

Serge Bennathan and his Legacy with Dancemakers

As I embarked on this project to explore the archives of dance makers, I found myself at a crossroads. Initially, I had a subject that I wanted to explore, but as I delved deeper into the material and reflected on my life changes, my research shifted. I began to hone in on themes that resonated more profoundly with me—specifically, the concept of queerness and how it intertwines with the work of Serge Bennathan, one of Canada's most distinctive choreographers. This essay aims to articulate my understanding of queerness, connect it to Bennathan's artistic journey, and examine how these themes reflect the broader historical context of the AIDS epidemic and its impact on the artistic community in Toronto.

I have chosen to reflect on the work of Serge Bennathan because he embodies the intersection of queerness, the impact of the AIDS crisis, and the necessity of creating inclusive spaces for aged dancers within the dance community. These themes are not merely relevant; they are fundamental to understanding the broader implications of dance as an art form. In a society where marginalized voices frequently contend with systemic barriers to visibility and representation, Bennathan's work underscores the critical importance of embracing diversity and advocating for inclusion in the arts. His contributions offer valuable insights into how dance can serve as a vehicle for social commentary and cultural change, highlighting the transformative potential of artistic expression in addressing issues of identity and community resilience.

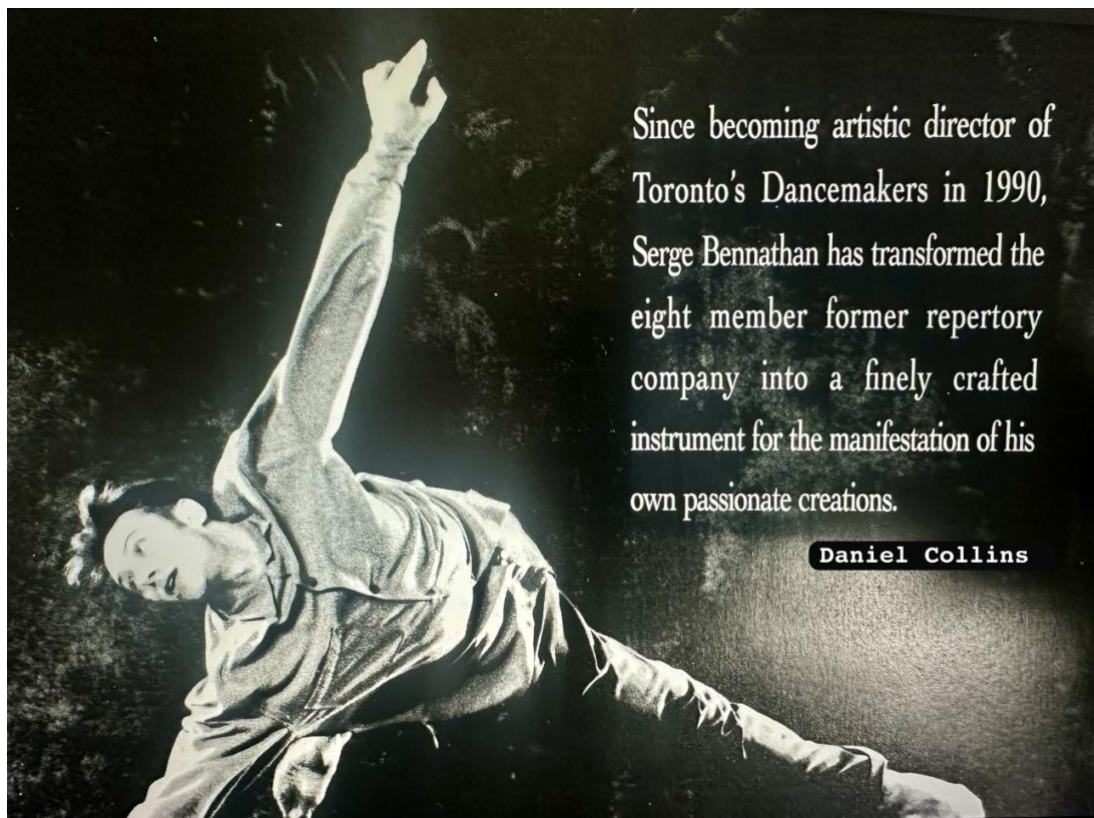


Image description: The image shows a dancer in a dynamic pose captured in black and white. On the right, a quote reads: "Since becoming artistic director of Toronto's Dancemakers in 1990, Serge Bennathan has transformed the eight-member former repertory company into a finely crafted instrument for the manifestation of his own passionate creations." - Daniel Collins.

