

# ballet tanz

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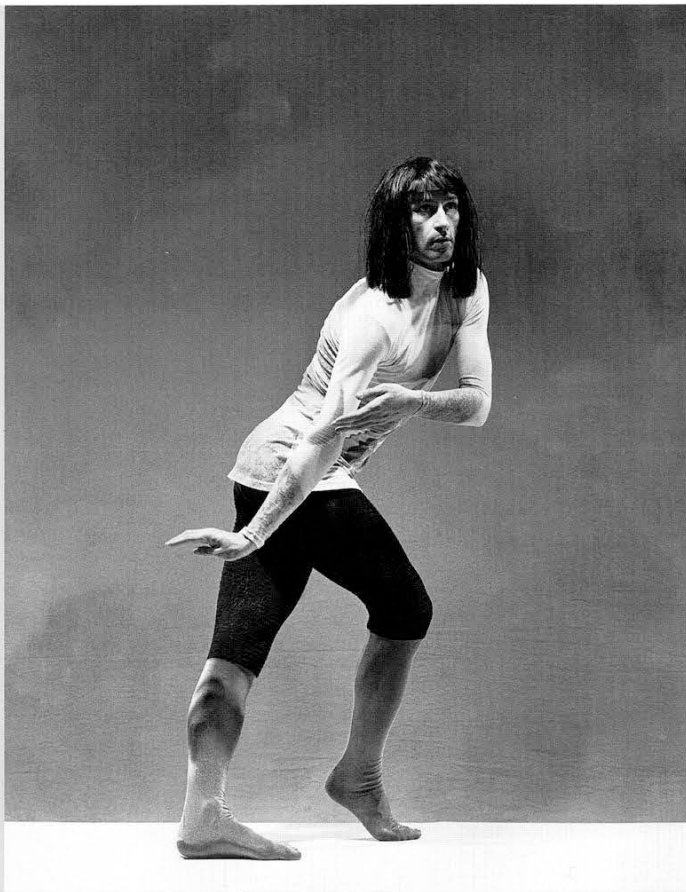
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## Contemporary Dance in Catalonia

### Profiles of María Rovira and María Muñoz

by Dieter Jaenicke

For many years Catalonia – and that generally means Barcelona – has had a name as one of the most creative centres of contemporary dance in Europe.

At the beginning of the eighties Cesc Gelabert and Angels Margarit were the leading dancers on the Barcelona scene and thus of the whole of Spain; their peers, now all in their thirties and early forties, include Ramón Oller's *Metros*, Sabine Dahrendorf's *Danat Danza*, María Rovira's *Transit*, Juan Carlos García's *Lanonima Imperial* and María Muñoz und Pep Ramis' *Mal Pelo*. There is also now a whole crew of young choreographers and companies who've attracted notice in recent years and are gradually carving out an international career.

As in many other places, the Barcelona dance scene has developed not because of the particularly inspiring working conditions but despite the ignorance of local arts politicians. It took ages for even the more well-known companies to get a basic subsidy – something between 45,000 and 192,000 dollars a year. Payments are gradually falling behind schedule, meaning an immediate 10% depreciation through loan costs. Most companies are still in a precarious situation today and, after more than ten years of successful artistic work and international recognition, are still having to get by without reasonable financial support or bearable working conditions. The best efforts of Ferran Mascarell,

Barcelona's sharp arts politician and dance lover, have unfortunately brought about little change in this state of affairs. Worth mentioning, however, is the 'Mercat Dels Flors', one of Mascarell's initiatives where at the end of the eighties a specialist dance theatre was opened under the direction of *Fura Dels Baus* co-founder Andres Morte. The survival of Barcelona's contemporary dance companies has always been and still is made possible more by international centres and festivals than support by local agencies: Cesc Gelabert has been closely associated with Berlin's Hebbel-Theater for several years; Angels Margarit is something like house choreographer to Hamburg's International Summer Theater Festival, as well as to the Vooruit Kunsten Centrum in Ghent; and *Mal Pelo* has been constantly supported over the years by the Klapstuk-Festival in Leuven. María Rovira, who received the prize for Choreography of the Year for 1996 in Barcelona, is this year devising a choreography commissioned by the prestigious American Dance Festival. Cesc Gelabert, Juan Carlos García and Vicente Saez from Valencia were also invited to the Komische Oper in Berlin as guest choreographers.

The high-pressure Olympic Games, which supposedly brought prosperity and an enormously heightened international profile to Barcelona were followed by a depression in the arts: the dance companies are still bemoaning the empty coffers which resulted from the mega-event, and the expensive Autumn Festival has disappeared without a trace. The Grec-Festival, in the past one of the guarantors for the dance scene as co-producer with many companies, has this year withdrawn from its agreements with *Mudances* and *Mal Pelo*. Both the Grec-Festival and the Mercat Dels Flors appear to be making room for more conservative programming under their new directors. 1996 sees Catalanian dance companies working at a top-flight international level – but less and less in Catalonia. Angels Margarit has found co-producers for her new piece 'Arbre de Te' in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, but so far there isn't a single contract for a single performance in Catalonia.

