

Hester van Hasselt closely followed Benoît Lachambre's AIR project at the School of New Dance Development, attending rehearsals, interviewing the artist and watching the performance itself.

# Space is a body

By Hester van Hasselt



Wailing loudly, a girl kneels down before us, beseeching us. Her cries abruptly transform into a friendly but forceful machine-like voice, saying 'Please sit down... please sit down... please sit down.' Meanwhile, two people nearby are slithering past one another like snakes. And elsewhere Benoît Lachambre is asking a woman in the audience to grab hold of the two leashes attached to the leather band around his neck and to pull and to pull harder – and harder and harder again.

All of this, and more, is going on at the same time in the vast, seatless Expo hall of the Brakke Grond. Audience members are free to walk in and out as they choose for themselves what they watch – or even participate in. Just like last year, when Ann Liv Young's 37 Sherrys was performed here, this year's Something Raw festival is the venue for a one-off performance by the SNDO's AIR – Benoît Lachambre. And it couldn't be fresher, or more raw, than this.

## Wild and highly expressive

Day one of rehearsals at a studio on the Entrepotdok and it is time to meet Benoît Lachambre. We shake hands as I explain that I will be following the project. I am struck by his intensely pale face and his piercing gaze – his eyes are the lightest blue, almost white.

The artistic director of the SNDO Gabriel Smeets introduces Lachambre, a Canadian choreographer, dancer and collaborator who has made an important contribution to the development of dance as an art form. That Lachambre is the new AIR needs no explanation: it was the students themselves who asked for him to be invited.

In the hours that follow I learn more about Lachambre's work. In his solo *Délire Défait* he snarls and screams into a camera, makes tiny tap dance leaps and then rolls over the ground winding red tape around his face. Lachambre's



oeuvre is wild and highly expressive. It challenges and confounds me, but above all else I am transfixed by Benoît's physical being, his body – that gesticulating body that is at once muscled and almost translucent. His movements are stripped-down and graceful, as if there is space, as if there is air, between the bones and skin. I realise that I see before me someone who is a dancer to his very core – just like previous AIRs Steve Paxton and Deborah Hay about whom Gabriel Smeets once said: 'The life they lead isn't just about dance, it *is* dance.'

## Space is a body

All the residencies at the SNDO follow a similar pattern: the school invites an artist to come and share his or her practice with the students. It is then up to the artist to decide what the project will be. Lachambre chose to open up the creative process of making his new solo *Snakeskins* to the students. His four-week residency in Amsterdam marked the first phase in his own rehearsal process.

The knife cuts both ways, because as well as teaching them he hoped to learn from the students: 'After this process I go on with my process. I want to have a lot of questions.' Lachambre took the morning to introduce the students to his working method; in the afternoon the students all worked on their own solo. His concept of 'space' played an essential role in this process.

Benoît Lachambre explained how he experiences the space around us as a body, rather than as an empty volume that is to be filled with dance. The space is alive. It *exists*, in its shape, in the sound, in the temperature, in the floor under your feet and in the presence of other people. 'Just that in itself is something that totally revolutionises my notion of existence.'

'I am always influenced by the outside, no matter what. I like the presence of a body that is aware of this. Not only of what he is *influencing* but also what he is *influenced by*. It changes the politics of presence. There is no more hierarchy. You are not the centre. You are just influenced. You are part of a bigger dynamic.'

## Solo?

This idea put the 'solo' on which the students worked with the AIR into a very different light. Students are used to thinking of solos as performances for which they withdraw into solitary studios to create 'the ultimate individual artistic expression.' For this project, however, they had to share their 'solo' space with 36 other fellow students. This was a new and strange experience for many of them.

Lachambre: 'Actually, the performance we are making isn't a series of solos; it's a group piece, but it's still all about the solo. The individual students place their own signature under their work, and by doing that they take on their own artistic responsibility. That responsibility goes further than their own material, because I'm asking them to stay conscious of what happens in the space as they work. What kind of atmosphere are you creating together? What is happening between everything and everyone? And what does it mean to be conscious of this, as an artist?'

## Shedding, yielding, shifting

Lachambre would not be the man he is if he did not approach these questions in a physical way. The first two hours of each day of rehearsal were devoted to physical training. But this wasn't the kind of training one might normally expect to see: there was no instruction in dance techniques, no stretching and no focus on stamina training or physical excellence. Instead, guided by Lachambre, each student carried out research into his or her own body. He asked them to place their feet in full contact with the ground, and to visualise space around their ankle bones and in their hips. One student pulled on high-heeled thigh-length boots to feel how they opened up the space in his pelvis.







In these and other ways they zoomed in ever deeper on the experience of the body, increasing their sensitivity to what was going on around them.

Throughout the process, Lachambre took as his metaphor the image of a snake shedding its skin: it's all about letting go, yielding and shifting. In essence, this is what his new piece *Snakeskins* is also about: repeatedly casting off skins – or identities, or thoughts – and becoming ever more sensitive to what *is*.

