

Abstract

Blanca Li is a dancer and choreographer. But most of all, she is a whirlwind of energy, joy, great happiness and sincere kindness. She is an amazing artist who has been offering inspiring dance shows to both kids and grown-ups for the last 20 years. In her ballets, she embraces all kinds of dance and respectfully celebrates the variety of dance. Indeed, the Spanish choreographer who chose to establish in France a long time ago devotes herself to every kind of dance with an equal interest. As a matter of fact, she has been one of the first choreographers to promote hip-hop and urban dances on the greatest stages in the world. She is now about to present her last show, ROBOT, an uncanny ballet with men and machines. When she is not working on her own creations, you can find her directing Beyonce, elaborating choreographies for Pedro Almodovar or Michel Gondry, or orchestrating a fashion show for one of her designer friends...

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Full version

“Nothing is happier than dance”

Her shows are happy mixes, breaking down styles and borders. On the occasion of her new creation ROBOT, the Spanish choreographer invites us into her universe. Blanca Li is a dancer. Blanca Li is a choreographer. But most of all, Blanca Li is a whirlwind of energy, joy, great happiness and sincere kindness. Blanca Li is an amazing artist who has been offering inspiring dance shows to both kids and grown-ups with her company for the last 20 years. In her ballets, she embraces all kinds of dance and respectfully celebrates the variety of dance. Indeed, the Spanish choreographer who chose to establish in France a long time ago devotes herself to every kind of dance with an equal interest. When she is not working on her own creations, you can find her directing Beyonce, elaborating choreographies for Pedro Almodovar or Michel Gondry, or orchestrating a fashion show for one of her designer friends. Blanca Li's company is a melting pot of cultures, that reminds us of Klapisch's movie “l'Auberge Espagnole”. The choreographer tells us about her love for dance.

ELLE. Tell us about your show “ROBOT !”. How did the desire to make machines dance come to you?

Blanca Li. It came from a simple thought. We are spending an infinite amount of time with the machines. And it is crazy to see that we adapt so quickly to them, that we hardly remember our life before them. I find very interesting the fact that all this was made to make the human beings faster, better, more efficient. I started some research, I went to Japan to meet artists using robotics, and I discovered a fascinating universe. And some crazy people too! I met Maywa Denki, who developed some musical machines for me. Every machine is a music instrument; they all play live music on stage, like an orchestra. And it is in France, with the corporation Aldebaran Robotics [who created the robot Nao], that I found some little dancing robots. Dancers, robots, we all started working together, and that is when it all started to be crazy! No one was in the same beat, it was a mess! We had a revolution happening during the rehearsals. I understood that machines were not perfect. As soon as they start racing, it is like if they were threatening our lives. This is something you can observe with a simple phone letting you down, leaving you totally helpless. This is pretty much what happens on stage with all my robots: there is always something unexpected happening.

ELLE. In all your shows, you are used to introduce elements from our everyday life. Or urban dances, such as hip-hop. The dance you create seems to be very open, when dance is usually perceived as a severe and close universe.

B.L. When I am dancing, I am just having fun. Dance is energy, colors, humor. You can communicate anything through it. I am not scared about bringing humor in my shows or referring to everyday life. I love to see the public identify and feel involve through the gesture. I do not want to compose hermetic choreographies. Because dancing is telling a story with you your body. It is speaking the truth. It literally is “body language”.

ELLE. What skills do your dancers have?

B.L. They are coming from all kinds of artistic worlds. I love reinventing myself at every new show and using all kinds of dance languages. There are coming from ballet, hip-hop, flamenco, electro, contemporary dances... These dancers are always passionate, because they support their dance and they want to share it with the world. They are generous, with strong personalities. I could not work with people coming, doing their steps and leaving right away. A dancer's creative madness is essential to me. In this motley company, everyone brings his own knowledge and is enthusiastic about discovering something else. All these surprises make me very happy. When I was younger, I was living in New York, where I had put on a show about García Lorca's poems, and I had mixed flamenco, with hip-hop and contemporary dance. All the dancers had to learn the others' gestures. It was an inspiring experience. You are right to say that dance is often a close universe. But not in the way I want to practice it. It is such a wonderful activity, it would be a shame not to open it to everyone.

ELLE. Are all dances noble to you?

B.L. Of course! I would never despise any of them, as long as they surprise me and they are practiced with passion. You can not imagine how wonderful it is to discover a new dance. A few time ago, I went to Colombia to work on a movie. In Cali, people dance a very particular form of salsa, which is very different from the one we usually know, which is from Cuba. I had never seen it before! It was absolutely outstanding! I worked with over one hundred amazing dancers. We worked day and night with great pleasure. I know that this is something I will keep in my mind and I will use some day. I need to let it mature because it takes time to understand a dance. It is exactly the same as learning a new language.

ELLE. That is to say?

