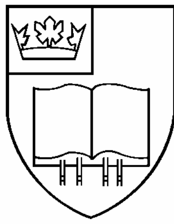

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Edouard Lock: showman or shaman?

by

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In the late 20th and early 21st century, dance has been shaped by a few great artists with the vision and the audacity to exploit and explore the possibilities of the artform in a new fashion. Two of them have spent their careers working in Europe: Pina Bausch, who is German and works in the area of neo-expressionist theatrical modernism, and William Forsythe, an American also working in Germany, whose interests lie in expanding the expressive potential of classical ballet. A third is Canadian: Edouard Lock.

I have called this talk "Edouard Lock: showman or shaman?" The Montreal choreographer has been called both, sometimes by the same person. "He is a cauldron of cultural semiotics," said one Vancouver critic, "or he is a triumph of meaninglessness."

I would like to argue that his work can be seen as a triumph of meaning built out of a triumph of meaninglessness, and if that sounds unlikely I'll explain further in a minute.

It is possible to argue, in fact, that he is both a mirror and a shaper of our cultural zeitgeist, and that his dances can function as complex metaphors for the social, spiritual and intellectual dislocation that has been brought about by the technological advances of our age.

Before I attempt this, however, I would like to talk a little about dance and dancing, and what it can do to us and for us.

I have a habit of telling people that I think dance is the most moving and communicative of all the artforms. Some days I actually believe that. It's not a story-telling art. As Martha Graham said, there are no mothers-in-law in ballet.

But I like the idea that dance becomes something greater than itself; that it crosses the borders of language and logic, lets you see beyond the interacting bodies on the stage and through the interplay of rhythm and pattern and energy to a greater *thing* – it could be an idea, or an emotion, or an intuition within yourself that the dancing has provoked – puts you in touch, at the best of times, with the intuitive, the spiritual, the transcendental… and you go away refreshed, thoughtful, energized.

It can be something as simple as the way a ballerina (so slight, so ephemeral) leans into the supporting arm of her dashing cavalier in *The Sleeping Beauty* and you get a sudden piercing understanding of what it is like to be defenceless, to trust, to be cared for. Or you can watch a tough little package of protoplasm

in running shoes and a corset and a scrap of stretchy black silk project herself bodily through the air onto someone who doesn't seem to be expecting her – but he turns at the last moment and plucks her from a beam of light and they fall and roll and in those moments you are given access to whole volumes of pure information about recklessness and bravery and relationships…

What you also get from all this, there in the dark in the company of three dozen or three hundred or three thousand strangers, is the most piercing affirmation of what it is to be human, what it is to try to make sense of inhabiting this watery structure: the bravery of this scrap of bone and sinew and skin, muscle and hair and brow, all at the mercy of this huge and apparently indifferent world… and, too, the intoxicating challenge of it: the thrill of opportunity, of the unlimited possibilities of the human condition.

Movement never lies, said Doris Humphrey, another great dance modernist, and what I think she was getting at was the way that what we see when a dancer dances before us is the naked truth, because the body can't express anything else: it's finite, visibly expressive. What plays into all that is the philosophers' idea of the "lived body" – the idea that we experience consciousness not only in our minds but through our bodies – meaning that the body is not simply the machine through which the mind expresses itself; the body is who we are and the place where we live.

The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty said that it is through the body that we can know the world, because the body is made of the same flesh as the world: not *actual* flesh, of course, but worldly matter. And it is through the body that we communicate with the world.

But because we are inside the body, we see everything from a particular vantage-point – *our* vantage-point. And since the world's boundaries are far greater than the limited perspectives of any single individual, the meaning of what we see is likely to be far more embracing than what we, in our limited way, perceive. What's more, we exist in a swirling, changing cloud of experience, and as soon as we think we understand, the cloud reforms and new possibilities present themselves.

All this has profound significance for dance, and particularly for the dance that is under discussion here. And an additional factor that makes all this hugely poignant, at least to me, is the transience of it all. The body – such an impermanent scrap of a thing – moves, and the dance is gone.

It is an artform that simultaneously defines and defies the ephemerality of existence. We have nothing but the body, and soon enough we will not even have the body. But it is that physicality that speaks so eloquently about the implications of mortality – and at the same time voices our defiance. No other artform speaks so directly about the fragile, temporary quality of life, or about the human instinct to transcend those bonds and aim for that perfect moment of self-realization.

