, dealing with dementia, Alzheimer's, and forgetting in general. In terms of style, Demoustier chooses repetitive movement patterns, clear, minimalist phrases that interlock, influence each other, and then expand. These take place within a dark, geometric scenography, which can feel alienating or even distant to the viewer. This choice allows for extreme contrasts here and there, with bright colors and dreamy passages—almost hallucinatory—which cast the whole in a new light. Music and sound play a distinctive, autonomous role. This will continue to be the case in her future performances.

"Whether I am twenty-eight or thirty makes little difference. But I do want to continue riding this momentum. I have found a way of working that suits me and a style that defines me. Moreover, I am fortunate to collaborate with wonderful people I trust. And if I can share coffee and enjoy the sun with those same people, I count myself lucky. Storming the opera is not a prerequisite for that."

The southern French sun sinks lower along its arc toward the west, painting the sky above Marseille a soft pink. As she rises and turns her back to the opera, I tell her that I was born on the song *Breek de stilte* by Stef Bos.

"Silence does not exist. Just as a zero point does not exist. Fortunately, not that would drive us mad. Silence only exists in the spaces between sounds. From that, everything is born. Listen."

Hear the Silence will premiere on February 12, 2026, at the KVS.