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Carlson, footprints and paper prints

MARIE-CHRISTINE VERNAY FEBRUARY 2, 2014, AT 5:06pm



Carolyn Carlson at the Atelier de Paris, 14 January (Photo Edouard Caupeil)

GRAND ANGLE Roubaix, Vincennes, Chaillot ... At 70 years of age, the American choreographer continues her momentum. Meet a nomadic star, and a master of dance, less attached to power than to transmission.

She is barefoot, standing straight in a pair of tongs, tall, slim, lean even, very "beanpole", as she's called, her hips wrapped in a wool fabric. A few twitches race across her gaunt face known around the world. Carolyn Carlson, who will celebrate her 71st in March, is nimbly leading her master class at the Atelier de Paris, located in the Cartoucherie de Vincennes.

The American choreographer who has lived in France since the early '70s, is the creative director of this space reserved for transmission and regularly open to the public since 1999.

She is assisted by a team of ten individuals including Anne Sauvage, the general director who never ceases to praise her talents: "*She is an exceptional woman. She knows how to delegate, and she listens to everyone.*" And it's true.

In the studio, standing in front of the participants, she doesn't miss a beat, sweeping the class and multiple details in one glance. Positions, rhythms, no fault escapes her but she never intervenes brutally or head-on. She simply moves forward to join the group, blending in like a young student and she executes the poorly understood movement, shows the direction in space and the accents to place on a movement that's too regular. The dancers hang on to her every breath, they're so happy to rub shoulders with a "master" even if Carolyn Carlson does not look like one and even if she doesn't appropriate the title. The numerous dancers and choreographers who are patiently waist-listed for her master classes know this all too well.

ENTHUSIASTIC APPLAUSE

At the end of the course, two Italian participants explain how precious the master class is to them: "*In our country, the opportunities to improve are rare. We see very few performances. Here, it's a dream. Every day, we thank Carolyn.*" Each of her courses receives feverish applause as though it were a performance.

The star (because she is one, a rare event in the world of dance) who has never differentiated nor separated creation and learning, does not seem moved. Like the others, she picks up her things from the floor and takes us to her "loge", a miniscule room that serves as an office and cubby hole, with a mini bathroom. Luxury is not her thing. The space was designed like the entire workshop: a space to move about and do functional work with a small kitchen area that allows the participants and the team to eat.

In June 2011, Carlson was named head of the Théâtre du Chaudron that adjoins the work studio. The room and the stage were renovated for rehearsals and performances. There again, she doesn't care about making it her baby. She is committed to the Cartoucherie adventure for the others (choreographers and companies in residence) and has complete faith in her team. *"The workshop bears my name but that's it. It's not mine"*, she disarmingly says when this is an age that exacerbates the sense of ownership. The June Events festival – which takes place every year and whose program is handled by Anne Sauvage – is proof of this. Carolyn Carlson has the elegance of not squeezing in her favorites, something rare for the profession.

OLYMPIAN CALM

"The first thing in transmission, is the class, she says, and of course, the performances. Because it's not merely a question of giving the gesture but also the way of making the gesture. Dance is fleeting, the curtain rises and closes, but it stays in the memory of the dancers and the audience." Along with the steps, the movements, and the rhythm, with Carlson, a philosophical dimension is added that touches on the every day. Dance, her way of being, relationships with others, everything is connected, and she always keeps an Olympian calm.

She herself does not disown her professors, quite to the contrary: *"We all come from someone. Nothing is new, what counts, is how we do it together. I owe everything to Alwin Nikolais [American choreographer and educator, 1910-1993, who directed notably the Contemporary Dance Center of Algiers, editor's note]. He gave so much of himself, I want to continue, now it's my turn to give. No book can replace this master-student relationship. Even if I have added my personal touch to Nikolais's training, such as work on arms that touch the horizon and an extension with eastern philosophies and the martial arts. Kazuo Ohno [Japanese choreographer] always thanked his ancestors. We can't forget that we come from Africa. It's a shame to disown history."*

THE CUT OF THE FOREARM

In addition to oral transmission, she adds writing and drawing. At first, it was for the sake of preservation. Carlson has always started her choreographies or her classes with drawings and notes, a first relationship to space. She then translates this in the gesture, its speed, direction and quality (limp, relaxed, energetic, etc). For her master class, she drew a circle and the multiple ways of cutting it, the slicing of the forearm, for instance. Her writings, haikus and calligraphies are numerous (like *Traces d'encre* and *Dialogue with Rothko*, both recently published).