B.L. Each dance has its own arithmetic. Flamenco is 12 counts; salsa is 8, with 6 danced counts and 2 pause; waltz is 3 counts. A dancer is always counting and playing a score he has in memory. Learning a dance is solving a code. And it is only when the equation is understood that you can dance. When I meet a dancer, I always ask him the name he calls a step, how the rhythm sounds to him. In fact, I can hear it in an absolutely different way.

ELLE. What does the knowledge of all these different styles bring you?

B.L. Not to be restricted. Learn from the others. To learn another dance is to discover another culture. Dance is always a journey: when you dance, you immerse in a country, a way of life. Even long after you are gone, you can never really forget this country you discovered, because your body has its own memory: gestures, moves, music, feelings. Sensations. A body's memory is essential. That is why I absolutely wanted to create the “Dance Fest” [“La Fête de la Danse” at the Grand Palais, Paris, 2011]. In my opinion there is nothing easier, funnier, happier than dance to get to know another culture.

ELLE. Precisely, the “Dance Fest” has been a truly popular event in Paris. Is it that important to

have dance democratized?

B.L. Of course it is! You know, many people tell me they are sad to admit they cannot dance. As a matter of fact, you always find people in parties who remain apart, not even considering to go dancing. I am sure that many of them would love to participate... What a frustration. They are most of all paralyzed by fear. The fear of being ridiculous. The fear of others' opinion about themselves. But they are wrong since we have all been made for dancing. Dance is already inside our bodies, and that is why I think a body should be moving. That was the message I wanted to share with the "Dance Fest": everyone can dance. Dance is something universal and that brings people together. We can all hear, feel the rhythm. We all have the same arms, the same legs. Seeing all those people dancing together was amazing. Women were going first. Men were staying apart at the beginning, and then suddenly joined them. Everyone was taking their shoes off and letting loose. No one cared about what the others were doing, everybody was staying focused on their own steps. The party has been fantastic. It was pure body expression. I am proud of that event because it gave people joy.

ELLE. What was the most successful kind of dance?

B.L. You would never believe me. Even I have been very surprised. It was the King's Rigodon! Incredible, isn't it? A baroque dance which is centuries-old, with wigs and everything! I would have never imagined. The Charleston has also been surprisingly successful. The live classes with teachers worked very well too. I saw up to 400 people following the steps at the same time. It was very moving for me.

ELLE. However, it had been very difficult for you to set up this event. Even after the great success of the first edition, you are not sure yet there will be a second one.

B.L. You are right. I find it very strange to see that dance is not celebrated like music or cinema. I believe it has a place within these institutional events too. There are TV shows like "Dance with the stars". Every successful singer dances as well. We want to copy Beyonce or Justin Timberlake. In videoclips there is dance too. Choreographers never were that famous. Today, we know who Angelin Preljocaj or Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui are. We should not think dance is for elites. People love dance. And I do not understand the fact that it is not considered a popular art. Dance is everywhere around us.

ELLE. Anyway, you are absolutely everywhere there can be dance! Cinema, clips, fashion too, like the last Jean-Paul Gaultier show you choreographed. You even danced in it with your friend Rossy de Palma!

B.L. What a great memory! It was so funny and gay! Fashion models spent time to prepare the show. In fact, even when it is fun, it is still work! Dancing imposes strict discipline. Models enjoyed this other way of expressing themselves through their bodies. As I was working with every single one of them, I sometimes had the feeling that I was designing a dress for them.

ELLE. What does fashion bring you?

B.L. Fashion has always naturally been a part of my life. As well as cinema or music, in fact. I believe this is something that comes from my years as a student in New York. We were a group of young filmmakers, musicians, dancers. When I came to Paris, I also evolved in a group. I had people coming to my place to sew, to display a short movie, to listen to a new song, and I was seeking their reactions about my choreographies. Or I was doing cooking. As a Spanish woman, I found it very important to share meals all together. I have always had a way of sharing which is very "Movida". I need the others, my friends, joy, laughs, casual atmospheres. I met Margiela, Paco

Rabanne, Lacroix, Gaultier, Galliano very naturally. Azzedine Alaïa too used to lend me dresses to dance flamenco. All this was made in a very friendly and simple way. Just like with Almodovar, who I have known for a long time, or Rossy de Palma, who was my friend a long time before she became an actress. I have a particular admiration and a sincere affection to fashion designers. I find them brave: they are not scared to express their personal and craziest visions. There are not that many artists with this duty of making people dream. And I love working with such creative people. Moreover, both dance and fashion are ways to study the body. Those two disciplines are a perfect echo to each other.

ELLE. What does dance bring to you?

B.L. Everything. One example. I have worked a lot with children. I remember this little boy who was very shy, insecure and lonely according to his teacher. The last day we were working in this school, we sat in a circle, and each one of the children had to show the others their own choreography. And this little boy showed us something fantastic. He was applauded by the whole group and his teacher was speechless. Later, she told me this experience had changed him totally and he was feeling much better. How beautiful is that? I love sharing my love for dance. I have the chance to dance every day, as a job. This makes me stronger, more confident. I feel good in my body, confident about my charism. Dance makes me strong, dance makes me free.

Sylvia Jorif