#### María Rovira – Transit

María Rovira is 'La Loca' (the crazy woman) among Catalanian choreographers. Constantly traversing the globe, she works in Cuba and Costa Rica, in the USA and then back in Spain. She encourages young talent all over the world, and champions Latin American companies, planning and agitating with unbelievable energy. Now in her mid-thirties, she meets just as many friends on the streets of Havana as in Barcelona, and was the overnight star of last year's American Dance Festival, leading to an invitation to choreograph especially for the



festival this year. Early this year she celebrated a decade of her company *Transit* with current and former members in a retrospective of excerpts from five productions which drew the crowds for a three-week run in Barcelona. At Frankfurt's Mousonturm she drew a standing ovation early this year and has continued her success with the prize for the best choreography in Barcelona. She's received modest but stable funding and last year finally managed to find a permanent rehearsal space, built by herself and her company.

#### María Muñoz & Pep Ramis – Mal Pelo

'Bad Hair' is the meaning of the company name, and the history, self-image and artistic concept of choreographer couple María Muñoz and Pep Ramis is just as extraordinary. María Muñoz is the real avantgardiste of Catalanian dance: every movement seems like a reflection of itself; calls itself into question; steps out into unknown territory; withdraws, repeats itself; hesitant but precise in its hesitancy; exactly thought-out and staged. Researching untiringly without a thought as to conventions or the expectations of others, María Muñoz has been enriching the dance scene for years with her idiosyncratic creations, originally together with María Antónia in the *La Dux* company – but it is only since the collaboration with her partner Pep Ramis and his quieter, almost poetic expressive powers, flowing movements and spatial organisation that *Mal Pelo* has acquired its own unmistakable stage persona. Over the years the couple have deliberately gone for small-scale works for up to three

dancers to avoid the pressures and problems of larger productions. The centre for their work is a 300-year-old finca near Gerona; whoever works with *Mal Pelo* will have to go without the bright lights for a while at least. Ten or more people – dancers, musicians, designers, and technicians – live and work during production periods in the house where *Mal Pelo* have built their own small studio – the whole setup is one big arts workshop. The materials and elements of all the company's productions are to be found here – a lot of old wood and other material worked on by nature and time. In 'Peros Del Sur' (Dogs of the South), *Mal Pelo*'s most mature and successful work so far, they combine a fantastical spatial feeling with a surprising dramatic depth to create an enduring image of Mediterranean dance. The solo and duet programme 'Dol, Zarco' displays the genius of Pep Ramis in a very private piece inspired by the death of his father and a panorama of very varied choreographies by María Muñoz with musician/performer Tristan Holzinger.

Now the two Catalanian dancer/choreographers, who've been close friends for years but whose work could hardly be more different, have worked together on a joint choreography: 'Sao' was devised last autumn on Mallorca. Angels Margarit's harmonious style of dancery beauty contrasts with María Muñoz's choreographic elements set in harder details. 'Sao' draws its inspiration from the vistas of Mallorca's highlands, the experience of a week-long self-imposed exile in nature, but also from the individual strengths of the two personalities and exceptional dancers Angels Margarit and María Muñoz. □

body/soul theme runs through the work of many Catalanian choreographers; at its core is a utopianism that finds sensual expression in aesthetic form.

#### Cesc Gelabert

Similarly to the dances of Vaslav Nijinsky as seen in old photographs, Cesc Gelabert carves his movements into the space: a silhouette, an essential plasticity, a physical artifice: the body draws its shaping force from a crooked palm; the dancer visualises the space in a broken posture, his positioning on stage imparts significance.

In other words: the body writes a text and the dance speaks a language whose vocabulary consists of the limbs, whose grammar is the relationship to the space and whose rhythm rises from the unfolding of movements. This text is distanced from the dancer, who writes it through his/her interpretation.

This understanding of choreography can also be seen as a break with the contemporary discourse within which the dancer strives for authenticity, to bring him/herself to expressivity. In this Cesc Gelabert distances himself from a main branch of contemporary dance that he himself has so influentially worked within, most recently in his 'Requiem'.

#### The Transformation of Symbols

Cesc Gelabert is perfectly at home in artistic traditions: in 1988, when he danced an excerpt from 'Salome' in the courtyard of Berlin's Martin-Gropius-Bau between the Roman sculptures, bringing the historical space to life with his emotional gestures, it was plain how much he creates out of Mediterranean culture, how closely he is bound to Barcelona as an historic city on the ancient sea. His choreographies always include the historical perspective that links the modern movement and gestural vocabulary with a reference system on a historical basis. In Gelabert's choreographies the ancient symbols are transformed into the present, constituting the background against which the individual is linked with the blood memory of human culture. When, in his 'Requiem', a choreography on death (premiered 1987 in Barcelona) Gelabert makes the sign of the cross on stage, he has taken an hour to reach this point; a postmodern dance could do it right at the start. Deeply rooted as he is in Ibero-Mediterranean culture, Cesc Gelabert has internalised western symbolism and gesture, something which is exemplified in 'Belmonte', the choreography in which he tracks the myth of the legendary Spanish bullfighter. In ritualised forms, the confrontation with ceremony and death, the choreographer touches upon handed-down emotional formulations which are reshaped by the dancers into contemporary configurations, thus making plain what the Catalanian