

# When Definitive Is Death

With Ballet National de Marseille, Frédéric Flamand asks accurate questions about contradictions

BY BRIAN MCCORMICK

Ballet National de Marseille, under the leadership of artistic director Frédéric Flamand, has its U.S. premiere next week, July 25-27, at the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center. With "Metapolis II," an evening-length piece lavishly praised in Europe in the seven years since it was first performed, Flamand demonstrates his interest in the dynamics of technology and cultural change (see preview, p. 12).

Flamand shared his thinking with Gay City News about how he puts his work together and the collaborations he chooses.

**BRIAN MCCORMICK:** What first aroused your interest in experimenting with technology in collaboration with movement?

**FRÉDÉRIC FLAMAND:** There is a long history about the relationship between movement and technology. Let's think of the wheel for instance which allows mankind to travel faster than its proper legs. The relationship between movement and technology - let's stay the machine - has been emphasized in the 19th and 20th century. Think of the assembly lines in the Ford factories for instance and the criticism that was given by Charles Chaplin in "Modern Times."

Art has been reflecting the phenomenon especially at the beginning of the 20th century. Italian futurists were obsessed by speed. Ballets Russes and Ballets Suédois were collaborating with the painter Fernand Léger who had in his paintings a mechanical conception of the human body.

I was also impressed by the experiments of the Bauhaus and especially Oskar Schlemmer. So, for me, being involved in experimentation with technology and the movement was to insert my work in an already long tradition.

Slowly, the importance of technology moved from mechanics to electronics and especially the image - movies, video, and lately technologies bound to the Internet. I'm sure we can't think nowadays of the human body without connecting it with all those technolo-

gies of communication.

Think of the Internet for instance. It has made possible, at least virtually, to realize all dreams of ubiquity, of traveling without moving. That's what I try to show in my creations. The relationship of the real body to the virtual body, the diminishing importance of the real contact compared to the mediatized contact. Let's think of all those meeting places on the Internet where people can fantasize and in one way escape from the reality.

**BMcM:** Describe your work with Joy Division and The Eurythmics.

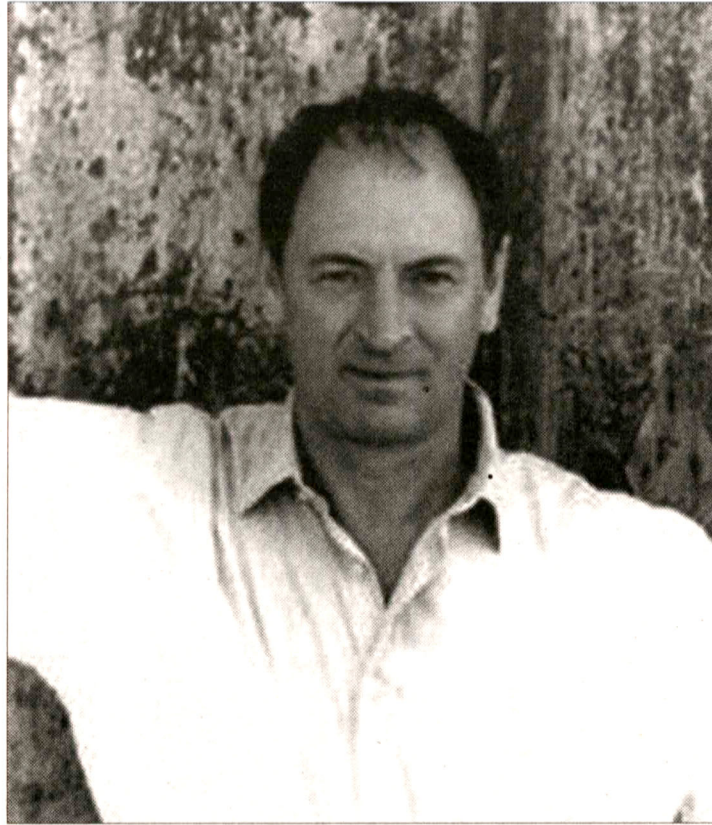
**FF:** There was no real work with Joy Division and The Eurythmics. It happened that we ran a factory, an old sugar refinery, that we turned into a cultural center. In this factory we organized big events. One of those events was dedicated to William Burroughs. It was the opportunity to organize a concert with Joy Division - it was their first gig on the continent, outside of Great Britain - and with "A certain ratio."

