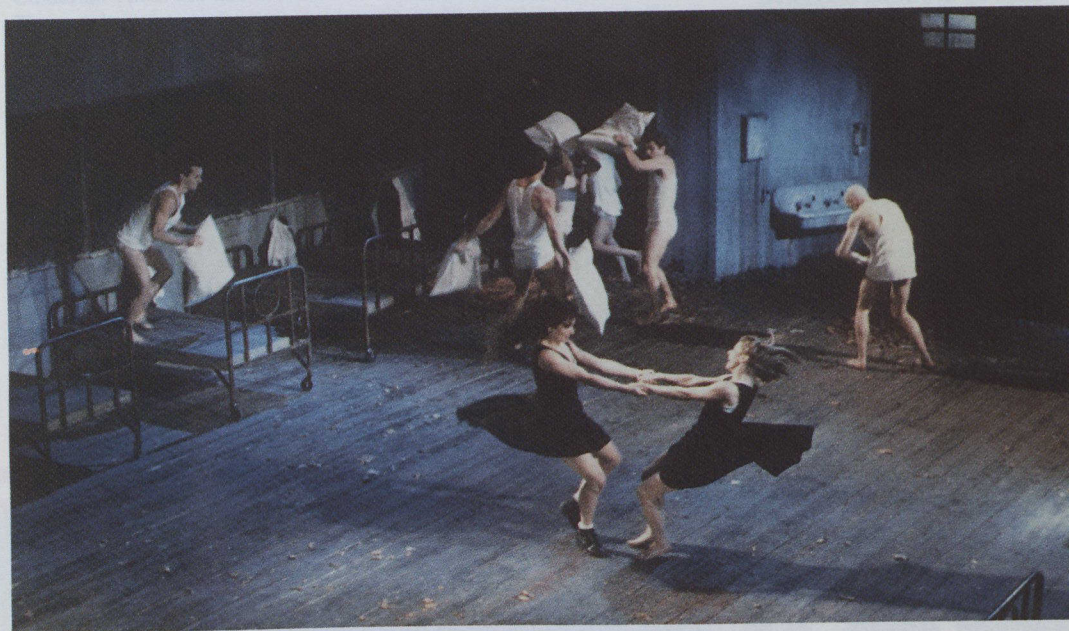


Carbone 14: Pushing the Boundaries of Creativity



Yves Dubé

A shooting gallery where girls gun down their lovers; an acrobatic dance over and under a whirling bed; a room with dead trees hanging from the ceiling — these are not images associated with traditional theatre. But then Carbone 14 is not a traditional theatre group. This vibrant troupe from Montreal is one of the most renowned contemporary exponents of performance theatre, incorporating dance and music with a minimum of text, providing a kaleidoscope of sound and motion that bears more resemblance to a rock video than to Tchaikovsky.

The company was founded in 1975 by Gilles Maheu under the title *Les Enfants du paradis*, a reference to a film about nineteenth century street performers in France. It evolved into Carbone 14, taking its new name from the process of determining the age of objects by measuring the rate of decay of the carbon 14 contained within.

Over the past decade, Gilles Maheu has produced a series of provocative and award-winning works, including *Le Voyage immobile* (1979), *Pain blanc* (1981), *L'Homme rouge* (1982) — a solo performance — and *Le Titanic* (1985). *Le Rail* (1983), a denunciation of physical and moral cruelty described in *The Punter of Brighton*, England, as “spectacular and hard-hitting,” won Best Scenography at the Festival of the Americas in 1985. *Hamlet-Machine* (1987), a fragmented vision of ideologies providing “a grand performance ... of unbelievable violence and darkness” (*Nord Eclair*, Lille, France), captured the same award in 1987. All of Maheu’s work comments on contemporary social issues, from consumerism to the nature of revolution to the role of the individual in a bureaucratic system.

Maheu and his company of 12 have performed throughout the world to widespread critical acclaim. *Le Dortoir* (1988) toured Europe in 1989, gain-

Carbone 14’s *Le Dortoir*: “brilliant imagination and dizzying frenzy.”

ing rave reviews across the continent. The *Salzburger Nachrichten* hailed the “brilliant imagination and dizzying frenzy” of the production; the *Glasgow Herald* declared the troupe “justly acclaimed as one of the most exciting new phenomena in the growing area of performance theatre.” In February 1990, *Le Dortoir* began a two-month Canadian tour, preceding a return to Europe in July and to the Brooklyn Academy of Music in the United States in the fall.

Maheu’s inspiration for *Le Dortoir* came from a childhood photograph. The action occurs in the dormitory of a Catholic boarding school, a sterile environment of metal beds and broken windows, on the day that United States President John Kennedy was assassinated. The dreamlike wishes of six boys and seven

girls are revealed, culminating in the solo dance of a nun. The mood shifts dramatically when Kennedy’s death is announced and the children revolt, the pace of their dancing rising to a wild and disturbing frenzy. Poetry and athleticism combine to recreate in stunning fashion the ethos of political and religious rebellion that occurred in the 1960s in Quebec.

Indeed, Maheu’s theatre roots go back to his days as an actor in the Quebec of that time. He then turned to mime and street theatre in order to break through the restraints imposed by traditionalism. He studied with such European masters of mime as Yves Lebreton, Eugene Barba in Denmark, Étienne Decroux in Paris and Jerzy Grotowski in Poland before returning to Quebec in 1975 to found his own troupe.

Maheu progressed from street theatre to full-scale productions, determined to “rediscover the art of shaking the viewer’s complacency — the art of overwhelming.” He believes that theatre, like music, must appeal to the senses and not only to the mind. Refusing the label *avant garde*, he calls his work the theatre of today, which speaks to the people of today in vocabulary suited to modern times.

Maheu’s work has brought him to the forefront of performance theatre, an international movement with exponents throughout the world. Carbone 14 has been lavished with critical praise wherever it has appeared. The multi-disciplinary talent of Gilles Maheu — actor, director, author, choreographer, designer — speaks to the human condition as the world approaches a new millennium. ♦