

FRANCE/dance

By Laura Cappelle

Le Temps d'Aimer, Thierry Malandain's annual festival in Biarritz, has been luckier than most events. The 2020 edition was able to go ahead between lockdowns, albeit with limited capacity. Yet while there was much to celebrate back then, this year's festival felt freer and more joyful – with sunshine, a packed schedule and full houses.

The "giga barre," an open-air ballet class, even returned with no restrictions. For the first time in over 15 years, I stood in first position and tried not to hang on to the barre for dear life. If the past year has reminded us of anything, it's the privilege of moving freely, and the setting – the promenade along the city's main beach – proved irresistible.

The first weekend of *Le Temps d'Aimer* also brought some very strong premieres. Malandain, who is 62, remains one of the unsung heroes of French ballet, and his new version of *The Firebird* is spare, sensitive and musical. Out of the several versions Stravinsky composed, Malandain opted for the 1945 suite, and a metaphorical reading of the story. In it, the Firebird (a breakout performance by Hugo Layer, all extensions and elegant épaulement) becomes a messenger of sorts, given the task of bringing hope to humanity; in the programme notes, he is compared to St Francis of Assisi.

Around Layer, the corps de ballet, appearing alternately in black or white, goes on a quiet journey from darkness to light. Malandain isn't a

choreographer who thrives on dramatic conflict: he is at his best when operating on a symbolic level, finding order within chaos. Here, he brings out colours and contrasts in the score through elegant patterns and group tableaux.

The Firebird was paired with another Ballets Russes-inspired creation. Martin Harriague, a young choreographer who was appointed associate artist with Malandain Ballet Biarritz in 2018, opted to tackle *The Rite of Spring*. He mostly draws on the original libretto instead of reimagining it, with a few surreal images thrown in: the dancers first enter through the lid of a piano on stage.

Harriague, who was born near Biarritz and danced with companies in Marseille, the Netherlands and Israel before returning home, works in a more contemporary idiom than Malandain. He channels a fitting explosiveness into *Rite*, along with vivid storytelling. The presence of two older characters, a woman and a man, is especially welcome, and it is implied at one point that one of them might be the target of the group.

It would have been a slightly more original take on the ballet, but a sacrificial maiden is selected instead. The last third of Harriague's work is weaker as a result, as the maiden dances very little and remains an ill-defined character.

The next day, Malandain and Harriague also headlined a triple bill performed by Dantzaz, a youth company based not far from Biarritz, on the other side of the

Spanish border. While Dantzaz doesn't aim to train purely classical dancers, its members made a brave stab at Malandain's 1996 *Ballet Mécanique*, a surprising pure dance piece in which men and women show off between, around and sometimes on four ballet barres.

Dantzaz was more at ease in Harriague's *Walls* and *Fossile*. *Walls* is a new work inspired by Donald Trump's obsession with building a wall on the Mexican border, but is slightly too literal to hit the mark – there is only so much running against a wall and sneaking from behind it you can stage before the idea is exhausted. Nonetheless, some expressionistic scenes, with dancers mimicking Trump's hand gestures and the peculiar vocal rhythm of his speeches, were very well crafted.

It's clear Harriague is still experimenting with various choreographic tools. *Fossile*, an excerpt from a longer work that meandered upon its premiere in 2019, ended up feeling tighter and more convincing in this version

for two superb young dancers, Pauline Bonnat and Julien Rodriguez Flores.

One of Malandain's strengths as a programmer is his eclectic taste, and while not all the productions hit the mark over the first weekend of *Le Temps d'Aimer*, they covered a wider range of dance styles than most festivals. The hip hop dancer and choreographer Hamid Ben Mahi brought emotion and experience to his sequel to *Chronic(s)*, a self-portrait combining dance and text that became a hit in 2001. Two decades later, he's opted to return to autobiography with the same writer, Michel Schweizer, and the result is a bittersweet meditation on ageing in hip hop.

From the physical toll of high-impact choreography to casual racism and what it takes behind the scenes to sell a show (or to "sell yourself," as Ben Mahi puts it), *Chronic(s) 2* is an eloquent work, which will hopefully tour as widely as the first instalment. ■

Below: Hugo Layer in *The Firebird*.