My exploration of queerness has been a deeply personal journey. As a gay man who previously did not identify with the term “queer,” I found myself questioning why I felt this way. Was it a matter of semantics, or did it reflect deeper feelings about identity and belonging? This inquiry led me to research the meaning of queerness, ultimately revealing its richness and potential for inclusivity and why speaking out with a broader audience is important.

José Esteban Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, states, “Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness's domain.” This perspective offers a framework for understanding queerness as an evolving concept—one that invites us to envision a future filled with possibilities beyond normative constraints. By embracing diverse experiences of time and identity, queerness challenges traditional notions of temporality, allowing for new forms of self-expression, community-building, and social change. It encourages us to “look forward while feeling backward,” a sentiment that reflects the duality of acknowledging our past while striving for a more inclusive future.

In this context, my exploration of queerness is not just about identity but also about understanding the collective experiences that shape us. It connects to the experiences of countless individuals within the LGBTQ2S+ community, particularly those who have navigated the complexities of love, loss, and resilience.



Image description: The image shows two individuals facing each other, with their foreheads almost touching. Their expressions are serious, and their intense gazes are locked on each other, suggesting a moment of confrontation, focus, or emotional exchange. The lighting casts shadows, creating a dramatic effect and highlighting the tension and connection between the two subjects. The image has a sepia or grayscale tone, which adds a timeless, classic feel to the scene.

Preceding this project, I created works that reflected my insights and exposed my findings on queerness as a research subject. One such work is “Queer Visibility on Toronto Streets,” an art installation that explores queerness through curated photographs capturing the presence of stickers on Toronto’s streets, specifically those that engage and prompt introspection within the queer community. Central to the installation are stickers from the queer community, symbolizing belonging and resistance. Additionally, the installation includes an audio with my reflections on these images, underscoring the need for queerer activism. By combining visual and auditory elements, I prompted critical reflection on queer visibility in Toronto, challenging viewers to consider the complexities of acceptance and inclusion.

Another example is “Becoming Out,” a self-expressive performance through the lens of identity. Phelan’s idea that performance manifests through its disappearances resonates with my experience of coming out; authenticity emerges when fear is overcome. Each performance, though repeatable, is unique and shaped by audience interaction. I challenge myself to connect with viewers, altering the performance’s energy. By refraining from scripting my words, I embrace the moment’s uncertainty, highlighting the body’s fragility and strength in performance. This embodies the essence of becoming out, where truth is realized in the Here and Now.

With this background in mind, my exploration of the archives of dancemakers led me to discover a collection of photographs—images devoid of names or accompanying information. At that moment, my work began to take shape. These photographs evoked a myriad of sentiments and feelings within me, stirring a deep emotional response as I reflected on their significance. As I delved deeper into the archives, I unearthed valuable information about the choreographies and artistic contributions of Serge Bennathan. Each piece I uncovered provided context and a richer understanding of the creative landscape in which these images were situated, enhancing my appreciation for the artistry and intention behind his work. This journey through the archives connected me to Bennathan’s legacy and invited me to explore the stories that lingered in the silent frames of those photographs.

Serge Bennathan: The Choreographer and His Time at Dancemakers



Image description: The black-and-white photo shows a person with a serious, introspective expression. They have short, light hair, wear glasses, and are dressed in a dark turtleneck and shiny leather jacket, adding a sophisticated, edgy vibe. Positioned slightly to the side with an arm resting on a railing, they gaze distantly, suggesting deep thought or reflection. The dark background, dotted with distant lights, enhances the moody, contemplative atmosphere, giving a sense of mystery and focus.

Serge Bennathan was born in France and trained in classical and modern dance in Paris before working professionally with Roland Petit's Ballet de Marseille for six years. Since moving to Canada in 1985, he has created independent works for Le Groupe de la Place Royale, EDAM, Simon Fraser University, Le June Ballet International de Cannes, and the Canada Dance Festival. His independent creations include *The Strangeness of a Kiss* for The National Ballet of Canada, *In and Around Kozla Street* (Warsaw) for Ballet British Columbia, *The Last I Saw...* for Alberta Ballet, and a reprise of *The Fall* for The National Ballet of Canada.

