

QPAC Scholar in Residence, Professor Judith McLean

in conversation with

Artistic Director Ballet Preljocaj, Angelin Preljocaj

Full interview transcription

Judith: So I want to begin by thanking you for spending some time with me this afternoon and I wanted to begin with where your love of dance came from. What's your first memory of thinking about it?

Angelin: You want me to tell this long story...

Judith: Yes.

Angelin: Do you want short or long...

Judith: It's your story...

Angelin: I was working on Judo when I was...

Judith: Yes I know Judo.

Angelin: Judo you know.

Judith: Yes.

Angelin: I was 11 years old and I met a girl in my school, and she gave me a book about dance, and I read this book and suddenly I fall completely fascinated by an image, a photograph, of Rudolph Nureyev jumping in a fantastic position and with a beauty on his face, it was amazing, and I see that and the caption says Rudolf Nureyev transfigured by the dance. And when I read that I was thinking wow what is this dance that can make somebody so likeness and beautiful and yeah. And then when I give back the book to my young friend I ask where do you dance, and she says to this school. And then I follow her with my Judo uniform and then I start my first dance class and it was a revelation for me.

Judith: And what did your parents say?

Angelin: They didn't want to know at all that I had become a dancer. It was my first fight...

Judith: With your parents?

Angelin: Yes, with my parents.

Judith: And where did you train?

Angelin: I trained with the...

Judith: At the Aix-en-Provence?

Angelin: No no, it was in Paris.

Judith: Ah yes, Saint Lucie is it?

Angelin: Sucy-en-Brie.

Judith: Yes

Angelin: And [indistinguishable]

Judith: Yes

Angelin: And after I met [indistinguishable] who was a dancer of Martha Graham, oh no sorry, of Mary Wigman...

Judith: Sorry I don't know.

Angelin: Mary Wigman is the founder of German expressionism in dance and I learn a lot of things with her. Incidentally, I discovered the work of [indistinguishable], and then I decided to go to New York to learn something of the abstract modern dance and then I come back to France and I met some choreographers, and especially Dominique Bagouet who gave me the possibility to create my own work also. I was dancing in the company but also I created ballet.

Judith: And how old were you at that stage when that happened?

Angelin: I was 23.

Judith: Yes, so you started to choreograph your own work.

Angelin: Yes, yes.

Judith: That's quite young isn't it?

Angelin: Um yes. But when I founded my company that was later, because I founded my company in '85...

Judith: Yes,

Angelin: 30 years ago.

Judith: Yes.

Angelin: Like this house was founded in the same moment.

Judith: Yes, it is the QPAC house.

Angelin: Yes, and we started with three dancers, me and two friends of me and this was the beginning.

And now the company is 24 people and my work has a different range of inspiration.

Judith: Yes, we will get on to your work and the work of *Snow White* in a little while, but I'm really interested to explore the courage that dancer's really need to have, because you were a young man and your parents weren't particularly pleased that you were going to become a dancer and then you have to leave home don't you, to pursue your dance training.

Angelin: Well first of all I have to go to ballet class without my parents knowing that, and so I say I go to Judo but then I go to the dance. And it is very nice because the people believed, the teacher of ballet dance don't ask me money for that because they want me to continue to dance because I say that my parents don't want, and they say ok, no problem, come if you can. And then I decided to come.

Judith: So at what age did you leave, after you became a late teenager and you started to dance professionally, did you go away from home then?

Angelin: Oh yes, at this moment yes.

Judith: Yes, it is obviously quite young when you do that.

Angelin: Yes, I was 18.

Judith: Yes. Alright, so who would have imagined that some 30 years later not only have you become a dancer, but you are the artistic director and choreographer of your own company called Preljocaj. Do you still sometimes want to pinch yourself?

Angelin: Pinch, what mean pinch?

Judith: Pinch means...

Angelin: Oh yeah, pinch, like pinch me I'm dreaming. Yes, I am dreaming, I'm still dreaming.

Judith: Yes

Angelin: Actually I am dreaming that you're all here, and everything is like dream.

Judith: Yeah, ok

Angelin: No for example, it's always for me a pleasure and astonishing to see that I am here dancing, you know. At the moment, people are suffering in this earth and it's a great opportunity to be and artist and to dance.

Judith: So that's an interesting idea that you've contrasted two ideas that there are people in the world who are suffering and yet there are still artists that are trying to do things that are not so much to do with people suffering. How do you reconcile the world of the artist when there are things going on in the world.

