



Filipe Portugal  
CHOREOGRAPHER

# disTanz

Press Release

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## Modern choreography meets the Baroque: A double-bill “Corpus” in Zurich

★★★★★ ?

Von Sarah Batschelet, 28 Mai 2017

Two stunning new ballets by choreographers [Douglas Lee](#) and [Filipe Portugal](#) premiered in Zurich. Both took their inspiration from 18th century music and were accompanied by the period instruments of Zurich's fine baroque Orchestra La Scintilla under conductor Christopher Moulds, who specialises in that repertory. From the pit, cembalist/pianist Giorgio Paronuzzi shone with music by members of the Bach family, and concertmaster Hanna Weinmeister also gave sheer luminosity to her solo violin.



© Gregory Batardon

Born in Lisbon, Filipe Portugal has distinguished himself, not only as a charismatic soloist in the [Zurich Ballet](#), but also as a promising choreographer. For his riveting new work, *disTANZ*, he takes his inspiration from music by Bach and his sons Carl Philipp Emanuel and Wilhelm Friedemann, and has the dancers, in various configurations, expand the small orbit of bodily movement to an extraordinary collective of activity and pacing. The ballet is visually contained or, alternatively, offset by a huge and regularly perforated metal disc – like the enormous saucer of a teacup – that hovers over the stage. (Marko Japelj). While that serves first as a striking honeycomb/filigree backdrop, it later descends and tilts at an angle, or serves as a visual “cap” to the athletic movements below it. In motion, it emits a tone like a call from the otherworld.

Portugal's choreography takes the dancers to the very limits of physical possibility, and often incorporates the "beat" of the Bach in entirely startling ways. Rarely have I seen a dense collection of movements parallel a score so closely. A single note emphatically played, and a foot might strike out like a momentary afterthought, or an arrow-straight body suddenly crumple. Portugal expands even small, inconspicuous gestures into something much bigger, continually making instinctive and fluid transitions from one movement into another. "I like to try out things that are new for me," he has said, "so that I don't get stuck in any one style." And in *disTANZ*, Portugal freely expresses the balancing act between closeness and separation, modelling and transforming the dancers' steps just as the personalities themselves change or strike out into new territory over time. As such, the piece is also a reflection of the dancers with whom the choreographer has worked.



Yen Han and Jan Casier in *disTANZ*

© Gregory Batardon

Among them, the sinuous Yen Han and her strong partner Jan Casier gave the most poignant performance. She easily stands two heads shorter, but in her shiny skin-toned, full-body leotard, she moved as seamlessly as a slippery water creature in his arms. Giulia Tonelli, Tigran Mkrtchyan and Daniel Mulligan's pas de trois was also stunning, none the least for the mastery of dozens of difficult sequences the dancers simply made flow.

British choreographer

Douglas Lee's *A Lady with a Fan*, the second ballet, took its inspiration from an oil painting by the Spanish court painter Diego Velázquez, dated ca. 1640, which counts today among the most treasured holdings of the Wallace Collection. New evidence suggests the female figure – wearing a black lace veil and dark dress with low-cut bodice – was the Duchess of Chevreuse, a Frenchwoman whose political conspiring turned the powerful Cardinal Richelieu against her, forcing her to escape to Spain.

All of that intrigue, suspicion and drama was packed into the second ballet. For the work's successive scenes, choreographer Douglas Lee alternated the music of Antonio Vivaldi with that of the modern American composer, Michael Gordon: a brilliant contrast that added real heft to the narrative. The accomplished Katja



W. Moore, T. Vanderbeek, K. Wunsche and C. Aitchison-Douglas in *Lady with a Fan*

© Gregory Batardon

walls – which the dancers themselves ably positioned mid-performance.

Wünsche danced the noble Lady, whose proud strides across the stage contrasted with the gyrations and distorted movements that mirrored the enmity shown towards her. The use of the black fan, both as a visual element and as a snap-call to attention, was just brilliant.

In the first ballet, Martin Gebhardt's lighting effects were sublime. Yet as a man of many talents, it was the choreographer himself who designed the formal stage flats – in solid Renaissance forms of towers and high



Katja Wunsche and William Moore, *Lady with a Fan*

© Gregory Batardon

intervention saved the modest mishap, but even that – the unexpected – was perfectly timed. Otherwise, though, there was little less than a magic hand at work on this ballet, adding another truly breath-taking performance to the Corpus that both ballets celebrated.

Lee also did the costumes, which were remarkably effective in their simplicity. The Lady had a ballooning black chiffon skirt, while the others wore sombre-coloured full body leotards, and each man, a starched ruff collar. In one particularly vigorous pas de deux, the Lady's partner lost his collar centre stage. It lay there, abandoned, until Wünsche –despite being hurled across the stage by two male partners – managed to grab it in one fell swoop and heave it into the wings. A little human