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(red.).

***50 Jaar Ballet Vlaanderen:
Van Jeanne Brabants tot
Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui.***



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Right upon opening *50 Jaar Ballet Vlaanderen* (*50 Years Ballet Flanders*), my eyes fell on a photograph I immediately recognized. The picture shows six figures – some barefoot, others wearing soft dance shoes –

assembled in and around Rudolf von Laban’s icosahedron. It was not the first time I saw this picture. I have always been intrigued by this image of the 18-year-old Jeanne Brabants in one of her classes with Lea Daan during the late interwar period. The presence of the icosahedron in this photograph is meaningful: as a geometrical form, it not only highlights a spatial architecture, but as soon as someone starts moving in it, it also reveals temporal tensions between mover and form. As such, the image exemplifies how Brabants was practicing dance at a peculiar intersection: while seeking for a clear and communicative movement language as stored within the roots of expressionist dance, she was still drawn to the refinement and technical virtuosity of classical ballet. This far from evident convergence between modernity and ancient regime would also inform the dance company she founded in 1969, “Ballet van Vlaanderen” (the Ballet of Flanders).

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of Ballet Flanders, dramaturge Koen Bollen and dance historian Staf Vos have edited a lavishly illustrated volume that guides the reader through the history of this Antwerp-based ballet company in eight chapters. The book is structured according to the artistic directorships that each left

their distinctive mark on the company's identity, apart from the name changes it underwent (to Royal Ballet of Flanders in 1976 and to Ballet Flanders in 2014). The various contributions in the volume make clear how the main challenge for all artistic directors was to find a balance not only between contemporary and classical dance traditions, but also between a local and international purview for the company. Attaining that equilibrium seemed to be the precondition for attracting the gaze of the public as well as for meeting the need for political support and public resources. In fifty years, seven directors have passed on the torch, whereas some amongst them have even thrown it down.

Lieve Dierckx's prologue to the book, "Vrouw tussen twee werelden" ("Woman between Two Worlds"), chronicles the life of Jeanne Brabants (1920-2014), who as the founder and director of the Ballet of Flanders obviously figures as a central protagonist in the company's history. During the first forty years of her life, Brabants would arduously seek for suitable contexts that could still her passion for movement long before she would even think of founding her own ballet company. Her parents did not allow her to take dance classes with the soloists of the Opera, even though

Brabants was completely mesmerized by the dancing she saw at opera performances. A more "decent" alternative, however, came up soon: Lea Daan, who had studied dance at the Folkswangschule in Essen, worked in Antwerp as a dedicated teacher in the tradition of modern expressionist dance. From then on, the path to dance and movement opened up for the young Brabants. Together with her sisters Jos and Annie, she created in 1943, at the height of World War II, the "Dansgezelschap van de Gezusters Brabants" (Dance Company of the Sisters Brabants). Over the next two decades, Jeanne Brabants became renowned for her excellent skills as a dance educator. She had developed these skills earlier through her work at the "Brabantsschool" (Brabants School), which was a school for gymnastics, acrobatics, layman's dance, and ballet she founded in 1941. It operated alongside the dance company of the Brabants sisters, and also offered opportunities to take supplementary training courses in various dance techniques abroad (17). These efforts resulted in her appointment as a coordinator and dance teacher of the first, formal dance education program at the "Koninklijke Vlaamse Opera" (Royal Flemish Opera) in 1951. When Brabants started noticing that foreign companies were taking over the

virtuosic dancers she had trained herself, she established in 1966 the Studio Ballet for advanced dance students seeking to start a professional career. From then on, and supported by state reforms that increased the autonomy of the region of Flanders within Belgium, Brabants was only one step away from founding Flanders's first ballet company in 1969.

The actual first chapter of the book, "Het pionierswerk van Jeanne Brabants" ("The Pioneering Work of Jeanne Brabants"), focuses on the period from 1970 to 1984, when Brabants was the company's artistic director. As the authors Koen Bollen, Rina Barbier, and Staf Vos point out, during those first years, the Ballet of Flanders still occupied a semi-autonomous role within the opera houses of Antwerp and Ghent. This subservient status of dance was reflected in the fact that new seasons of the opera houses were developed by first determining which operas would be featured and only then could Brabants start to compose her own dance programs (which were often "mixed bills" rather than evening-length pieces). A pure autonomous role for the art of dance, as she advocated when founding the Ballet of Flanders, did not (yet?) seem possible. Still, Brabants continued her quest for a solid technical, artistic, and financial future for the company. She considered modern ballet the most suitable format to instigate those developments. Having

laid the groundwork, however, her directorship ended in 1984.