I mention these things because they seem to me to be fundamental to our appreciation and understanding of the work of the choreographer Edouard Lock. His work challenges the mind-body duality. The two elements blend. In his work, the body is not meant to be analysed intellectually – he wants us to see without truly understanding – to allow the gesture and the rapid movement to create a sense of risk and disorientation that puts us in touch with intuition rather than the intellect.

His own belief is that this is the function of art – to destructure and destablilize reality in order to allow us to see. And when I talk of his work being a triumph of meaninglessness, I am referring to this destabilizing of our perception. By manipulating the speed and the shape of the bodies we look at, he disrupts our understanding of the world before us. He offers no overt significance that we can read. But there is a greater significance that we can intuit, if we are open to it.
But I am getting a little ahead of myself.

Edouard Lock was born to Spanish parents in Casablanca, Morocco, in 1955, and the family emigrated to Canada when he was three. He became interested in dance by accident. He was studying literature and film at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia) and saw a poster for a class in dance improvisation. He had always thought himself too awkward to take to the dance club floor, but he decided to give this class a try. It was a revelation – as if something or someone had switched on his future.

He danced with one of the great hothouses of new dance in Montreal, le Groupe Nouvelle Aire, in the mid-70s, and began quite soon to choreograph small pieces for that company. He did a commission for Les Grands Ballets Canadiens in 1979, and the following year founded his own company, Lock Danseurs, with a work called *Lili Marlene in the Jungle.*

The first time I saw his work was in the summer of 1981, at the Canada Dance Festival – a brief excerpt from *Oranges*. Then I went to Montreal that winter to see the full *Oranges,* staged in a tiny theatre – the Conventum – to tiny audiences. At that time the company was still Lock Danseurs; it didn't become La La La Human Steps until two years later, perhaps in acknowledgement of the growing collaborative importance of the dancers.

However, much of what would become recognized as the early trademark Lock look was already in place – the intensely filmic quality; the astonishing theatricality of the imagery (spray-painted graffiti was an element – very much of the age; from time to time dancers performed on a narrow pathway of milk bottles); the precise detail of gesture: a controlled sequence of pointings, small reachings, strokings, mainly for the hands and arms, with fingers adding emphasis: V-shapes down the sides of the nose, or horizontally from the eyes – intimate and vaguely erotic; and, perhaps most distinctively of all, the noisy, punk-flavoured chaos of rolling, risky, airborne movement, all catches and collisions. It felt riskily, excitingly new.

The work that followed, *Businessman In the Process of Becoming an Angel*, built on that. It moved at something approaching the speed of light, with dancers and musicians sharing equally in the risk-taking. And at its blazing heart was his muse, Louise Lecavalier, she of the mane of white-blonde hair and – in the physical challenge of what she did - a seemingly bottomless well of bravery and self-sacrifice: a flame on legs, someone once said.

Nothing was quite comprehensible. Nothing seemed quite under control. Like modern life. However, for all its apparent looseness and freedom, this was work that was meticulously crafted and precisely timed down to the microsecond: given the riskiness, it could hardly be otherwise.

The movement evolved from extremely slow research in the studio: Lock described it to me as a kind of animation, stringing together poses like single frames of movement to create a continuous filmic blur, carefully layered, slowly accreted, all about careful choices: the angle of the head, the flickering of the hands, each element precisely calculated.

And at its core you could – if you wanted – make it mean a few things for yourself: an attempt to come to terms with urban chaos yet still maintain a sense of personal integrity; the dog-eat-dog world of modern business (a cut-out dog called Max plays a large and linking part); the mundane businessman who, through the alchemic effect of dance, is briefly transformed to the angelic; a celebration of humanity in all its strangeness and contradiction.

At its debut at the National Arts Centre here, *Businessman* drew an audience of 127, 50 of whom left before the end. Hardly an overnight hit. Nevertheless, within a very short time Lock and his company became identified in the minds of many members of the dance community in Canada and abroad as a specific example of the new wave of Quebec artist.