Bennathan's experiences in France and his subsequent move to Canada have profoundly informed his approach to choreography, emphasizing the importance of personal emotion and the human condition. His artistic vision has reshaped the identity of the companies he has worked with, transforming them into platforms for his emotionally resonant works.

Since he was appointed Artistic Director of Dancemakers in December 1990, Bennathan has created several notable works, including *Quand les Grand-mères s'envolent* (1992), *Chronicles of a Simple Life* (1993), *Les Vents tumultueux* (1994), *Les Arbres d'Or* (1996), and *The Trilogy of Sable/Sand* (1997), all of which received individual nominations for Dora Mavor Moore Awards. His 1995 creation for Dancemakers, *Sable Sand*, won the Dora Award for Best New Choreography.

In addition to his work with Dancemakers, Bennathan has collaborated with Opera Director Robert Carsen on various productions, including *Mario and the Magician* for the Canadian Opera Company, *Turandot* with the Flanders Opera (Antwerp, Belgium), *Faust* for the Grand Théâtre de Genève (Switzerland), and the Canadian Opera Company's productions of *Jemufa* and *Salome* in 1996 with filmmaker Atom Egoyan. His recent projects include *Eugene Onegin* with Robert Carsen for the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York and *The Boy Wonder Project* for Ballet British Columbia.

By the time Bennathan joined Dancemakers, the company had already been in the dance scene for several years, the company itself has a rich history, having been formed in April 1974 by a group of dancers who recognized the need for an alternative dance platform in Ontario. At that time, only the National Ballet of Canada and the Toronto Dance Theatre were performing for adult audiences. Initially funded with a modest budget of \$15,000, the company produced 19 public performances in its first fiscal year. At its peak, Dancemakers presented over 100 performances annually, showcasing a range of classical and modern dance styles. The company's members come from esteemed institutions such as the National Ballet, Toronto Dance Theatre, and York University, reflecting a diverse foundation of training and experience.

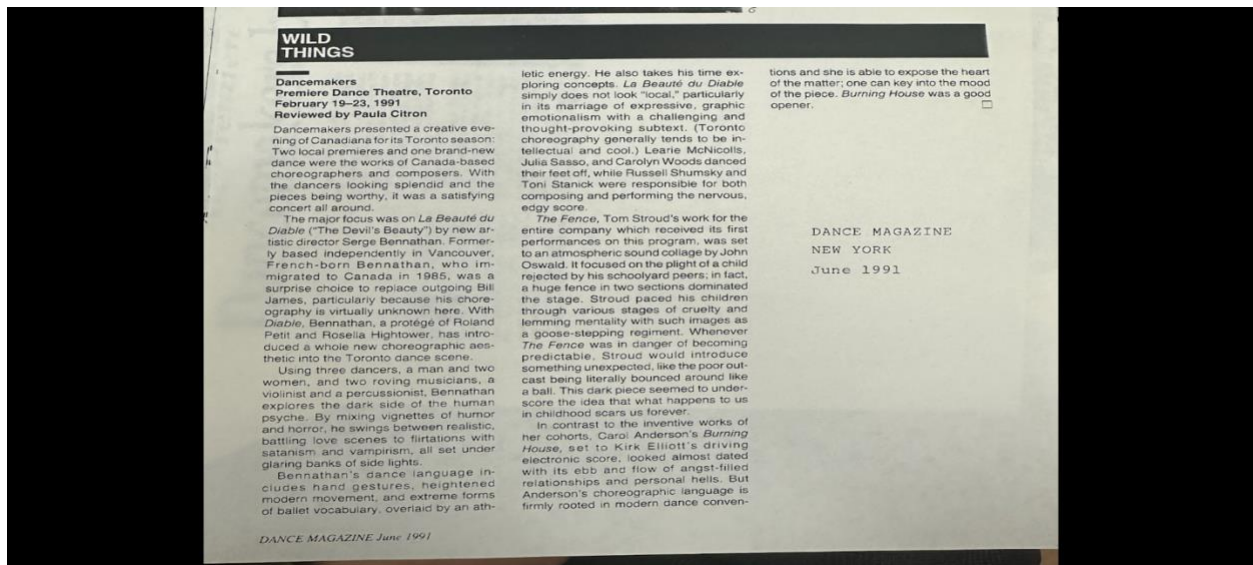


Image description: The black-and-white photo shows a review from a dance magazine from June 1991 in New York. The review is titled "The Wild Things," focusing on the performance of the piece "The Devil's Beauty".