Carolyn Carlson's masterclass at the Atelier de Paris, 14 January. Photo Edouard Caupeil

Carolyn Carlson, like most American choreographers, has always been in contact with painters and designers. A way of better visualizing the scene that she meticulously draws. In 2011, she donated practically all her archives (1) to the National Library, covering a long period from her start in the United States in the 1960's, with numerous course notebooks, musings, and drawings of over a hundred choreographies that she signed. Her famous solo, *Blue Lady*, that she created in 1983 and in **2008** transmitted to Finnish dancer Tero Saarinen (the choreographer's parents are of Finnish origin), is subtly sketched with some spots of color.

Movies complete these written traces. On January 11, L'Atelier de Paris launched the Carolyn Carlson Collection, with some of her audio-visual archives. Of the 900 existing articles, over 150 have just been digitalized and put online by the International Dance Video Library, inspired by video maker Charles Picq who filmed numerous performances at the Maison de la Danse in Lyon. Further, a documentation set is available to the public at the Atelier de Paris.

If she is leaving poetic traces that can be read independently from her choreographies, Carolyn Carlson does not belong to the past. In 2009, the deaths of Pina Bausch and Merce Cunningham affected her deeply; they also accelerated her thoughts on the question of memory but she is not at all in a backward-looking approach. She just left the National Center for Choreography in Roubaix (Nord) that she had joined in 2004, as she had the responsibility for the Paris Opera theatrical research group (1974), shaking up the house's habits, as she had set up in Venice (1980-1984) and had directed the Cullberg Ballet in Stockholm (1992-1994).

Roubaix, in her nomadic path, did not make a greater impression on her than her other experiences, except that she appreciated "*the comfort of the institution*" that she made profitable: courses, creations and multiple activities with the general public, and neighborhoods including the very disadvantaged Epeule where the choreographic center is located. "*It was as if I were back in New York, in the Lower East Side where I lived, she explains. In Roubaix, I was very touched by the population's generosity notably that of the breakers.*"

I had an apartment facing the Piscine museum. I was regularly plunged in the neighborhood's daily life. I was part of it. But I'm happy to be leaving: nine years is enough. Because this place does not belong to me either. I did not take care of my succession. I simply said "Good luck" to my successor, Olivier Dubois."

"A SPIRIT IN MOTION"

For others, these nine years are unforgettable. The dancer and choreographer, Brahim Bouchelagem, born in 1972, in Roubaix, director of the Zahrbat company, is one of fifty artists that the choreographer helped, even launched. When she arrived in the Nord, he did not know her. She opened the doors of the CCN for the performance of one of his solos, accompanied him in his administrative procedures, loaned him a studio. She wrote and drew a poem about him, which gave rise to a solo in January 2009: *What did you say? "We had a real bond. This portrait resembles me; she describes me while talking about herself. It's an immaterial connection and when I dance solo, I have the impression she's with me on stage. I also shared a duet with her, it was powerful. If I had to describe her, I would say she is a spirit in motion. She's like a mother in dance."*

This summer, and for two years, she will join the Chaillot National Theater in Paris, as an associate artist. She already has an office at her disposal and, beyond the intended creations, the first one being in November, a schedule is currently under discussion concerning the maintenance of her repertoire and her educational actions within and outside the theater.

Here again, it's not simply a matter of leaving a footprint. *"With Carolyn, says Didier Deschamps, director of the theater, we are not in a traditional transmission but in a dynamic."* Modelled on this woman who backs away from nothing and who dreams of opening a dance academy for the future of choreography. *"After all, she laughingly confides, Martha Graham taught until she was 95 years old !"*

(1) A part was exhibited at the BNF in 2013.

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