



Carolyn Carlson

Danse avec la star

The American from Paris, Venice and Roubaix is one of the greatest dancer-choreographers in the world. Her life is an epic. And she tells it with passion.

Carolyn Carlson has followed a path worthy of an epic. The Chaillot Theater, where she is artist-in-residence, has dedicated a complete series of shows with four different productions including a new creation, two legendary solos and the reshewing of “Pneuma”, a magnificent fresco staged for the Bordeaux Opera Ballet. It’s time to review the dazzling trajectory that has made Carolyn Carlson, a “living treasure”.

When did you make your first appearance in France?

In 1968, I arrived in France which was in full turmoil and just discovering American dance, with Alwin Nikolais with whom I’d been dancing since 1965. And then, during the International Dance Festival that takes place at the Champs Elysées Theater, I was awarded the title of best dancer. It was a magnificent distinction however we had already left for New York and I only learned the news a year later when we returned to Paris to dance at the Théâtre de la Ville. During this second stay, one night I discovered the Opera with the luminary creator John Davis. I had a shock in front of the building, a feeling of déjà-vu, and the premonition that one day I would work there. Discovering France was overwhelming for the Californian that I was. Everything was so new, so exotic, down to the taste of the onion soup with heavy cream that we savored at night in the Halles with small bread croutons.

Carolyn Carlson in Dialogue with Rothko in 2013

In 1970, you left Nikolais and New York to return to France with John Davis.

We set up in a small hotel on the Saint-Louis island, at a time when it was still possible to live cheaply in Paris. It was at that time that Thomas Erdos, Nik’s [Alwin Nikolais, editor’s note], agent introduced me to Anne Beranger who hired me in her company. In 1971, at the Gaîté Lyrique, I discovered “Le Regard du Sourd” de Bob Wilson. A show that lasted five hours, a revolution in the relationships between time and space. It was a revelation and triggered for me the desire to create my own shows. At the Avignon Festival in 1972, in the Papal Palace’s honors courtyard, I presented “Rituel pour un rêve mort” based on an idea by John Davis for which Maurice Fleuret helped me with the musical choices.



Restaging of Pneuma, masterpiece created for the ballet of the Bordeaux National Opera

"DARLING, YOU ARE A GENIUS!"

The following year, you reunited with Nikolais at the Hamburg Opera where he was invited to put on a show with Pierre Henry and Nicolas Schoffer.

And that's where I met Rolf Liebermann who was behind the project. A little later, in London where I put on a work for the London Contemporary Dance Company with Larrio Ekson, who had become my favorite partner, I was asked to participate in an homage to Edgar Varèse at the Paris Opera. Once again, inspired by Nietzsche's writings, John Davis and I prepared the solo "Density 21.5" that quickly placed me in the French landscape. Two months' work for a seven minute solo!

This was the masterpiece that immortalized you when you were only 30 years old! And that opened the doors of the Opera.

Yes, and that's where my life was again disrupted. Having arrived at the head of the Opera, Rolf Liebermann offered me a unique position in the lyrical theater by installing me as "principal choreographer" and by allowing me, in parallel to this secular institution that is the Ballet, to create the Paris Opera Group for Theatrical Research (GRTOP) with contemporary dancers. It set up in the Rotonde des Abonnés and with them I created "L'Or des fous, les fous de l'or", "X-Land", "Wind, Water, Sand", "This, That and the Other the Beginning and the End" and "The Year of the Horse". From 1974 to 1980, Liebermann stood by me without fail; but the Opera is a three-ring circus. Every show engenders conflicts, the insults abound, in the hall the hullabaloo is constant with the absolute refusal of part of the audience. And Liebermann whispers in my ear: "*Darling, you are a genius but your shows are much too long.*"

It's impossible today to imagine what the fights were like then. And you set the basework for contemporary dance in France. But in 1980, Liebermann's contract ended.

