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DANCE

An Experimental Choreographer Who Isn't Afraid of Failure

By SIOBHAN BURKE OCT. 18, 2016



The choreographer Jérôme Bel. “I’m not interested in becoming a museum of myself,” he said. “I want to do new things.” *Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times*

When the French choreographer Jérôme Bel unveils “MoMA Dance Company” next week at the Museum of Modern Art, the 25 performers will have had just three rehearsals as a group. Mr. Bel is the first to acknowledge that the experiment, as he calls it, might not work.

“I’m not afraid of failure,” he said recently by Skype from his Paris apartment. “It’s O.K. — even at MoMA.”

The latest in Mr. Bel’s explorations of what it means to dance and what constitutes a dancer, “MoMA Dance Company” features staff members from more than a dozen departments across the museum, ranging from Visitor Services to the Department of Painting and Sculpture. Most have no formal dance training. But that’s not a drawback for Mr. Bel, who has cleverly and

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irreverently been stripping dance to its essentials, often de-emphasizing learned technique, for 22 years.

“Many people say, ‘I’m not dancing, I can’t dance,’” he said. (Disarmingly animated in conversation, Mr. Bel completed many thoughts with gasps, sighs and other exclamations.) “But you just put on their favorite pop music and they dance. That’s enough for me.”

During the next two weeks, Mr. Bel, 52, will be the focus of Crossing the Line, the French Institute Alliance Française’s genre-blurring fall festival. “MoMA Dance Company,” performed twice a day in the museum’s atrium, Oct. 27-31, is presented with two older productions elsewhere: “The Show Must Go On” (2001), Oct. 20-22 at the Joyce Theater; and “Jérôme Bel” (1995), making its New York premiere at the Kitchen, Oct. 27-29.

Lili Chopra, a curator of Crossing the Line, described the series as a portrait of Mr. Bel that illuminates several distinct but related moments in his career. “What creates the link with Jérôme is how he reveals reality, how he’s not interested in theatrical illusion,” Ms. Chopra said.

Part of a generation of European dance artists that was heavily influenced, a few decades after its pinnacle, by Judson Dance Theater — the renegade collective that redefined theatrical dance in 1960s New York — Mr. Bel has been a central to the largely French movement known as “non-dance,” though he rejects that term, which he has called “the invention of a lazy journalist.”



“The Show Must Go On,” Mr. Bel’s piece featuring amateur and professional dancers.

Paula Lobo for The New York Times

Until a few years ago, Mr. Bel said, “there was very little dance in my dance pieces.” He continued: “I’m known for this. There were only actions. Of course, it was all about dance, but it was a discourse about dance — a meta-dance, or something like this.”

“The Show Must Go On” — which earned Mr. Bel a Bessie Award after its New York premiere at Dance Theater Workshop in 2005 — is a prime example. Its 10 amateur and 10 professional dancers spend much of the 80-minute piece simply standing, hugging or, at their most physical, doing the Macarena, to pop songs whose lyrics lend much of the meaning.

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“The big provocation of ‘The Show Must Go On’ is that there are 20 people onstage — great, sometimes famous dancers — and they don’t do anything,” Mr. Bel said. “The question at the time, in 2001, was, Why is theater still relevant?”

A similar question could be asked of the work itself. “People think it’s still relevant, which personally I doubt, but it’s the presenter who decides,” he said. While Mr. Bel doesn’t object to restaging past pieces, his passion lies in the present. “I’m not interested in becoming a museum of myself,” he said. “I want to do new things.” Recalling an interaction with students who had learned about his work in dance history class, he sounded amused and dismayed at his own canonization.

More recently, Mr. Bel has been exploring dance as “a tool for people to express things they can’t elsewhere,” he said. In “Disabled Theater” (2012), he worked with a cast of disabled actors. In last year’s “Ballet (New York),” performers of varying ages and abilities approached the same tasks in strikingly different ways, a structure also used in “Gala” (2015). While praised by some, Mr. Bel has also come under attack for only superficially celebrating difference, and for riding too fine a line between representation and exploitation.

Like the casts of other recent works, the members of “MoMA Dance Company,” assembled through an open call to the museum’s 750 staff members, will have some freedom: They choose their own costumes, music and choreography. Ana Janevski, a curator in the Department of Media and Performance Art, described Mr. Bel’s role as coordinating and supervising more than choreographing.

After decades spent deconstructing the apparatus of the theater, the museum is relatively new territory for Mr. Bel. When invited by the Modern to participate in its Artist’s Choice series, in which an artist builds an exhibition from the collection (he’s the first choreographer to receive such an invitation), his interest turned from the artwork to the people whose jobs, even if indirectly, revolve around caring for it.

“I’m more interested in human beings than in objects, obviously,” he said, holding up a coffee mug. “Look, it’s nothing — it’s a simple structure. A human being is so complicated, especially a dancing human being, especially a nonprofessional dancer.”