Meeting with Lachambre after a rehearsal, we talked about death as the shedding of a skin. Lachambre has been seriously ill for some time. 'This work is changing how I look at things and it's changing the way I live,' he explained. 'To be honest, it's not only a choice. My body is breaking down on different levels, and I have had to face changes. I'm coping with it by accepting change, by allowing my notions to exist. It's a way of healing.' Although Lachambre is convinced of the power of his method, he is also fully aware that it may be insufficient to cure him. Laughing he added: 'I may never heal completely. But okay...'

At the end of our conversation, Lachambre cautiously brought together his ideas on dance and the body to form a more general plan: 'I think the time has come – these are my convictions – that there will have to be changes if we want to survive. I mean as humans on earth. We can't continue like this. Things have to shift. So I'm working on shifting as much as I can. I don't know what is going to change in the future, but I believe that the work I'm doing is investing in a change towards a certain direction that is more peaceful.'

#### Charming the snake

Look at what's going on around you and inside you; remain alert as you look, and make choices about how you move in response to: that's what Lachambre calls 'charming the snake'. It's about your own body, but just as much it is about the space, your fellow performers and the spectator: 'There's always a game with the spectator. And I love that game. I find it very interesting. At a certain point in *Délire Défait* I listened to the spectator, to the spectator's body. I saw it as my task not only to do the piece but also to listen. During a very aggressive scene I noticed that the audience started resisting, and if I went along with that I noticed that the monologue that followed was much gentler than I conceived it. Choreography is also that shared body. I am a participant in that body. I interact and I am also touched, taken, wandering through. Sometimes the space shifts so much that everyone changes: the whole audience'. Lachambre grabs his own arm, his skin, and says, 'this is my tool of recognition.'

The performance on 18 February at the Something Raw festival demonstrated that this inclusiveness, this approach to participating and relating to one another, can happen in a challenging way and in a context that is simultaneously sensitive and wildly dynamic. The performers and audience members mingled so thoroughly in the space that it was sometimes unclear who belonged to which group. All of us were 'solo' and 'part of a bigger dynamic'. While a girl at one side of the hall stuttered quietly into a microphone ('Can I, can I, can I, can I ask you for a dance?'), a young man clambered three metres up a wall to demand that spectators immediately gathered below him to catch him 'en masse' when he jumped into their upreached arms. Other performers spoke directly to individual spectators: 'Let me know if you're planning on going and I'll do my solo for you. I'll make sure I'm the last person you see here this evening.' Still others attracted attention in less explicit ways, and these we (or some of us) discovered as they quietly went about their own 'solo' performance. The sense of generosity hanging in the air was very inviting.



#### Who is actually responsible?

'A rollercoaster.' 'A super-open playground.' 'Tough, beautiful, opening.'

Some days after the performance there followed the assessment. The entire SNDO came together, including the four who stepped out of the project halfway through. One by one they took their turn to speak about their experiences, eloquently and in detail. It was not an easy process, but most of them made their way through it and reaped the rewards.

Two Japanese students, Jija Sohn and Yui Nakagami, explained how Lachambre's work struck them as having a very Eastern character. Used as they are to the rigid structures of European approaches, it was a breath of fresh air for them to work with Lachambre: 'I was gradually melting into the process, connecting to his method without speaking with him.' Referring to the performance at Something Raw, Marina Colomina said: 'It was great to activate the spectator I was relating to, and that the spectator and the performer could have different entrances to the work: the conditions allowed for a constant renewal. And it was great that roles could swap; some spectators were more nervous than me.' Oneka Von Schroder described Benoît as a 'kinetic wonder wolf'. And Louis Vanhaverbeke had this to say about the solo: 'The more I tested out my solo material in the group, the deeper my process went. The angle of approach, the reference points and the immediate responses in this temporary social context always provided a fresh perspective. There was enrichment and broadening rather than a narrow focus on the individual in a closed process.' And, with reference to the space as a body, Louis continued, 'For me, attuning myself to the space was simply a matter of saying 'yes' to proposals I encountered on my path. When you're working together in a group, a range of possible courses emerges. I discovered that the potential for doing something with them depended on my motivation. Yes we can? But of course, this kind of behaviour can also conceal the danger of opportunism. I remember Benoît emphasising the fact that not everything we engaged in was by definition interesting. It required self observation and sensitivity to the group to fully appreciate whether a particular behaviour suited a particular climate. Consciousness and observation of oneself forms the basis of this work and they unveil the guidelines for a physical practice. It is a brilliant and accessible concept.'

Now that Deborah Hay, Ann Liv Young and Benoît Lachambre have all done an AIR project in the school, the penny is dropping: In the regular curriculum the students are used to consuming; the teachers provide them with their tools. But an AIR is an artist who doesn't serve anything, explain anything or provide any answers. As William Collins pointed out: 'It's liberating to deal with this responsibility. It demands a lot of commitment. I was constantly analysing how I could engage.' Essential questions about the profession and education were posed once again: What does it mean to choreograph? What does it mean to teach? Who is actually responsible for making it happen? In this way, a particular experience with a unique artist triggers self-reflection on two levels: by the young artists and by the educational institution itself. I believe a great deal of credit should go to the school, the theatre and the students and artists involved, who are willing to take the risk to achieve something so incredibly important for all of them – and I think, thereby for dance as such.

*Hester van Hasselt is a performer, writer and funeral speaker.*