That was the end of a cycle. In my private life also: John Davis and I, we separated. And I received a call from Italo Gomez who wanted to hire me in Milan. Finally, it was at the Fenice in Venice where I travelled with Larrio Ekson and Jorma Uotinen whom I had met in Helsinki in 1976 during a creation for the National Ballet of Finland. The water, the calm, the silence, the dark nights on the canals, the fog, beauty everywhere: in Venice, I swam in a climate that marked me deeply and I found a new poetry and lyricism there. Which led to "Undici Onde" in 1981, "Underwood" in 1982 and "Blue Lady" in 1983, a solo worked to the music of René Aubry right after my son Alexis's birth. I stayed there until 1985 without ever really leaving the city since later I took over the management of the first Dance Biennale. But when the Venetian cycle ended, once again, I did not know where to go. And it was Gérard Violette who then suggested I become artist-in-residence at the Théâtre de la Ville. I presented four creations, including "Still Waters" and "Dark". But the break was brutal: one day, I heard him tell me that I was no longer at the top of the wave.

"PARIS IS MY REAL HOME",

And how did you get over it?

I found myself invited to Finland. A very beautiful period with my son at the French school in Helsinki and me amidst people who share my blood, the Finns who are as crazy as I. Because with my four grand-parents originally from Finland who fled the Russian invasion and set up in California, I feel terribly Finnish. At the age of 18, my mother had even sent me to Finland to find a husband. After two years in the middle of lakes, I was called to Stockholm to direct the Cullberg Ballet for a year. But that was my worst experience.

You feel Finnish but you never stop saying that you never feel better than in Paris.

Yes, Paris is my real home. That's where I live best and I always come back to. Starting in 1978, I had a dream where I saw myself teaching in a studio in the middle of the woods. And the dream came true in 1999. Thanks to Jean-Jacques Aillagon and with the help of the city of Paris and Ariane Mnouchkine, I was able to create the Atelier de Paris at the Cartoucherie in Vincennes which in 2015, became a center for choreographic development. For me, teaching is essential, and it's also a real pleasure, and as soon as I arrived at the Paris Opera, I welcomed artists from different horizons who came to follow my courses. In Vincennes, the artists who teach are in the forefront: Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Meredith Monk and Susan Buirge.

You have just completed a nine-year cycle as the head of the Roubaix Nord-Pas-de-Calais National Center for Choreography, where dancers you had met during your various travels gathered and where you had a fascinating artist, Tero Saarinen dance your solo "Blue Lady".

Roubaix was an extraordinary experience. I enjoyed complete liberty and we were able to roll out considerable work with the local population and the young in particular in the city and region. People were crying when I left. And as I had lived in New York for seven years in neighborhoods that were not the poshest, in the Nord, I found this same mixed simplicity, a generous and unpretentious population that inspired me a great deal. But what was I going to do once the Roubaix cycle was completed? Once again, luck smiled on me. As soon as I was free of my obligations, I announced my availability to Chaillot Theater director, Didier Deschamps, who immediately offered to receive me as a choreographer-in-residence for two years. The site is immense, cold, impersonal, and the studio has no windows and a low ceiling. But here we met a very warm and considerable audience with over 1000 persons every night.

After "Signes", a spectacular piece staged in 1997 for the Paris Opera Ballet, here is "Pneuma", a vast dream danced by the Bordeaux Opera Ballet, created in 2014 and today staged in Paris. It's Gaston Bachelard who inspired this work.

I feel in constant dialogue with nature, the land and the skies. I pay particular attention to the upper levels of the atmosphere: clouds, stars, sun, rain, moon, to the mystical origins of angles and the possibilities of existence of another dimension. How many times in our overloaded lives haven't we raised our eyes to the sky to scan this emptiness, this invisibility? I have a memory of a trip to the US, to the Grand Canyon, of a beautiful expanse of unequalled beauty at the heart of an endless desert area. It was like being on the roof of the world with the temptation of a terrifying jump into the infinite. What is this immensity that has no name? This poem that has been written since the birth of the world? That's what I evoke in "Pneuma" with music by Gavin Bryars and Philip Jeck and in a stage setting inspired by Rémi Nicolas.

By RAPHAEL DE GUBERNATIS