The subtitle of the following chapter "Flamboyant virtuoos en creatief klassiek" ("Flamboyant Virtuoso and Creatively Classic") serves as a denominator for Valery Panov's relatively short directorship from 1984 until 1987. In this contribution, Rina Barbier outlines how many initial educational activities of the company were cut back after 1984, as a means to direct all efforts towards the creation of large productions. Evening-length classical ballets would now attract public attendance *and* generate positive press reviews. Robert Denvers's artistic leadership from 1987 until 2005 is discussed in Lise Uytterhoeven's chapter subtitled "Balletklassiekers, neoklassieke parrels en hedendaagse huischoreografie" ("Ballet Classics, Neoclassical Gems, and Contemporary In-House Choreography"). Denvers did not only propose a return to abstract modern ballet (more specifically, Balanchine's work), but he also reinstalled a firmer alliance with the local professional dance education. In the next chapter, subtitled with the phrase "We Had a Good Thing Going", Wilfried Eetezonne discusses how in 1985 a department for the creation of musicals was added to the structure of the Royal Ballet of Flanders, leading to a successful output of different kinds of musicals until 2004. Kathryn Bennett's direction period, which ran from 2005 until 2012 and was

characterized by William Forsythe's choreographic influence, is discussed in Judith Delmé's contribution "Een nieuwe richting en een internationaal profiel" ("A New Direction and an International Profile"). In his chapter "Vernieuwing met het oog op het verleden onder Assis Carreiro" ("Innovation with an Eye on the Past under Assis Carreiro"), Steven De Belder writes about what turned out to be a transition period for the company under Assis Carreiro's directorship from 2012 to 2014. Finally, in the Epilogue titled "Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, man van vele werelden" ("Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Man of Many Worlds"), Koen Bollen focuses on the current directorship of Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui since 2015. As these three final chapters demonstrate, the plurality of contemporary movement languages that by the beginning of the twenty-first century became fairly established also contributed to the recognition of the Royal Ballet of Flanders as a company with its own artistic merits. Brabants's initial challenge to create an autonomous space for dance within – or rather, next to – the existing institutional framework of the opera houses seemed to be resolved in the new millennium. However, already in 2014 (and shortly before Brabants passed away), the Royal Ballet of Flanders and the Flemish Opera were obliged by the Flemish government to merge once again. From then on, the company presented itself as Ballet Flanders.

The authors succeed beautifully in creating a clear and concise overview of each period. While reading, I paused to ponder over several of the images in the book (and almost each of the 223 pages of this book contains one). These images, however, raised questions on the editorial choice to have each single chapter focusing on the main characteristics of the subsequent artistic directorships in order to sketch a chronological evolution of the company. The photographs, which illustrate the text rather than providing the orbits around which the text circulates, made me wonder about the histories held within them: who are all those different dance artists frozen in and through time? Where are they now? What role did they play, together with the spotlighted directors of Ballet Flanders, in creating a prolific environment for dancers, choreographers, spectators, and dance students? At the end of the book, there is a complete list of the 1970-2020 repertoire. However, the archival sources are not included in the general bibliography; instead, they are mentioned in the notes of each chapter. A clear overview of the archival resources of the company, as well as an indication of the different *loci* where these resources are preserved and how they can be accessed, might have been helpful to understand *where* and *how* the past of the company is safeguarded, outside of the margins of this book.

Thinking further about margins, one wonders whether the strong focus on artistic directorship in this book casts aside other voices and steers them too much towards the periphery? Admittedly, a collage of citations from dancers, spectators, journalists, and independent choreographers who have worked with the company fills three opening and three closing pages. These edges of the book stirred my curiosity to read more perspectives beyond the frame of the artistic directors with their dedicated chapters. Could these voices from *beyond* the margins also complement the story which unfolds center stage; the story of *50 jaar Ballet Vlaanderen (50 Years Ballet Flanders)*? While I much appreciate the measured pace of the subsequent contributions and while the vast underlying archival preparation work for this book certainly does not go unnoticed, these questions linger beneath the surface of the different chapters. As such, these questions do not undermine, but rather emphasize the significance of this publication.

Let us return to that first picture that caught my eye, which shows a young Jeanne Brabants dancing outside of the icosahedron, not barefoot like the others but wearing her dance shoes. She seems deeply immersed in a collective practice of Laban's B-scale movements. Rudolf von Laban once said: "(...) movement is a suitable medium to penetrate more deeply into the nature of space, and

to give a living experience to its unity with time" (36). After the impressive chronological presentation of *50 Jaar Ballet Vlaanderen (50 Years Ballet Flanders)* through the lens of the company's artistic directors, we could perhaps imagine a next spiraling movement. This spiral would lead readers, archivists, and authors alike in a more expansive understanding of the forces that Ballet Flanders exerted on and received from other local and international dance vectors. A more diversified reading of this particular history spanning half a century could serve as an incentive to connect to, as well as to shed light on, the voices that (at least in this publication) are present only in the margins or even completely absent. As such, we could learn, like Brabants on the picture from 1938, to extend beyond our own kinesphere. A clear and plain understanding of the past is what this magnificent book offers to its readers; the virtuosity to play with that past now appears as a next possible gesture.

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Works Cited

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