

Jérôme Bel, Gala, Montréal, Monument-National

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Jérôme Bel

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Jérôme Bel

Gala

Recently, the persistent lack of diversity in cultural production, from films, to television, to print media, has garnered significant attention. And as choreographer Jérôme Bel observes, contemporary dance suffers similar maladies. In an interview for the program notes accompanying the Festival TransAmériques's production of his work *Gala*, Bel remarks, "In 99% of dance shows the dancers are between 20 and 35 years of age, are svelte, in great shape and good-looking... I find that extremely limiting for an art whose tool is the body." With performances like *The Show Must Go On* (2001) and *Disabled Theatre* (2012), Bel has attempted to correct these representational oversights.

The choreographer addresses these problematics once more in *Gala*, which assembles a cast of amateur and professional dancers, sourced locally, who cross delineations of race, gender, ability, and body type. Beginning with pirouettes, these performers take turns literally going through the motions of conventional European dance vocabularies, before embarking on a series of group-accompanied solos. The piece reinforces the limitations of concert dance, offering the surprising talents, distinct propositions, and unique energies of a breadth of bodies as a celebratory alternative. It is an important endeavor, and one that succeeds in fostering an undeniably entertaining experience for the audience.

Beyond eliciting laughter and applause, however, it is worth considering how *Gala* actually operates as a dance work. The performance foregrounds diversity, and yet, it does little to engage, question, or investigate difference, how we understand and respond to it, beyond rote representation. Bel's claim that the uniqueness of each performer allows them to "suddenly become equal, worthy of the same interest," not only relies on troubling neo-liberal notions of individuality, but also seems to downplay the complex systems that perpetuate our valuing of certain bodies over others. To that end, let

us not forget the differential worth typically placed on dancers and choreographers, which, despite self-reflexive gestures, Bel's work does not sufficiently overcome.

And indeed, we should consider the politics that emerge not only from the performance spectacle itself, but also from the working ecologies that form it. For the FTA's production, the Montréal-based cast rehearsed over a short period with two assistants, Chiara Gallerani and Frédéric Segurette, before Bel joined the day before the opening. *Gala's* creation is a rapid-fire process, one perhaps made necessary by the nature of global contemporary dance and international festival circuits. And yet, this approach seems all too ready to accept the logics of late capitalist production—speed, interchangeability of parts, invisible labour—and internalize them within art-making.

Bel's work has been historically important in challenging conventional restrictions on who dance is by and for. Even so, these inquiries are not without precedent. One colleague pointed out, after the performance, that Liz Lerman has been working to create more inclusionary dance practices since the 1970s. Even with these historical examples, and even with Bel's interventions over the past twenty years, diversity in dance remains a glaring problem. And while *Gala* provides an entertaining approach to the issue, we may need to push further to effect sustained change.

Fabien Maltais-Bayda

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