For this event, we also invited William Burroughs - who inspired in us several creations, "The Penny Arcade Peep Show," "23 Skiddoo" - Gregory Corso, Kathy Acker. We had some screenings of films - "Towers Open Fire" and "Performance" with Mick Jagger. We organized those events on the different levels in the factory - five levels and 22 different spaces.

On another opportunity - we also organized a concert with the Eurythmics. Funny is that there were only a few hundred people attending this concert and the following week they reached number one in the charts and became international stars.

**BMcM:** Can you also talk a bit about "Moving Target" and what led you to explore this first collaboration with architects, and then explain how you came in contact with Zaha Hadid?

**FF:** I had explored many spaces outside of traditional theater - factories, swimming pools, churches. As my work developed, I felt the need to come back to the traditional stage and I was wondering how I could pervert the perspective space of the traditional stage.



Frédéric Flamand is amused when critics say he is "not ballet enough."

In my opinion, architects were much more aware of this work on structuration of space - or destructure - than usual set designers. That's how I got interested in architecture.

I read an interview with Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio and was very impressed by what they said about architecture: "Architecture is what exists between the skin of a man and the skin of another man." Having to deal in my work with the body of the dancers, that declaration was very appealing to me. I knew more about their installations and exhibitions than about their buildings. This preoccupation for the body was for me a natural link with dance.

So, I just wrote them a letter asking if they would be interested to collaborate with me for a dance project. Their answer was positive. They came to see a show in Barcelona and that's how the collaboration started. We created three pieces together - "Moving Target", "E.J.M. 1" for Edward J. Muybridge, "E.J.M. 2" for Etienne - Jules Marey.

In any case, my approach to an architect is the result of a contact. Not a contact in the first time with the person but a contact with something that stimulates me, that questions me. It can be a quote like for Diller and Scofidio of some-

thing I discover about the work.

Concerning Zaha Hadid, I was fascinated by the first designs she makes for her projects. It's not yet architecture but something very organic. She says she's inspired by Arab calligraphy when she works on a project. Her paintings are very dynamic, they've got this fluidity I want to find in the movements of the dancers.

So the meeting with Zaha was not through her buildings. She had not built so much when I was first interested in her. The meeting went through her paintings. As with Diller and Scofidio, I wrote her a letter asking if she would be interested in a collaboration with me, explained to her why I was interested in her collaboration, and the answer was positive.

**BMcM:** Following your successes since you were appointed artistic director of Ballet National de Marseille, how do you respond to the continuing criticism that your work is not ballet enough?

**FF:** Your last question is of the first importance for me. It's true I'm not a pure choreographer. I could tell you about the difference there is between ballet and dance, how American modern and contemporary dance created a break with

classical and neoclassical ballet. I could tell how, as far as I am concerned, I'm interested to work on that paradox, how to conciliate modern, contemporary dance and esthetics of ballet, how to work on a hybrid product, mixing different techniques.

I'm rather amused with that recurrent criticism of my work not being ballet enough. I don't want to appear pretentious, but there was the same criticism about Ballets Russes or Ballets Suédois in the beginning of the 20th century. Their creations were mixing visual arts, painting, sculpture, etc. And the purists would only focus on choreography, not trying to consider the relationships that can exist between choreography and the set design for instance.

In my case, my opinion is that you can appreciate my proposal if you don't try to separate the choreography from the architecture, the images, the lightings, the sound. I worked with an Italian artist, Fabrizio Plessi, who used this metaphor when he was talking of what we were trying to do. If you want to eat a sandwich with bread, ham, mayonnaise, salad, you don't try to separate the different layers. The taste of the sandwich comes from the subtle mixture of ham, bread, mayonnaise and the relationships they have between each other. That's the same thing for my work, you can't just isolate an element and consider it separated from the rest.

Of course, it seems a contradiction to come from the field of the contemporary dance and decide to run a ballet such as Ballet National de Marseille. But I think, with Thom Mayne, the Californian architect I've been working with in the creation of "Silent Collisions," that what's exciting in this time is to work with contradictions and try to find a way to deal with them. I did not say solve them. That's the very principle of reality that you can experiment in your everyday life.

I did not say I was succeeding in this enterprise, but at least I'm trying to question the principle of the contradiction. I'm trying to ask the most accurate questions, being convinced that good questioning is more important than finding the definitive answers. Definitive sounds like death to me.