During his tenure from 1990 to 2006, Bennathan directed Dancemakers, twelve of his works received Dora Mavor Moore nominations, including *Sable/Sand* and *The Satie Project*, both awarded for Outstanding New Choreography. He is also a past recipient of Canada's prestigious Alcan Rio Tinto Performing Arts Award. In 2006, he founded the dance company Les Productions Figlio. Bennathan's work often delves into themes of love, loss, and the existential questions that accompany them—issues that resonate deeply with the queer experience.

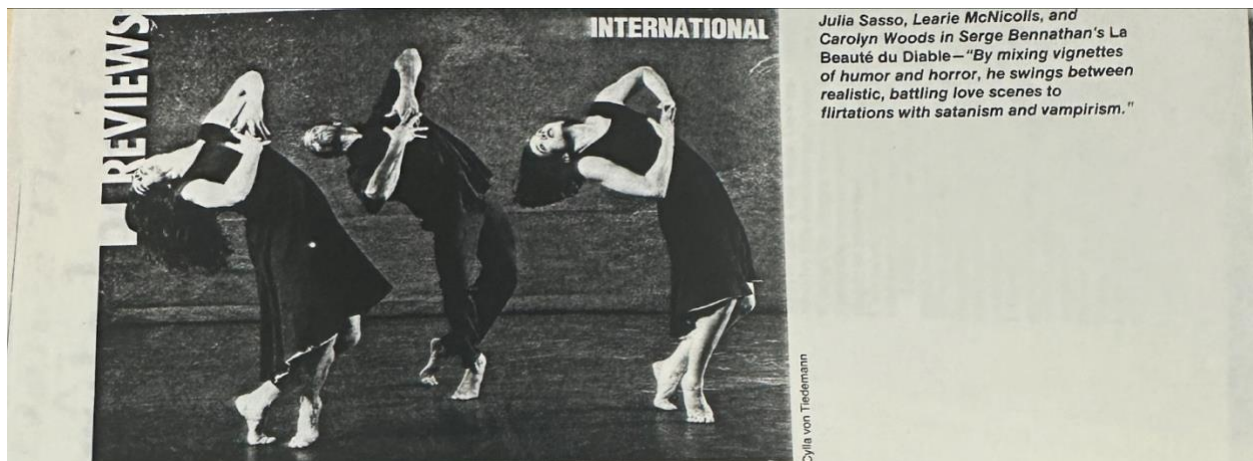


Image description: The black-and-white magazine page features a dance review with a photo showing three dancers in dramatic poses, leaning backward in a tense, expressive manner. They wear dark clothing, conveying theatricality and intensity. The photo and text together highlight the performance's dark, intense themes and supernatural elements.

Two of his most significant choreographic works, in my view, are *La Beauté du Diable*, produced independently in 1990, which was motivated by his own struggle with an intense love relationship and contrasts elements of the sacred and profane, and *Chronicles of a Simple Life*, spurred by the

death of a friend from AIDS. This piece portrays a broader exploration of death and separation, reflecting themes he had studied in previous works.

In an interview with Daniel Collins in 1994, Serge Bennathan commented:

“The main thing is to make sure your vision is taking place and that everyone is working towards this vision. But the more you grow, the more you mature, the more complex the work becomes. And the more complex”

AIDS on Toronto's Artistic Community

The AIDS crisis had a significant impact on the cultural landscape of Toronto, particularly within the dance community. As artists grappled with the loss of friends and colleagues, their work became a means of processing grief and fostering connection amid profound sorrow. A few choreographers began to incorporate themes of illness, love, and mortality into their performances, transforming the stage into a space for dialogue about the realities they faced.

Bennathan's choreography often reflects these themes. Works such as “Chronicles of a Simple Life” (1993), inspired by the death of a friend from AIDS, speak to the rawness of loss and the complexities of navigating a world marked by grief. These pieces serve not only as personal reflections but also as collective memorials for those who were lost, capturing the essence of a community in mourning.

