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The cast of *Out of Context* want to keep dancing the piece every year, until they die: “We want to grow old with it together”

For sixteen years now, Alain Platel’s acclaimed piece *Out of Context - for Pina* has been performed by its original cast, now in their forties and fifties. And they intend to keep going until they die. “We weren’t ready to say goodbye to each other.”

From the rehearsal studio of Leuven’s arts centre Opek come the sounds of mooing cows, interspersed with a comic a cappella version of Nelly’s *Hot in herre*. For most dance lovers, that rings a bell: *Out of Context - for Pina* is being rehearsed here. Alain Platel’s tribute to Pina Bausch was an immediate hit at its premiere in 2010, earning a 15-minute standing ovation at the Avignon Festival.

This newspaper also crowned *Out of Context* as one of the 25 most remarkable works of the 21st century. It is a fine example of Platel’s “dance language of the unconscious”, based on his experience as an orthopaedagogue working with people with disabilities. Audiences were captivated by the ecstatic dancers sniffing each other like animals in their underwear, and performing spasmodic, tic-filled fake karaoke to Madonna and Salt-N-Pepa.

Platel never expected it to become an evergreen, as he writes in his new book ‘Een tachtiger die zeventig wordt’ (An Octogenarian Turning Seventy), which will be launched this week during the Body of Work festival at STUK Leuven. The set-up of *Out of Context* is strikingly simple: nine dancers wrapped in a red fleece blanket, two microphones—that’s it. “The whole piece was really a stopgap,” the choreographer explains. “The original plan was to create a production for Gerard Mortier at the

New York City Opera, but it was suddenly postponed by two years. I still wanted to do something with that fantastic group of dancers, but due to lack of budget it had to be without live music, costumes or set.”

From Sevilla to Seol

Perhaps it has something to do with the timeless nature of the piece, but since 2010 *Out of Context* has been performed more than 300 times worldwide, from Seville to Seoul. What is remarkable is that it is still danced by the original cast, now aged between 44 and 52. “During our last tour in Tokyo in 2013, we weren’t ready to say goodbye to the piece—we were so strongly bonded as a group,” recalls Rosalba Torres Guerrero, for many years a key figure in Platel’s company Les Ballets C de la B.

“That’s when dancer Romeu Runa came up with a wild idea: what if we performed the piece again every year until we die? What if we grow old with it together? Our costumes fit into an airplane locker, and beyond that we only need our bodies, so logistically it seemed feasible.”

When dance productions are successful enough to remain in the repertoire, they are usually passed on after five to ten years to a new generation with greater physical stamina. But that didn’t apply to *Out of Context*. “Platel isn’t a classical choreographer who demonstrates what we have to do,” says dancer Ross McCormack. “He works in a task-based way with a lot of improvisation. So the piece is completely tailored to who we are. We might be able to teach the technical steps to a new cast, but our personalities? No. Not to mention our group dynamic—we share a kind of frequency.”

Out of Context features dancers from Portugal, New Zealand, France and South Korea. Each year it is a complex puzzle to align their schedules again. The agreement is that they only cancel in the event of a death, the birth of a child, or major force majeure. “It’s one of the greatest commitments in my life,” says Guerrero. “But it’s an incredible gift—you see your colleagues change physically, have children, deal with loss. We really want to keep this going because we care so deeply about each other.”



Rosalba Torres Guerrero. © Sophie Deiss



Ross McCormack. © Sophie Deiss

Confronting their changing bodies is part of it, and creates new meaning. “At the time of creation we were at the peak of our careers,” says Guerrero. “This year, for the first time, we’re all noticing that we’ve grown older. Some movements are more painful, our energy is a bit lower. For now we manage with a few small adjustments that the audience won’t notice. But in the future that will become more difficult. At the same time, the performance is now much richer. We no longer need to be virtuosic—instead we bring maturity and emotional depth.”

Grey hair

Platel himself feels the piece hasn't changed much since 2010. "I'm always frustrated that the dancers still look so good," he laughs. "I always give them the freedom to change things, but so far they don't want to. They don't even feel the need to update the pop songs. Fortunately, a few people now have grey hair—so you can at least feel the passage of time a little."

Soon, Platel will travel to Wuppertal to see *Kontakthof - Echoes of '78*, Pina Bausch's famous piece, performed once again by its original 1978 cast—for the very last time, as some are now approaching eighty. "The older dancers watch video footage of their younger selves—it's very moving. Something like that could perhaps one day happen with *Out of Context* too. Everything will depend on the health of the group. It's quite striking what happens to your body when you turn seventy—I feel that myself every day."



Choreograaf en regisseur Alain Platel. © Fred Debrock

They also need to beware of becoming sentimental. "It becomes pitiful if we try too hard to recreate the past," says McCormack. "That might be amusing for five minutes, but after that you've seen enough. Rather, we want to keep the spirit of the work alive and let it evolve with who we are now."

Platel, who will present a new creation *Soûl* next year at Opera Ballet Vlaanderen to music by Gustav Mahler, is in any case happy for them to continue performing *Out of Context* even after his death. He has never hidden the fact that he cares little about his legacy. "Some companies are almost militaristic in their approach to repertoire. As far as I'm concerned, anyone is free to use my material—they don't need permission. As artists, we all steal, and I'm curious to see how my work will live on."

Out of context - for Pina

From 28 to 30 April at 30CC (Leuven). On 30 April, Alain Platel will also present his book there. The Body of Work festival runs until 13 May.