Angelin: I think you know if you take the field of the painting, for example, and you see the painting and the history of the painting and you can see and feel the history of humanity. In the music also, in the theatre for example, and for example dance, which is made with the body which is a specific tool for the choreographer and for the dancer. And for example, the violence of humanity exists really, everybody knows that, but it's not so often that you can see the violence in dance because the idea of most of the people is dance is beautiful and graceful and you know. But dance really needs to be an art, like Picasso

for example paints Guernica which is very hard and violent and he expressed through his heart what is humanity and what happened in our conscience and in our body. Can you imagine an art who is involved with body and to ignore to the violence that a lot of bodies receive? Then it would be very inconsistent.

Judith: It becomes that kind of decorative art...

Angelin: Yes.

Judith: ...that isn't telling anyone's story.

Angelin: Exactly, just to make beautiful things is just entertainment but without deepness.

Judith: So it seems often the role of the artist is part philosopher, part social critic, but more than that someone who can offer us insights in a way that no one else can, for example, through the body in your case.

[END]

Part 2

Judith: So that brings me to the choice of *Snow White*. It's not a particularly nice story, is it?

Angelin: No, it's a hard story. What happened to this small girl is incredible, but it is also a thriller, I think, in comparison to *Sleeping Beauty* which the story is very simple you know, but with *Snow White* there are so many events and that is why I chose this fairy tale. And that gave a lot of occasion to develop creativity.

Judith: And I read somewhere that you had said that the story of *Snow White* is almost the Oedipal story in reverse. I wonder if you could talk about that a little bit more?

Angelin: Yes, also I chose this fairy tale because I was thinking that *Snow White* is very modern, very actual. I think this is a moment of *Snow White* actually, why, because of the progress of science, of medicine, of a lot of dietetics, the food, we become older but with better health, you know. And for example you can see women of 50 or 60 are very elegant, very nice looking, and a lot of seduction, and you can see in the street a woman of 50 walking with her daughter of 18 and there is like a competition of seduction between the two. For example, they can wear the same clothes and they exchange and that's why I was thinking but *Snow White* is exactly the problem that can lie in society actually between mother and daughter, and I was thinking it is really the period of a *Snow White* complex, like we say a Oedipus Complex, and I think this is the period of that.

Judith: Yeah beautiful...

Angelin: Because all of the condition of the conflict is in place.

Judith: Yes, and we have been talking a lot about that in preparation for it as well. A lot about the nature of obsession and middle aged women, of which the wicked stepmother is, becoming obsessed with their outward beauty and physical beauty...

Angelin: But behind that there is questions about femininity and the feminist in my opinion, because I think actually when a woman becomes a mother she doesn't want to give up the other part of her life, for example, professional, or about seduction, to be a lover, you know?

Judith: Mm, I do.

Angelin: And there is a fight to stay a woman and not just become a mother. You cannot say to a woman, you are a mother, that is not the only thing a woman is, she is a mother but that is a part of her life, and I think women are to assume that and to be mother obviously, I think women deserve to be president of the United States or you know, and that's why I think it is a very deep question.

Judith: Yes, it is a deep question. And I must say as a mother of a daughter who is now fully in her womanhood, that it is a journey that you go through as a mother watching the flowering if you like, both sexually, intellectually, all of those things that you have to find a way to actually be with your daughter, or be with younger women, and I think it is a very deep question. How do you be appropriate and

nurturing. So, do I detect there is an attempt to understand or some sympathy to understand the step mother?

Angelin: I think it is the first thing you think of the character, first of all, and you can see that Jean Paul Gaultier put a specific touch on her, like something very strong...

Judith: And very sexual.

Angelin: Yes, and she is fascinating, and beautiful, and passionate.

Judith: Yes, and I think there is an ideology around the French woman, you know, the idea of the French woman as always being sexy, and to look at Catherine Deneuve, and those kind of women, who are still in their eighties, I think she is, and still fully sexual. So it's an interesting question about how to be I think. Let's talk about the co-creators which you have had working on this and they are pretty impressive, Mahler...

Angelin: It was a very nice collaboration... no the thing is obviously he is dead, but I worked with old symphonies of Mahler in trying to recreate an imaginary score, and I was very attentive and aware of the tonality of the different musical choices to make it like it is the same music, and that is very important because you can't take different elements of Mahler or Beethoven and put together like that, because sometimes you see that it is not from the same. First of all, the choice of the different music is important and the place in the score is very important to the ear and to be current.

Judith: So that would be a very interesting discussion around, and we might have it when you get back, around that choice of tonality, and timber, and mood, and how that works together.

Angelin: And also what the music seems to express.

Judith: Express, yeah great. And of course to Jean Paul Gaultier and his fabulous, fabulous costumes. Talk about that collaboration?