During this period, countless artists in Toronto faced the tragic reality of losing friends and mentors. The numbers were staggering in the LGBTQ2S+ community affected, either directly or indirectly, by the epidemic. This loss necessitated a re-evaluation of artistic expression, prompting artists to create work that addressed the realities of illness and death and to honour those who had passed.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic began to emerge in Canada during the early 1980s, with the first reported cases occurring in 1981. At that time, Pierre Elliott Trudeau was Prime Minister. The Canadian government's response to the epidemic faced criticism for its slow pace, particularly regarding funding for research, prevention, and treatment. Despite the rising number of cases and growing awareness of the crisis, many felt a deep sense of neglect regarding the needs of those affected. It wasn't until the late 80s, driven by increasing public awareness and activism, that the government began to take more substantial action.

Necropolitics can be applied to the HIV/AIDS epidemic by examining how power dynamics shaped responses to the disease and the lives of those affected, particularly marginalized groups such as LGBTQ2S+ individuals, people of colour, and those living in poverty. This framework highlights how state and societal responses often devalued these lives, resulting in inadequate healthcare access, stigma, and discrimination. In this context, governments frequently implemented policies that regulated the lives of those living with HIV, including surveillance measures, mandatory testing, and restrictions on treatment access, further entrenching inequalities and exacerbating the challenges faced by already vulnerable populations.

The lack of government action and acknowledgment of the epidemic's impact fueled public outrage, leading many to take to the streets to demand change. Protests became a vital expression of frustration and a call for justice, emphasizing the need for comprehensive healthcare, funding, and social support. This activism is closely linked to the significance of Pride and the broader

queer umbrella, as it underscores the importance of visibility, solidarity, and community resilience in the face of systemic neglect.

By reflecting on the HIV epidemic through the lens of necropolitics, we can better understand how power structures influence the lived experiences of those affected and the broader societal implications of neglecting marginalized communities. The ongoing fight for recognition and rights within the LGBTQ2S+ community serves as a reminder of the critical role that activism plays in addressing health disparities and advocating for equality.

From my view, Bennathan's engagement with themes of queerness and AIDS offered a platform for dialogue about the realities of living with HIV/AIDS, challenging societal perceptions and encouraging empathy. This artistic engagement became a vital form of activism, illuminating the struggles faced by the LGBTQ2S+ community and advocating for visibility, acceptance, and healing in the face of adversity. In doing so, Bennathan's work contributed to a broader cultural response that sought to reclaim narratives of identity and loss, ultimately empowering a community to unite and advocate for change.

Departing from Bennathan's fight against AIDS with his art, he also challenged closeminded perspectives in the contemporary dance scene by engaging and working with aged dancers. For him, the aging of dancers is not a liability but a quality that adds depth and richness to their work. He articulates a belief that maturity enhances understanding and emotional nuance in performance. This perspective starkly contrasts the often youth-centric narratives prevalent in the arts.

“In our company, I think there is a beauty in maturity and age, which adds to the depth and understanding that goes into the work, the creation.” S.B.

In An interview with Daniel Collins in 1994, the interviewer asked the dancers also have a seasoned quality. You're not working with kids. Is that planned?

SB: It's very much planned. It's a part of how I see dance. It's a part of my vision. I want mature dancers. And the dancers who come into the company are usually 27, 28, 30 years old. I have dancers who are 33, 35, 38, and I want to still work with them as dancers when they are 48. In our company, I think there is beauty in maturity and age, which adds to the depth and understanding that goes into the work, the creation.

By engaging with older performers, Bennathan was drawn to their maturity and the rich tapestry of stories they carried stories imbued with grief, pain, joy, and resilience. His choice played a pivotal role in the success of his choreographies and his ability to direct dancemakers toward creating deeply resonant work.

Bennathan's focus on maturity revealed a deeper understanding of what it means to be human. Older dancers possess a reservoir of life experiences that inform their movements and expressions, allowing them to convey authenticity in ways that younger performers might not yet be able to achieve. This authenticity is crucial in dance, where the physical form must communicate the intricacies of the human condition.

Moreover, Bennathan emphasis on personal histories enabled him to craft choreographies that were not just technically impressive but deeply moving. The intensity of grief, the lightness of joy, and the weight of lived experience all coalesced in her works, creating a space where audiences could not only watch but also feel.

Bennathan believes that the richness of life experiences profoundly enhances artistic expression. His work often embodies this idea, highlighting how the human experience is not defined solely by youth but is enriched by the passage of time, the accumulation of experiences, and the complexities of identity.

An interview with Serge Bennathan.

