



THEATREWORKS  
PRESENTS

# GALA

Conceived and directed by Jérôme Bel

Performed by: Alecia Kim Chua, Alison Tang, Aole Tacuma Miller,  
Archana Satheesh, Dana Lam, Emma Lim, Eugene Tan, Fiona Lim,  
June Omar, Justina Hussain, Ma Yanling, Margaret Revalle,  
Mary Aw, Michael Wong, Samuel Lim, Seth Alsree, Shawn Tan,  
Timothy Julian Nga, Timothy Ng, Toshi Suzuki

Victoria Theatre  
6 – 8 October 2016, 8pm

"One of  
the coolest  
conceptual  
dance-makers  
on the planet"

*The Guardian,*  
13 March 2015

"A tour de  
force, wildly  
entertaining and  
truly radical."

*The New York Times,*  
13 May 2015

TheatreWorks is thrilled to be co-producing a work conceived and directed by Jérôme Bel.

We first worked with Bel during *The Flying Circus Project* in 2004 where he presented *The Last Performance* (a lecture), and *Shirtology*. In 2006, TheatreWorks presented Bel's collaboration with Pichet Klunchun - contemporary Thai dancer maker - *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* - which is a hit and has been seen by many around the world. *GALA* will thus be TheatreWorks' third collaboration with Bel. The reason for the continued collaborations with Bel should come as no surprise. We believe in presenting the alternative and works that push artistic boundaries; we simply love how Bel constantly inverts the status quo, how his works bring one beyond one's comfort zone. In placing different lenses to dance/performance and incorporating diversity, Bel constantly redefines the meaning of dance and performance. Plus, it is always an artistic adventure with him.

*GALA*, exemplifies what TheatreWorks believes in, that an arts experience can be excellent, transformative, inspiring and difficult all at the same time. We cater particularly to the tastes of audiences who perhaps wish to be unsettled, challenged, and somehow shifted in their perceptions of the world. *GALA* is a project that engages with real issues that matter in an artistic way. Bringing together 20 unique individuals together on one stage is no easy feat, but the process will definitely be fun for all, as everyone gets to 'play'. It is filled with self-discovery, without becoming self-centred / self-absorbed. While celebrating the individual, the work encourages the individual performer to examine himself/herself vis-a-vis his/her community. *GALA* creates a space where ability is dictated not by one's limitations, but by being the best that one can be.

To you, our audience and supporter, do feel, laugh and enjoy the beauty of this performance as it is in itself, a gala.

TheatreWorks (Singapore)  
6 October 2016

Firstly, I have to mention that I am very grateful for the professional relationship and camaraderie that has been established with Ong Keng Sen, Tay Tong and TheatreWorks for over a decade. As with previous collaborations, they were very keen when I introduced *GALA* and soon came on board as a Co-producer for the work.

The inspiration for *GALA* sparked three years ago, as French actress and singer Jeanne Balibar invited me to conduct a workshop in the poorest suburbs of Paris. Conducting the workshop turned out to be a challenging experience as I was interacting with amateurs from very diverse cultures and backgrounds, each having his own references about dance. I found it important that the amateurs were not taught what to do and how to dance. Instead, the dancers themselves were positioned as the choreographers, being urged to use their own imaginations, references and desires in the choreography. My goal was to emancipate the dancers from fear of judgement and other unwanted characteristics that inhibited their possibilities. I learned a lot from this process and loved how the amateurs destroyed the rules of the theatre (because they weren't aware of them).

An earlier production, *Disabled Theatre* that I did with Theater Hora also influenced my decisions for *GALA*. The mentally disabled actors that I worked with had such freedom and energy that I rarely found in my field.

Soon, I realised that the production should include professional dancers as well, so as to accurately reflect the aim of gathering the most diverse of individuals. This way, the range of dance extended through depicting contrasting individuals, from a young child who has never attended dance lessons to a professional ballerina who has studied dance nearly all her life.