And when we speak about Lock reflecting and shaping the spirit of his times, it is important to acknowledge the social context in which he built his company. He was an outsider. An immigrant. A Jew who was refused admittance to the Catholic school system. He understood social tension; he lived it. As a child, he knew what it was like to be picked on for being different.

So what he created was a company that used the language of movement as a communicative compromise - something that everyone could make contact with – a way to defuse cultural and social tension. This also tied in with Quebec's move away from a theatre of language to a theatre of gesture and movement, perhaps to make its cultural expressions better understood beyond its borders.

What is equally important to recognize is the context of theatrical performance in Quebec. Lock emerged as part of a Montreal performance scene (and a Montreal audience) that was fascinated with acrobatics and theatricality. The city is a hotbed of circus talent, but – as the late historian Iro Tembeck has pointed out – it is circus talent that is directed to a creative end, rather than a purely spectacular one: Cirque du Soleil being only one example.

So the influences were not only dance but mime, gymnastics and the theatre. From the 1980s on, much of the theatre movement that was made in Montreal was almost aggressively physical – not only the work of Lock, but choreographer Ginette Laurin and her company O Vertigo (she had her dancers take parachute lessons to prepare for her fantasies of flight and falling), Gilles Maheu and Carbone Quatorze (you remember those whirling bedsteads in *Le Dortoir*?), Jean-Pierre Perreault and other choreographers of the period.

At the same time, it was not ONLY theatrical. The previous generation of artists, liberated by the Quiet Revolution, had been deeply involved in making artwork that was permeated by – even initiated by – a desire to comment on issues of immediate concern to the emerging Quebec society – politics, sexuality, the church. And this desire to make social comment through art had by no means gone away. But just as the lens of movement invention had broadened, so had the intent of the message-making – less specifically Quebecois, more generally to do with the great questions of human life: Carbone Quatorze's *Dead Souls*, for instance. And, I would argue, all the works of Edouard Lock.

We might also trace the origins of his style to the post-modernist dance scene in New York, and to the German theatrical neo-expressionism of Pina Bausch. They were both well exposed in Montreal and both tended to strip away conventional ideas of beauty, technical prowess, structure and even meaning from dance and substitute the banality of the street and the theatre of the non-sequential.

But Lock went further. He invented a new vocabulary for dance – one that mirrored the fast-action hip-hop movement and breakdance that was going on in popular video culture. It brought him a different kind of audience – not just the dance crowd, and not just the young, but a wide spectrum of individuals – punks, rockers, people who had never looked at dance before but were drawn by its embodiment of the anarchic expression of its age.

He borrowed freely from the punk aesthetic for his look, and from the techno-pop field for his new-wave sound, to create works that – as the Vancouver writer Susan Mertens put it – it broke through modern dance's stranglehold on fist-to-brow significance and for style, impact and entertainment, rivalled the dream-world, high-energy quality of rock video and the rock concert.

The piece that was considered his breakthrough work, certainly in terms of building wide audiences, was *Human Sex*, which he premiered in 1985. The title was a bit misleading; as someone pointed out, it actually contained less sex than *Swan Lake*. But it was important because it was the first in a series of works – *Human Sex; New Demons* in 1987*; Infante, C'est Destroy* in 1991 – in what he has called his

"extreme" phase. No story, no gender, nothing conventionally beautiful, nothing emotional – simply movement, dense and fast and strange, the sonic background loud and urban, everything designed to throw us off balance and challenge our conventional methods of perceiving, extravagantly sensationalist visuals of blood and flames, harsh physical interplay.

This was the period when the critics who complained about style over substance were being heard the loudest: Edouard Lock as showman. Quebec new dance in general was being accused of concentrating on creating stylish amalgams of movement, music and visuals at the expense of actual dance content.

Part of the reason Lock came under attack, to the extent that he did, was that what he was offering no longer had the benefit of surprise. *Etonne-moi*. But they were missing the point. *Human Sex,* for instance, had serious things to say about the importance of communication between the sexes – "about being human together," as Susan Mertens said, "about attempting and failing and succeeding and being stronger than you thought you could be."