Angelin: First of all, when I was thinking to *Snow White* I was thinking who could do the costume, and obviously I have a lot of occasion to see different fashion events, and one day I see Jean Paul Gaultier fashion show based on the fairy-tale *The Little Mermaid*.

Judith: Ah yes.

Angelin: And it was really incredible because they were in dresses with shell and wet hair and it was incredible, and I decided to ask him to work on this.

Judith: Did you know him?

Angelin: No, I knew that he came very often to see my performances, but the abstract part of my work let's say, and then when I ask him he was thinking maybe for something abstract, but then when I told him I wanted it for *Blanche Neige*, for *Snow White*, he was very excited for that. And then we started to work, and the first encounter in terms of work was with my set designer and I tell the story to Jean Paul, manipulating the set and during this moment he was writing things and taking notes, and after one week he sent me 200 sketches of costumes, and most of them are in the performance. He has an incredible creativity and imagination. After we worked, we specified some things to make it more deep all the costumes. After we chose the fabric together and it was incredible, and all of the discussion we had with that. And after we were waiting for the costume, and one day very close to the premiere the costumes arrive and everybody was very happy, the dancers were completely excited, it was like Christmas, and Jean Paul came with all the costumes and suddenly with each dancer he recreated the costume. He moved it, curved it, and changed it on the bodies of the dancers, this was the third scale of the creation. That means that Jean-Paul Gaultier is in a continual process...

Judith: He never finishes.

Angelin: He never finished.

Judith: I would like to finish by saying that QPAC has really tried to bring very exciting international companies here and it has been quite a joy for us over the last few years because we get to see all kinds of dance. Is there a style that you would say distinguishes your company and your dancers, is there a Preljocaj style?

Angelin: I don't know because I am a bit schizophrenic as I told you before, I like sometimes very radical work with no costumes and experimental music, like Stokowski, and completely abstract and radical and avant garde, and sometimes I like to enjoy myself and also the audience, and then I think to something more popular. But say Jean Vilar is a French theatric, he used to say I want to do a theatre popular but exigent. I think he is true, it is not because you want to do something popular but you have to go down to the level of art, but you have to keep the high level of your art, but find a way to make this level accessible, to give access to this level to the audience, and that is the work I try. I do my best. For example, with *Snow White* to show that dance can be very exigent and radical, but can also make dream...

Judith: ...and meaning for people.

Angelin: ...and meaning.

Judith: I noticed somewhere in a description of *Snow White* that you talked about it as being a ballet, you were very clear to call it a ballet. Is that right?

Angelin: Yes, because it is almost like a game also to play with the concept. Number one of the concept is to take the same structure of the ballet, of traditional ballet like *Swan Lake* or you know, but decide to inject modern dance and the material is absolutely modern but the structure is based on the...

Judith: ... formal ballet.

Angelin: Yeah, and this is very funny and I like to play with this element.

Judith: So you're a kind of an iconoclast, you like to break things down and...

Angelin: Yes, I like to play. I am still a child and this is really what guided me. I tried to continue to play like when I was a child.

Judith: Yes, that's gorgeous. Well it is our gain that your coming, is there anything that you would like to say that we can think about until you come back. Is there something around the work that you think is particularly worth thinking about. For example, I think the relationship between mothers and daughters, or older women and younger women, is fantastic. In terms of the dance and I have seen the ballet on a DVD, and of course there is that amazing vertical work that happens, and I guess it has got me thinking around how do they do that, and how do they maintain that kind of strength?

Angelin: You want an answer, an honest answer, work, work, work. You know Picasso used to say my art is 25%, no 5% inspiration and 95% of transpiration.

Judith: Perspiration, yes. Yes, so tell us about the company and the company's, I mean it's a long way to come, it's a big flight, jet lag, all of that stuff, why do you come to somewhere like Australia?

Angelin: Because it's a very important part of the world. I think this is a country, a new, well a very old country but is new in a certain sense, and this ambiguity is very interesting. And I think personally this is the first time I come to Australia and I always feel a very particular energy, because it is the encounter of different people. For me and for the dancers when we were talking about coming here, everybody was so excited to come.

Judith: Do you know Bangarra, the work of Stephen Page?

Angelin: No, unfortunately not.

Judith: Well, we must introduce you to them when there here. Thank you for talking with me...

Angelin: It's finished?

Judith: Yes

Angelin: Oh no, it's too early.

Judith: I know, I could go on all afternoon but unfortunately it has finished.

Angelin: No, thank you, thank you very much. It was lovely and a pleasure, thank you.

Judith: Thank you.