In researching this essay, I explored Dancemakers' archives extensively but found myself seeking a deeper understanding of the foundational elements behind their remarkable choreographies. Motivated by this curiosity, I reached out to Serge, hoping to gain insights into two of his most significant works and their influence on Canadian contemporary dance. This conversation turned into much more than a typical interview—it was an engaging and insightful exchange where I had the pleasure of learning about his artistic vision and journey at Dancemakers. This experience enriched my research and deepened my appreciation for his contributions to dance.

Can you share with me memories of "The Devil's Beauty" and "Chronicles of a Simple Life"?

S.B. You are talking about two works that are very important to me. "La Beauté du Diable" is significant because it was a piece I created as an independent choreographer in Vancouver just before coming to Dancemakers, and I brought it with me as my first work with the company. "Chronicles of a Simple Life" is important because it is a work where my intimate life crosses with my artistic life. Here, I wanted to honour the life of a person who had a profound impact on both my artistic and intimate life. I was happy that we performed in Cannes and that even while very sick, he was able to see the work I was doing with the company.

Can you tell me more about "The Devil's Beauty" and how it happened that you decided to bring an independent work into Dancemakers?

S.B. For my work at Dancemakers, I wanted to keep the feeling of being independent, so bringing with me "La Beauté du Diable" was something like a bridge that helped me to start working with the company. Every work I create comes from a personal experience. The way I see or aim for my work to be seen is that I don't want to give the full idea of what it means for me; I want people to see and be able to relate based on their personal experiences. Even when working with the dancers in the choreographic process, I would never come and say the meaning of the work we are creating or what I have in mind because I'm interested in the dancers' interpretation of every move. Sometimes, at the end of the process, I will share some thoughts or insights with them, but it's not my primary interest as I believe that the word "why" is not the most important. My primary interest is to guide the dancers to make the choreography personal through the digestion of the movement in their own lives. In the end, I'm there to see their dance and ensure that whatever the dancer is doing matches the same feelings and emotions that inspired me to create the choreography I initially wanted to share.

Can you share with me what inspired you to create "The Chronicles of a Simple Life"?

This piece was for one of my dearest friends back in France. Back there, I had a small dance company for a few years, where he acted as a manager. However, this company ended when I

moved to Canada; nevertheless, our friendship never ended. We always remained connected, even across the distance. After some years, my dear friend tested positive for HIV. Back then, it was something painful, maybe dramatic. Day to day, I used to think about that, and those thoughts lingered in my mind for several months. I have a tendency that whenever some thoughts stick to me for that long, I just start exploring—not by dancing, but by thinking, writing, and painting. I allow myself to feel the emotions and sensations. In this frame of time, I believe the events happening around my life get into my skin, my muscles, and my brain; they become part of myself.

After this time, I usually go to the studio and move however I want. There are no words, no plot to follow, and no storytelling; I just let my body talk and move to release any feelings that were previously living in my body. After this time and after moving with the dancers, I start digging with them, where I look at them and observe their bodies and movements. It's a kind of work that we do together. My work is to guide the dancers to find their own movement that echoes and stays true to the initial emotion.

"The Chronicles of a Simple Life" was not about me letting go of him or the storytelling of his life; it was about the lesson he was somehow giving me by witnessing the incredible grace of my friend's life. He taught me a lesson to honour life.

Nowadays, All I want to do as an artist is to live my life with grace and honour.

What about the age of the dancers? I read that you quite enjoy working with mature dancers.

One of the main things I seek in a dancer is sensibility and adaptability. Often, I didn't specifically start looking for mature dancers. However, this happened many times during the years I spent at Dancemakers; I shared time in the company with initially young dancers who later became more mature in age. In my choreographic processes, I'm really interested in dancers being curious about the meaning of the movement they are creating—doing. I often ask the dancers to dig into their own emotions and body physicality to explore the meaning of a particular movement. I believe that it is only through this process of exploration that they can discover their true selves. When a dancer knows who they are, they become powerful human beings, and this is what the audiences can see in the performance. In most cases, when I worked with mature dancers, they already knew or at least had a better idea of who they were, and this process went smoothly.

What were your thoughts on the difference between dance in America and dance in Europe when you came to Canada?

Most of the dances and choreographies were from the Graham school system, technique, and much more from Cunningham. Maybe not every dance, but most of the Canadian dance was coming just from the States. To be honest, I just wanted to explore and be free—freedom in movement and experimentation with the dancers, and to be open-minded. There was a time when I explored technology, which may not be my favourite, but I have tried that, too.