It was what one writer has called an aesthetic of excess: still that emphasis on arresting theatricals – a steel lion whose mouth opens to display a demonic Quebecois Punch and Judy show, for instance; Lock himself on a bed of nails. And, above everything, that dense, spasmic movement, frenzied and risky. Kamikaze movement, I used to call it - airborne starbursts, horizontal barrel rolls, splayed backward leaps, blending physical theatrics with an attenuated, post-punk sensibility, accompanied by live, loud techno-pop and video projections: yes, like elongated rock videos.

It was very much a reflection of the spirit of the time – one London writer called the company the "vicious swan in the stagnant duck-pond of '80s pop culture" – and while it took the dance world by surprise at the time, it's really not much of a stretch to understand why rocker David Bowie asked Lock to conceive and direct a world tour for him – Lock and his dancers toured with Bowie for two years – and why Frank Zappa also invited him to collaborate.

By the mid-1990s, with *2/Deux*, he was beginning to move in a different direction. The pace calmed down a little. The piece had a more sombre, pensive flavour. An awareness of death – or the evanescence of life – was more apparent. And by now it was routinely possible to measure the success not only in reviewer and audience response but in numbers. In a business where an audience of a few hundred can be a major success, Lock was by now playing to 130,000 people in nearly 60 cities around the world. Producers in seven countries shared the creation costs of *2*.

Salt, in 1998, was another new departure, and we can see it, again, as being entirely in tune with the changing zeitgeist. This was a period, after all, when all the old dualities were being challenged – all the demarcations between traditional and informal, classical and modern, male and female, were up for reappraisal. Relationships were again in question. And again, it brought a different, cooler kind of virtuosity to bear – as virtuosic, in its way, as the Kirov Ballet, but without the bravura. Speed now became a means to put us into sensory overload, push us beyond our comfort level, subvert our traditional ways of looking, overwhelm analysis. But the tone was also more muted. The freneticism was gone.

It was now that Lock also increasingly began to call on the resources of ballet. He had already been commissioned to make works for a couple of ballet companies, and he had had his dancers working with a ballet master since *New Demons*. Now he began to weave together ballet's curvy lines with modern dance's sharply angled joints – knees, ankles, wrists – and putting his dancers in pointe shoes. Restraint and balance, so much the preserve of the ballet, began to show up in his work. Even a cool, distanced lyricism.

This embracing of ballet was a fascinating move for a variety of reasons. For a start, it gave him a chance to move the dancers faster and more efficiently. Posed on pointe, they can be rapidly spun. But it also gave him access to the distancing effect of the pointe shoe. They divorce the wearer from the ground – it was their original aim: up on their toes, their feet disappearing into nothing, the dancers of the ballet could more easily be seen to be the ethereal spirits of the great Romantic story-ballets. In that way, they gave visible reinforcement to the notion of our tenuous hold on reality – "as tenuous as that of souls," as Lock once explained it to me. At the same time, they also reinforced the impossibility of that attempt to transcend gravity – affirming that, however much we try to free ourselves from earth's bonds, we can never fully succeed.

The use of pointe shoes drew predictable criticism from some who saw it in conflict with La La La's trademark look, but Lock has been unrepentant. In fact, he now puts both sexes in pointe shoes – not as a gimmick, as some might do, but as a serious exploration of the kind of movement that might eventuate. You have to take risks, he says, you have to be prepared to change, you have to throw out the past and move on. Indeed, he has been compared to James Joyce in the way in which he has been able to mould new forms from the cross-fertilization of established techniques and innovative treatments.

The anecdotal origins of *Amelia*, his most recent work, lie in an encounter he had over two decades ago with two transvestites who were, as he puts it, "in a constant state of theatricality without being in a theatre." This mix of everyday life and the theatrical permeates this piece. The music was far less abrasive than in earlier works – piano, violin, cello, voice. It was not a collaboration, he says, though it certainly feels like one. The U.S. composer John Lang, a frequent collaborator with Lock, wrote it, based on lyrics by Lou Reed, whose music Lock had often listened to during the time he spent with the two transvestites who inspired the work.

By now, most of his dancers had come from a ballet-trained background, and the interplay of the ballet and modernist aesthetics were pronounced. He was able to refract ballet technique through the prism of modernism – tipped pirouettes, for example; sudden directional change; harmony and proportion interwoven with the fierce freneticism, detailed gesture and sexual charge; classical technique subjected to new demands of speed and complexity – he talked about being able to create footwork "like baroque architecture." A critic in Prague talked about it in terms of "watching embroidered lace … like listening to the sounds of the universe."

