



Stage

Interview

Dancefloor disaster: Ayelen Parolin masters the choreography of comedy

Chris Wiegand

The show must go on for the trio of hapless performers in Parolin's new production *Zonder*, which finds the funny side in failure



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Contemporary dance and comedy don't exactly go hand in hand but [Ayelen Parolin](#) is a choreographer with funny bones. In her new production, [Zonder](#), three dancers try to waltz their way through Strauss's Blue Danube but end up all at sea. None of the trio can keep in time and they're desperate to outdo each other. One puts a foot through the stage; another ends up attacking the set. Even the audience seems to be at fault. A showboating performer looks out at us, nervously raising his arms Gladiator-style. Are we not ... entertained?

These three fear putting a step wrong but Parolin, born in Argentina and based in [Belgium](#) for more than two decades, cheerfully draws inspiration from failure. One of her trio attempts to tap dance out of trouble, hoping no one will notice. "We are always running away from failure," Parolin says, "but to fail can be a new beginning, a new way to think. It gives a lot of opportunities. And if we laugh at failure, we become stronger." By trying to hide their mishaps with a quick salsa shimmy or a flashy pose, her dancers just get further into trouble and the dread sets in. "It's like a nightmare," Parolin says of [Zonder](#). "But a happy nightmare ... you can have fun even in a nightmare."





'You can have fun even in a nightmare' ... Ayelen Parolin. Photograph: Floris van Cauwelaert

Parolin describes her work as serious fun. How political is this piece about stumbling forwards and covering up your mistakes? "It's more like a collage than a message," she explains. "I play with symbols. You can read them as super-political but I don't think that was my conscious intention. It was probably something more personal that can be read universally." But it's not pure chance, she adds, that among the more frivolous costume elements - the billowing sleeves, the skimpy briefs - are military epaulets.

The music, Strauss's alternative national anthem The Blue Danube, is also open to interpretation. "It's this beautiful music that has become so popular you could hear it in a pasta advert. Normally it would be heard on the last day of the year in the balls of Vienna, with these big costumes and the orchestra. Beauty loses something and gains something when it becomes so popular. Everybody knows this music. It's almost, in contemporary dance, something that we can't use."

Chosen for the recent [Charleroi dance biennale](#) in Belgium, presented with the [Objectifs Danse](#) showcase, Zonder is both a pastiche and a paean to that old staggers' motto: the show must go on. As such, it evokes the mishaps of Britain's [Mischief Theatre](#). "I have always been fascinated about when you try to deny a situation where it's clear that something is falling apart," she says, then waves her hands about and trills "everything is OK" in mock despair. Creating Zonder, the company had their own obstacles - namely performers' injuries and the uncertainty of Covid. "We had to find solutions and try to be strong when you don't feel strong," she says. But it sounds like the creation process was a lot of fun, too: "We tried a lot of ways to ~~destroy things!~~"

destroy things:

Parolin is quick to point out that the first person she laughs at is herself. “And that gives me a lot of freedom. I destroy borders in a way by laughing. Everything is possible when you laugh.” Zonder can be read as a commentary on the traditional top-down power structure of dance companies, particularly in ballet. Parolin draws a contrast between her childhood passion for performance (“I was always in front of the mirror, in my own world”) and her experiences being taught in dance classes and at conservatoire in Buenos Aires, where she felt she lost her “free universe”.

One inspiration for Zonder was *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett’s study of artisans. “In the book he writes about the hand knowing, not the head. This is always what I’ve thought - that the body knows, not the head.” Growing up, dance was at the centre of home life. “At all the big family parties, there was always dancing. For me that was probably the beginning of everything - to have fun together, to play together. My parents loved to dance.” Growing up, distinctions were not drawn between “high” and “low” culture. Raffaella Carrà was Parolin’s idol but she loved classical ballet, too.



Daan Jaartsveld and Piet Defrancq in Zonder. Photograph: Stanislav Dobak

After earning money by dancing on a TV show in Argentina, she arrived in Belgium in 2000 and “was kind of reborn”. However? “Singularity in Europe was more valued

in 2000 and was kind of reborn. Now so: singularity in Europe was more valued. In Buenos Aires, it was almost like you needed to hide your singularity to be a good dancer. Here it was the opposite.” She praises the curiosity, generosity and solidarity of the bustling dance community in Brussels. “I feel lucky to work here and exchange ideas in a genuine way.”

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Not that her arrival in Europe was entirely blissful. She was knocked back by endless unsuccessful dance auditions. Someone suggested that she choreograph a solo for herself. She named it after her birthday, 25.06.76, and it proved transformative. “After the solo I did an audition and they took me. After that I never stopped working.”

She later updated the solo and maybe one day will return to it: “I like the idea that it’s not fixed.” In the meantime, Zonder is on tour. It is [staged in Brussels this month](#) -surely this captivating comedy will get snapped up for a UK run, too. Parolin has just heard that her company has secured another five years’ funding: the shows must go on - and she will have serious fun making them.

[Zonder](#) is on tour in Europe

Chris Wiegand’s trip to Brussels was provided by [Wallonie-Bruxelles Théâtre Danse](#)

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