After dancemakers, Bennathan returned to Vancouver and founded Les Productions Figlio in 2006. The company has since produced nine full-length works, including *The Invisible Life of Joseph Finch* (2007), *Manga* (2007), *Slam for a Time Traveller* (2008), *The Strange Adventure of Myself* (2009), and *Conversations* (2010), co-produced with The Dance Centre and the Chutzpah! Festival. His other notable productions include *Elles* (2012, Rio Tinto Alcan Award), *M. Auburtin* (2015), *Just Words* (2016), and *Contes Cruels* (2018). Outside Figlio, he has created

works for various institutions, including Ballet BC and Mocean Dance. Additionally, Bennathan is a painter and author of four illustrated books.

The Legacy of Dancemakers



Image description: This black-and-white image shows a person standing with arms raised outward in a powerful, expressive pose. The figure's mouth is open as if shouting or expressing a strong emotion. The stark contrast and simple, bold lines give the image an intense, almost iconic look, focusing on the person's expression and posture, which convey a sense of liberation or defiance.

Dancemakers, flourished since its inception in 1974, becoming a cornerstone of contemporary dance in Canada. The company committed to performing works of national and international acclaim, showcasing a spectrum of human emotion through movement. Bennathan's tenure as artistic director marked a significant shift in the company's identity, leading it toward a more cohesive and expressive style.

Bennathan's choreography has garnered acclaim for its emotional depth and technical sophistication. His works invite audiences to engage with the complexities of the human experience, often challenging them to confront uncomfortable truths about love, loss, and resilience. This commitment to authenticity in performance is particularly relevant in the context of queerness, where narratives have historically been marginalized or overlooked.

As Dancemakers continues to evolve, it remains a vital platform for showcasing the diversity of voices within the dance community. The company's dedication to exploring the human condition aligns with the broader goals of fostering inclusivity and representation within the arts.

In exploring my understanding of queerness alongside the legacy of Serge Bennathan, I am reminded of the power of dance as a medium for connection, healing, and expression. The themes of queerness, aging, and the impact of the AIDS epidemic resonate deeply within the artistic community, serving as a testament to the resilience of those who have faced adversity.

As I reflect on the histories that shape our present, it is essential to honour the voices and experiences that have paved the way for greater understanding and inclusivity. Dance, in all its

forms, remains a powerful vehicle for storytelling, allowing us to explore the complexities of our identities and the richness of our shared experiences.

Through the lens of Bennathan's work, we are reminded that queerness is not a static identity but an evolving journey. It challenges us to embrace our past while envisioning a future that celebrates the diversity of human experience. As we continue to navigate our paths, let us carry forward the lessons learned from those who have come before us, fostering a community that values authenticity, vulnerability, and connection in all its forms.

Dance, as an art form, has the unique power to communicate complex emotions and narratives that resonate deeply with audiences. Bennathan's exploration of queerness and the experience of having a beloved person with HIV/AIDS speaks to the heart of what art should accomplish: it should challenge societal norms, provoke thought, and create dialogue around critical issues. His ability to weave personal and collective experiences into his choreography invites viewers to engage with themes of identity, loss, and resilience in a way that is both poignant and transformative.

Furthermore, the inclusion of older dancers in contemporary choreography is vital. It challenges the prevailing notion that only youthfulness is valued in performance art. By making space for older dancers, Bennathan not only enriches the artistic landscape but also sends a powerful message about the value of lived experience and the diverse narratives that come with it. This inclusivity fosters a more comprehensive understanding of the human condition, allowing for a broader range of stories to be told and celebrated.

As an artist myself, I am deeply invested in the idea that art can empower us through performance. It can provide a voice to those who feel voiceless and create a sense of community among individuals from varied backgrounds. Art that addresses themes like queerness and the lasting impact of AIDS is crucial, as it encourages empathy and understanding in an often-polarized society.

Discussing Serge Bennathan's contributions to dance is not merely about celebrating his achievements with dancemakers; it's about recognizing the profound conversations he initiates through his work. His focus on queerness, the AIDS crisis, and the importance of inclusivity for older dancers aligns with my belief that the arts must continue to address and reflect the complexities of our lives. Through this lens, dance becomes a powerful tool for social change and personal empowerment, reminding us of the strength that lies in our shared humanity.

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