All of which, of course, helped Lock achieve his aims of disorientation. We have little time for contemplation in this work – there are none of the conventional poses and pauses that come like punctuation points in ballet and allow us moments of reflection. Inevitably, it defeats even the most assiduous, meaning-oriented viewer and we see, simply, movement – energy made visible.

I used the word shaman in the title of this talk, and not just because it resonates prettily – or glibly - with showman. Shamanistic practice is thought to put us in touch with the non-material world. In its attempt to change our perceptions, it often deals with reality in an imaginative, referential way. What Lock offers is the same sense of a slightly skewed vision of the world, a vision that is just off what we consider normal – a sense of having been given contact with something profound without being given the words. The interpretations, meanings, are up to us to deduce. Making logical sense of things seems to be a human instinct; Lock is asking us to give that up and let the body and its energies make contact with us directly. Not understand; intuit.

Lock protests that there is no implicit meaning in his work, but I find them often tinged with melancholy – a Los Angeles critic has even talked of his "tragic vision." *Salt*, for instance, seemed, like much of his work, obsessed with the passing of time. Its title had to do with the residue that remains after a surge of

emotion is over – trace elements of feeling or passion. I saw in it trust rewarded, trust betrayed. It had, as one writer put it, the taste of tears.

Another major theme – or, rather, mood – is ennui. The early works were filled with it, for all their freneticism and violence. Relationships were always casual; coolness prevailed; commitment was minimal. In the later works, along with the melancholy there seems to be a spiritual hollowness to the personae on the stage. The faces are uninvolved. The angst of the existentialists seems to hover close by.

Yet love, too, seems an underlying theme of Lock's work.

Some of it is overt. "It is dangerous to love too much," said Lili Marlene. "Oh triste amour," Lock spray-painted on the wall in *Oranges*. "Only the strong survive love" is the closing message from the dog Max in *Businessman*.

Some of it is implicit. It is impossible, after all, to ignore the relationships within the duets and trios that go on in these works, however tenuous these relationships might seem – these are human bodies we are looking at, with all the freighting that human bodies carry.

Angst… the search for love… overall, these dances are intended, I think, as ways for society to see itself. "Let me be your mirror" someone sings in *Amelia*. The mood is melancholy, detached, though not at all judgmental.

That idea of reflecting society to itself also resonates, again, with Lock's background as an immigrant, someone who looks at the place in which he lives through the lens of an outsider – someone who, because of not belonging, is alert to the unspoken undercurrents of communication that swirl around any group of people: undercurrents of meaning that are often quite at odds with what is being said.

It is that ability he offers us to recognise – to intuit – the way we are that persuades me to suggest that he both reflects and guides the zeitgeist.

And it is here that we also approach the idea that I proposed at the beginning of this talk - that his dances can function as metaphors for the social, spiritual and intellectual dislocation that has been brought about by our technological advances. From the earliest years, it has seemed to me that his use of theatrical techniques that are at the forefront of his time is simply part of an urgent advocacy of a re-examination of society's roots.

Although he claims not to be making judgments, it is as if he is both embracing and condemning the machinery of modern art that he finds at his disposal – using the tools of post-modernism (amplified sounds, high-impact physical theatre, the distortion of perception) to remind us that there exists, beneath the frenetic surface of the life we live, a simpler, more elemental world, built on certain unchanging values: values that are in the first and most important instance both human and humane.

You may have noticed that I have rarely mentioned the fact that he is Canadian. His work transcends its origins and focuses on something elemental to our common humanity and experience of life, at least in the developed world – which is, of course, why producers in so many countries are eager to commission his work.

And by choosing the forms of expression that he has – video, rock music, energy, risk, confusion – he has allowed a huge international body of people access to what he is doing and thinking … people who probably would not have allowed themselves close to a more traditional form of dancing.

In a sense, he has sugared the pill, but in reverse – making what he has to offer us tart and dangerous… but, in the end, doing what all successful art does: leaving us with the sense that we have made contact with essential, profound, truthful questions and insights about the way we are, and inviting us to find meaning of our own.

Showman, yes; but shaman too.