

Interview: Choreographer Jérôme Bel on Challenging the Dance World, and What Audiences Teach Him

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Credit: Herman Sorgeloos

Jérôme Bel's provocative work has been taking the dance world by storm since he made his debut two decades ago. Working on the fringe of the field, he constantly challenges preconceptions on what exactly makes a dance piece "a dance piece", by using non-professional performers, mischievous twists, and creating pieces that evolve organically with the passing of time. Fans of his work, or people waiting to see it for the first time, will have the opportunity to see three of his most prominent pieces as part of FIAF's Crossing the Line Festival. He has also created a new piece specifically for the Museum of Modern Art, which will see museum employees joining the ever growing canon of Bel performers. Read our conversation with Bel, in which he discusses working with MoMA, bringing his work to New York and what he learns from the audience.

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***Véronique Doisneau* shows the dancer as a worker. Considering how art is so romanticized, why was it important for you to show it as labor as well?**

Véronique Doisneau is a corps de Ballet dancer of the Paris Opera Ballet. She is a dancer among 150. She is not a star. She dances behind the stars. I thought it would be interesting to know about what her work is. We know about the stars but not about the corps de ballet dancers. The piece is a kind of documentary about the life of a corps de ballet dancer. And her work is not really romantic, much like that of most workers in the various segments of society. Of course she mostly performs ethereal young dead virgins but the work is kind of different.

As a choreographer you can make changes to your work on a daily basis, but once you've filmed a piece it will remain as it is forever. Does watching *Véronique Doisneau* in particular make for a difficult experience? Do you watch it and think of things you would have done differently?

Yes it could be different. There are two things I am not very proud of, and yes I can't change anything anymore. This is the big difference between cinema and theater. After a performance, you can always say, OK, it will be better tomorrow, but in films it is terrible, you don't have any chance to do it again, it is recorded forever. So you have to be very, very ready with your performance in order to record it. Usually I wait for the maximum of time before recording. For *Véronique* we made the film of the performance on her last performance ever on stage. It was meaningful to record this last performance as it would never be performed again. I suffered in the beginning to be forced to show the film instead of the performance but now I am very happy that we have this film, because otherwise we would have nothing left.

You've always given a voice to people who are ignored by society. Have you found that your work has become more relevant than ever in the face of the fear of the other that is propagating over Europe and America?

Well it is true that today the issue has become enormous. But I have always been suffering of social inequality since I was a teenager, since I started to develop a political consciousness. Inequality is something absolutely unbearable. This is the cause of most of the problems we have. Today more than ever, unfortunately.

You'll be showing *The Show Must Go On*, do you find that you have to make many changes to a piece that has become as well-known as this one? Are you ever worried audiences will know what to expect with one of your pieces?

No I haven't changed anything in the piece for many years because every performance is a new version of it, every night the performance of the same structure produces something different. There is always an expectation for a performance, that's why people come to the theater, get out of their home, travel through the city, pay for a ticket. Each spectator has her/his own expectation, and this is the most mysterious thing! This desire will negotiate with the performance, it will become a dialogue between the expectation of each member of the audience and what happens on stage. I cannot control this, and *The show must go on* is precisely about this, about this mysterious desire for representation. This is at the core of the theatrical experience.

How was the process of choreographing *Artist's Choice: MoMA Dance Company*? How will the artwork affect the piece?

It has been a total mess, we went through so many ideas, paths and failures. The encounter between dance and the Museum is a complicated one. Two artistic fields trying to understand each other. It has been very experimental, which is great in such a big institution! Finally I have decided to avoid any art works of the Museum, but instead to work with the human beings

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working in it. At least with them I could speak with, exchange and work. I have created a dance company in the MoMA, the MoMA Dance Company and the dancers are people from the staff.



Credit: Mussacchio Laniello

By opening up the idea of dancing at MoMA are you trying to draw a more personal connection between the audience and the art?

I don't know yet... We will see this soon.

For lack of better words, your work often sends people out the theater with thoughts dancing all over their mind. What have been some of the most insightful comments from the audience you've heard during post-show Q&A's?

Well, people explain the piece to me. The audience sees the work better than I do. I have an idea, go through an experimental process, try to find solutions to many problems, and then I don't really know what is visible. So it is always refreshing to hear the audience bring up things I've forgotten about, or which are very personal because my unconscious is also there in the middle of the stage. The audience is telling me what I have done.

Since you will be in New York, what classic Broadway musical would you like to choreograph?

Sorry, I can't do commercial works, I can't work on something which is already written. If I start a work it is because I don't know what will happen. It is research, speculation...something I don't know.