At times, audience members feel uneasy with the frailty of some of the performers. I feel that this relates to our ubiquitous stigma on failures, and that we should confront this issue of success being the only goal in our capitalist societies. *GALA* is symbolic of what the society can be. I share with you a quote by Samuel Beckett: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better."

Hope you enjoy the show!

Jérôme Bel  
6 October 2016

## GALA

With *GALA*, Jérôme Bel continues his patient deconstruction of the institutional representation of dance, concerning himself less with destroying dogmas than with questioning what is absent, or fortuitously silent, and what is voluntarily forgotten. After having had mentally handicapped dancers perform (*Disabled Theater*), then members of the audience, (*Cour d'honneur*) the choreographer again gives the stage to those who are generally kept off it, here a group of amateurs giving rein to their amateurism in the fullest sense of lovingly doing art. His fight against generalised exclusion from performing in a show takes here the form of a *GALA*, a non-professional collective celebration, sapping the authority of the idea of "dancing well" to the benefit of the pure pleasure of being your own producer. *GALA* explores the physical and intellectual plasticity of these novice bodies by mobilising their desire to express themselves through dance and their capacity to embody, albeit minimally, a choreographic knowledge.

Inspired by the experience of a workshop with amateurs in Seine-Saint-Denis, the piece explores an alternative path to the official channels of choreographic art. The choice of a *GALA* form, poor relation of the professional show, thus gives the place of honour to the simplicity of execution of domestic dance, the sort you can do at home, without mastery or technique, thereby, it is assumed, sacrificing any strictly aesthetic interest. Arriving in their party clothes, picked out from their own wardrobes, the dancers take over that place of power, the stage, and in a sense do away with its authority. Shown in all its bareness, as in all Jérôme Bel's shows, the stage becomes an empty space for these improvised interpreters to invest. In this neutralised place, the presentation of their intuitive bits of knowledge and their home-made movements illustrates the idea of an "equality of different sorts of intelligence", a theory of Jacques Rancière in *The Ignorant Master*, but displaces it to the field of dance: just as there are not several different ways of being intelligent, *GALA* suggests a continuity between all the different ways of dancing. At one and the same time Jérôme Bel discredits the specialist's reduction of the amateur to his supposed impotence, and definition of him as an imperfect and dull figure, in order to valorise his choreographic potential.

In the first part of the show, the performers one by one give their interpretation of a signatory gesture of a particular period of dance, following a thread which leads from the highly codified classical ballet to the liberated dance of modern times. Jérôme Bel here shows the unconscious processes of assimilation through which each person integrates the official history of dance. The piece thus distances itself clearly from the words of experts, and runs counter to the series of portraits (Véronique Doisneau or Cédric Andrieux)





which presented the backstage of the dance world to the general public. Completely to the contrary, *GALA* in its own way poses the question of the "non-dancer", an expression that is widely used in contemporary theory but whose pertinence Jérôme Bel has long disputed: who do we see evolving on stage if not dancers? Is dance necessarily conditioned by an acquisition of know-how? How otherwise can these interpreters be qualified if what they are doing is not performing? Isn't a poor dance nonetheless still a dance? Through this series of individual performances, the piece shows tangibly the infusion of artistic imaginations in the social group; the steps and attitudes proper to each choreographic form together constitute a collective memory, an embodied cultural knowledge.

Running counter-current to his handling of the theme in *The Show Must Go On*, the form of the show in *GALA* does not involve any criticism of popular entertainment. Jérôme Bel is on the contrary levelling high and low culture, erasing the hierarchies between the different cultural layers to probe the common basis of dance performance. The presence of a few professional performers in the middle of the group gives the audience the opportunity to suspend any idea of judgement, to toss away their expectations and their reflexes of appreciation, by confronting dancers of different types and levels, and placing them on the same footing. This lack of differentiation, while not preventing comparisons, removes any doubt as to the intention: although a certain distance makes it permissible to smile, the treatment of amateurism does not allow any irony. The final aim of the undertaking is certainly not to invite mockery, but quite the contrary to question the feeling of superiority which does allow it. It is up to the spectator to decide whether to undertake the reform of his critical way of viewing.

