



FARMER TRAIN SWIRL - ÉTUDE

Chris Dupuis in conversation with Cassiel Gaube on the eve of his avant-première in *Les Brigittines* during Working Title Festival (29.11.2018). Chris Dupuis is a Canadian writer, editor, and curator based in Brussels. His articles and interviews have been featured in magazines, websites, and journals. He has led writing seminars at Concordia University (Montreal), KU Leuven (Leuven), Das Arts (Amsterdam), HKU (Utrecht), and A.PASS (Brussels).

How did you get interested in House dance?

It started with wanting to expand my sense of what dance could be. When I was studying at P.A.R.T.S. I got really interested in hip-hop, though I didn't know much about House dance yet. In speaking with people, I heard that Paris was one of the big centres for hip-hop and House worldwide, so I decided to base myself there and dedicate time to these practices. I found a number of places for daily practice, including a street dance school opened by dancers who are now in their forties. I started taking classes every day and creating a relationship with dancers from that scene. I also traveled to New York and took time there to get in touch with the very dense House scene it's got. There's a strong self-organizing element to the practice, which I found really different from the paradigm in contemporary dance. The practice of dancing together is really central to the culture, in training and jam sessions during the day, and then at night in the club.

You also spent a lot of time learning about this history of the form as well.

House emerged in a very specific time and place, in the suburbs of Chicago and New York at the end of the 1970's. There was a very specific mix of cultures and musical styles present in those places, which come together in the form, a combination of African American and Latin American dance styles, mixed with disco, funk, and gay culture. You had all of these different musical and movement vocabularies coming together and so there were all of these intersections possible. Together, they produced this very rich and kinesthetically satisfying form that has continued to evolve and grow over several decades.

There's a kind of sub-genre of contemporary dance that's all about bringing nightclub aesthetics on stage. Do you feel like what you're doing is part of that field or is it something else entirely?

I think that the sub-genre you're talking about, at least some of it, is really about this idea of bringing the party on stage, which isn't my aim. [Farmer Train Swirl - Étude](#) is an embodied and subjective exploration of the style of House dance. I'm interested in diffracting the forms that constitutes it and thinking through this process.

What I find fascinating is the lexical nature of House dance so to say. House dance, like hip hop, is based on a broad and specific vocabulary of basic steps. Once the dancer has assimilated these simple steps, her craft essentially consists in combining and articulating them together, giving rise to increasingly complex constellations. I see this instant compositional process as a syntactic activity: "making sense" of the basic steps by rhythmically organizing them in relation to each other, conferring them a quality of flow. I'm interested in inviting the audience to discover House dance as a practice that can be read.

As the title indicates this work is an étude. That is, in the musical sense of the word, a composition designed as an exercise - as an occasion to practice a set of specific skills. The idea of investing sufficiently in a particular practice, through working from it and thinking through it consistently matters to me. I'm not only utilizing the form, but as well giving back to it in some way. Which is the reason why I gave myself such a large time frame to dive into House dance and then artistically work from it. The last 2 years were mainly spent learning and practicing; and this solo is prelude to a piece I'll make next year (with several dancers), in which I'll keep on deepening that research.

Also, I acknowledge that I'm making a piece that's going to be presented in the context of performances - and often onstage. The work is designed to inscribe itself in the context of a theatre, and I'm thinking through this condition. Not only am I working from the experiences I've gone through in my practice of House dance, but also with the ways of thinking about dance and choreography that I've received in my previous contemporary dance education. It is for me a work of integration and acknowledgement of several aspects of my current interests and understanding of movement.

Bringing these movement vocabularies into a theatre setting puts them in dialogue with a specific dance field, which includes contemporary dance and the historical lineage of modern and ballet leading up to it. Why did you want to bring House dance into this setting and what do you think it achieves?

There is of course a real question whether a dance that's primarily designed as a medium for social bounding can legitimately be brought onstage, somehow stripped from its original context and function. The way I answer this question for myself is to focus on the very materiality of House dance and to make a work that attempts to unfold and inhabit the great diversity of forms it's constituted of.

While inviting onstage a mode of thinking about movement that doesn't belong to the stage and its usual temporality, a certain friction appears, which I hope is generative. It puts back in perspective the fact that ballet is an aestheticized evolution of European folk dances. Pas-de-bourrée is by the way a central step both in ballet and House dance - as well as in many other dances.

The fact that, at the beginning of the performance, I give to the audience a kind of map of the steps I worked from expresses my intention to make transparent that I haven't come up with this material. I'm somehow exposing the lineage this work inscribes itself in - or at least a part of it. By exposing my sources - as a kind of bibliography - I wish to allow the spectators to witness the transformative and combinatory process that I've engaged in.

My hope is also that giving straight access to the names of these steps can give the audience a sense of the historical depth and the cultural context that these moves emerged from. Also, very simply, I really love these names. In the 70's, lots of hip-hop steps were named after figures and elements of pop culture - the Roger Rabbit and the Smurf, which are both cartoon characters; the Drunken Master, which comes from a kung-fu movie featuring Jackie Chan; the Reebok and the Fila, the sportswear brands. I'm curious how the evocative power of these words can inform the spectators' experience of watching the movements I convey.

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