

Current Dance Works, 2013-2015 season

“Orthopädie or to be”: Kilian Haselbeck & Meret Schlegel”

An intermezzo of curiosity: “Dancing brings out what’s unique in us”

He’s loved the moonwalk since he was a small boy. At the age of eleven, he was already imitating the language of Michael Jackson’s movements. As a child, she took rhythm lessons and practised her dance steps in museums. Today Meret Schlegel and Kilian Haselbeck are an unconventional dance duo – one separated by almost two generations. What links them together?

Kilian, you are almost 30 years younger than your dance partner. What have you learnt from Meret?

Kilian Haselbeck: Dancing with you, Meret, has made me calmer and more sensitive. I’ve learnt that you don’t need grand actions to create tension. In my earlier days I wouldn’t have had the confidence to take my time on stage and play with the audience’s expectations.

Meret Schlegel: I’ve become stronger and cheekier. When I’m together with Kilian, new associations are created. The physical presence and the energies in space are different. I’ve been guided on this journey of discovery by curiosity: a desire to find out what happens when we come up against each other.

The encounter between Meret Schlegel and Kilian Haselbeck in “Orthopädie or to be” is a meeting between a mature woman and a young man. Initially wary and tentative, then with increasing boldness, they discover their bodies, push each other away before coming back together again. This is a duo that bridges the generation gap – playfully, ironically and respectfully.

Kilian: I was fascinated by all the things you wanted to learn from me. We watched the hip hop film “Rize” together and learned freestyle moves such as krumping. You were really enthusiastic about that dance language.

Meret: You asked me what concerns I have at my age. I showed you my arm and said: my skin, it moves. I can do exercises and apply cream but nothing helps. That’s when you came up with the clothes pegs idea.

On stage, the pair experiment with brightly coloured clothes pegs, attaching them to almost every part of their skin, starting with the face before sticking them all over their bodies. It’s an image that gets under the audience’s skin, too.

Their first ever meeting took place in 2010 at the Tanzhaus Zürich. Kilian was dancing in a piece by Philippe Saire. Meret, who was the artistic director at the time, invited Kilian to perform a solo in the short piece platform “12 MIN.MAX”. Out of that intermezzo came their mutual inquisitiveness about artistry.

To what extent does your age difference come through in the work you do together?

Meret: For me, our encounter is a new beginning. I feel young and I'm discovering new sides to myself. But I know that when I stand on the stage with my grey hair and wrinkles, the audience is aware of the age difference.

Kilian: Age has never been an issue in what we do together. Certain cultures take it for granted that older people dance. Here it's often viewed as embarrassing, but a body expressing itself is something beautiful, no matter how young or old it is.

What fascinates you about dance as a form of expression?

Meret: The fact that we as human beings can express ourselves through movement. Unlike animals that move in order to survive, we're not foraging for food: we're looking for the uniqueness inside us that comes out when we dance.

Kilian: We can use body language to touch our fellow human beings without using words. You can create a movement that is beautiful to look at and at the same time emotionally moving.

The duo both say that on stage they give themselves space they wouldn't have allowed themselves in everyday life. Meret and Kilian want to touch their audience – and win them over. Even when they were children, they loved being in the limelight. In the stage, they found a place of freedom.

Kilian: Michael Jackson was my role model. The rest of his life was chaotic, but the stage was his world. He seemed liberated, and I found that really exciting. I taught myself his routines when I was an eleven-year-old in front of the television. I was rather shy and introverted, but on the stage I felt indescribably free.

Kilian Haselbeck came to contemporary dance via hip hop, urban dance and ballet. Originally from Schaffhausen, he completed his training at Codarts in Rotterdam in 2008. Since then he has travelled around the world as a freelance dancer and choreographer. He has been to Shanghai for the Expo, New York with Les Ballets du Monde and Switzerland with Philippe Saire, Oona Project, Philip Amann and Meret Schlegel.

Kilian: It's amazing that in your generation you came to dance in such an unconventional way whereas my starting point was so conventional: classical ballet.

Meret: As a child I often danced to Antonín Dvořák's Slavonic dances. We didn't have much room at home. The table and chairs were always getting in the way. If I bounded around too energetically, the needle and the record would jump too. I visited museums because I found space to dance in the exhibition galleries. When no-one was looking I used to spin around and jump. The desire to move is like a thread running through my life.

Meret Schlegel took her first dance lessons with Wigman pupil Irène Steiner. Back then in the 1970s there was no way for her to attend a contemporary dance course, as such things simply didn't exist at the time. At the age of 20 she moved to the US where, in an intensive workshop on contact improvisation, she learned about the American dance scene: José Limón, Merce Cunningham and others. She pieced together her own training programme like a patchwork, travelling from the east coast to the west and back to attend technique lessons and workshops.

Meret: I didn't obtain the kind of diplomas that dancers have now. But I knew that I wanted to do something in my life that involved movement. For me, dance has always been about communicating with the audience. It allows me to tell the stories inside me. I've never had an image of what I wanted to be as a dancer. I'm much too playful – and that's how I've conquered the world.

After her "patchwork" training in Europe and the US, Meret worked on interdisciplinary projects with artists from other genres. Based in Zurich, alongside her collaboration with Kilian Haselbeck she has most recently appeared in the production "Second Skin" by Kiriakos Hadjioannou.

What makes your partner unique as a dancer?

Kilian: I admire your freedom when you move. Not just on the stage but also in the studio. When the music that's playing grabs you, you just start dancing.

Meret: I have the feeling that you are at home in every fibre of your body. It's not just an instrument you're playing: it's you.

What are your most important sources of inspiration?

Meret: The expression of humanity in art. For me, art is like a compass. It helps me find my way in this complex world. I'm inspired by the ways others have given it form and expression – be it on the stage, in the visual arts, or in good food.

Kilian: With me everything is very intuitive and comes from the moment, so I find inspiration everywhere. It doesn't have to be an intellectual artistic language; I'm just as inspired by a pop video or nature. I recently taught dance in a special school. The way those people opened up was thrilling.

In 2013 the duo set up the company “zeitSprung” (“timeLeap”), which represents their collaboration and also a network of artists from a broad spectrum of backgrounds and generations. The name expresses a commitment: a desire to achieve a leap forward.

What dream do you still want to realise?

Kilian: A world tour! I want our encounter to inspire people from different cultures. I have an immense desire to perform and develop our piece.

Meret: So do I. Our culture is becoming increasingly alienated from the body: everything's all about the head, about reason. We want our language of movement to give the audience space – and room for their own stories.

Interview: Sulamith Ehrensperger.