From the experience of these bodies with no particular choreographic qualities, the most benevolent members of the audience might retain an image of fragility or lack of discipline, the most defeatist of something grotesque or an artistic rout. By placing themselves however outside a system of judgement, as the piece invites them to do, they can perceive in the approximation, gaucheness and spontaneity the language of rough and unformatted bodies, which are alternatives to virtuosity. To the rigid attitudes, movements and discourses of the academic world, these bodies are opposing their mobility and their irregularity, and thus their inventiveness. In this way, the spectator is never confronted with a neutral or generic body but with an individual one which startles and astonishes and thus poses questions. The value of what has failed, missed the target or been badly executed resides thereby in its capacity to deconstruct models and to reap benefit from their distortions. As in Samuel Beckett's *Worstword Ho*, Jérôme Bel encourages the performers to give fruition to their failures, to "Try again. Fail again. Fail better" so as to make their lack of skills opportunities for an alternative plasticity, for another way to produce dance, starting from what is lacking. The show thereby

celebrates non-know-how without ever lapsing into an ode to mediocrity.

Secondly, *GALA* subverts the system: the performers no longer have to embody emblematic steps and assigned forms, but become in themselves the models through which the choreographies are transmitted. One by one, each person executes solo a dance that he does in real life. The rest of the group is encouraged to imitate him by immersing themselves in the steps in an extra-verbal form of communication, similar to what Rancière calls universal learning, in the same way as we learn our mother tongue, picking it up without any discursive mediation. Through this device, Jérôme Bel lets us see the mechanisms of imitation through which art forms impose and diffuse themselves in the bodies which are interpreting them. Outside academic apprenticeship, the processes by which dance is appropriated in fact arise from a collection of imitated behaviours through which an individual joins in a collective recital (be it family, ethnic, generational or whatever), which is a component of his own particular identity. Each solo reveals the corporeal forms of this cultural heritage while at the same time enabling its performer to experience a new territory, and to express himself outside his usual community. On stage, in the heart of the group which both isolates and integrates him at the same time, each dancer delivers his knowledge and informs the others with it, in the dual sense of transmitting knowledge and sculpting their bodies.

In this collective mechanism, dance is thus brought back to its political and social application, its capacity to unite ephemeral communities. But where academic training tends to create homogeneity and a uniformity of behaviours, the group of amateurs reveals through its general gaucheness the particularities of each of its members. Its lack of synchronicity therefore lets strongly differentiated personalities emerge which are interpreted through variations in rhythm, amplitude, grace or energy. The professional dancers themselves, shaken out of their comfort zone of being technicians, go through a test of unlearning, divest themselves little by little of their automatic behaviour, to rediscover the sheer pleasure of dancing. Through a demonstration of bodies simply moved by a wish to produce themselves, to be their own production, *GALA* discreetly asks the question of *primum movens*, what is behind the impulse to create dance, the infancy of dance. If this is a natural aptitude, the simple expression of the relation of our body to time and space of which art is only the sophisticated form, the excuse 'I can't dance' no longer holds true. For Bel, as for Rancière, valorising an intuitive and unconsciously absorbed knowledge, which puts intelligence at the service of what we want, and is capable of destroying the inhibitions of the desires to dance, *GALA* should finally be understood as a hedonistic manifesto of dance without complexes.

Florian Gaité

Researcher in philosophy (Institute ACT - Pantheon-Sorbonne University) and art critic (member of the International Association of Art Critics)



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Michael Wong, Samuel Lim, Seth Alsree, Shawn Tan,  
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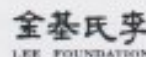
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


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