

a narrative of discovery

# La Ribot

## a castillian codebreaker

by **Lois Keidan**. William Burroughs may have called language 'a virus', but in La Ribot's recent London based choreographic research, language is a code - and one that can be encrypted, cracked and re-configured through the body to take on new meanings and point to new artistic possibilities

**W**orking with Marc Smith, a deaf English dancer who uses spoken and signed language, Angelique Cox, a hearing English dancer who speaks sign language and with her own languages of Spanish, English and dance code, La Ribot spent five weeks working on the construction, deconstruction and abstraction of the received codes of sign language and dance.

Put simply, both sign language and dance codes are manual methods of communication; sign language using arms, hands and fingers as a means of direct expression and dance code using hands and arms to represent the movements of dancers' legs and feet. La Ribot's trick was to try to locate a motive and methodology to effectively synchronise the two and turn them into the material of performance. The process the group embarked on was in one sense alarmingly simple and sequential - for example, they said or wrote text, then translated this into sign language, then interpreted the signing through other body parts (legs and feet), then translated these movements into dance code, then interpreted the dance code and finally composed the, by now fully abstracted, codes into choreographic sequences.

For me watching the research process at various stages, one of the highlights was the early moment when the dancers realised they could not remember a choreographic sequence unless they could remember the original text on which it was based. Not being a dance person as such, it was this moment that opened my, admittedly naive, eyes to the potential of what was going on and what was going to be possible. Through this strangely logical process of realising choreographic sequences, that may have their own internal codes but that are entirely based on, and driven by, text, La Ribot had arrived at a challenging new choreographic question: What can movement literally mean as well as actually do? By deploying text as their starting point, these English-, Spanish,

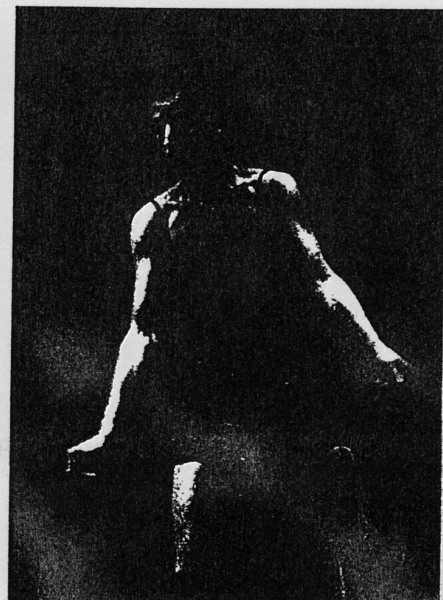
sign- and dance-literate collaborators were evolving an original language for movement that is based on the vocabulary of speech. This is utilising the text as a form of notation and the possibilities are surely overwhelming: "In a piece of work relating to dance is it important to grasp the real meaning of the various movements? Do we, in dance, wonder what the steps or movements mean in their literal sense? Do we wonder what images, sensations, ideas or pictures act as a driving force for the bodies engaged in dance?"<sup>1</sup>

Of course I cannot convey the complexities of the processes and questions La Ribot was exploring. Indeed, text was not the only language at play - as she suggests in the above questions, actions and images were also put through the abstracting and refining processes. For example, the simple act of removing and discarding a T-shirt was individually interpreted and then codified by each dancer before being recodified and performed by the group. The cumulative abstraction of gesture and

movement through one dancer to another was also a central part of the process. However, what connects all of these elements and singles this project out for me as extraordinary, are La Ribot's initial questions about whether it is possible or important to grasp the real meaning of movement and whether movement can mean something literal. Can dance say something and what can be said through dance?

From asking what movement in dance could mean, to constructing a new choreographic code that is based entirely on meaning, to refining that code, in an almost homeopathic like process, through the body and back into abstracted images, La Ribot is asking even bigger questions about the nature of performance, and dance in particular, in the 1990s - she is mapping out a whole new terrain of artistic method and madness to navigate. In this sense the *Dance Codes* research is a continuation of her influential and inspirational work in eroding the borders and breaking the rules of contemporary artform practices.

For those who know La Ribot such playful and bold experiments in form come as no surprise. For those who have not yet seen her work you have a treat in store. Originally from Madrid and trained as a dancer, La Ribot has chosen to live in London since 1997. Her work is creating such interest across Europe that she could be based anywhere, but she was drawn to London by the energy and impulse of the new performance scene here. For La Ribot, a city that recognises and supports radical interdisciplinary practices (and even has a name for them - Live Art) offered the perfect climate in which to locate her work. Hers is a practice that is driven by ideas more than disciplines and one that explores the relationships and tensions between dance, performance art and visual art - it is therefore impossible to



Isabelle Webster

describe La Ribot as simply a choreographer or dance artist and that is precisely what I find so irresistible about her work. La Ribot is probably best known for *Piezas distinguidas* (*Distinguished Pieces*) which she began developing in 1993. *Piezas* are a series of short, sharp snapshots that blur the boundaries between the performing and visual arts and exist in a space somewhere between Cindy Sherman and Pina Bausch. She has described them as "short adaptations of ideas presented as plastic art, dance, poems in motion or tableaux vivants."<sup>2</sup> So far she has produced 26 *Piezas* in two different programmes (13 *Piezas distinguidas* and *Mas distinguidas* 97) and the ultimate aim is to produce 100. Each piece lasts from between 30 seconds and five minutes and is conceived as a piece of conceptual or visual art that can be bought (by a distinguished proprietor!) and owned in perpetuity. The owner can attend a performance of their *Piezas distinguidas* anywhere in the world and owns a unique Super Eight movie transcription.

Pursuing the ideas explored in this summer's research process of creating dance material from signed texts, La Ribot is now planning to produce a full length show, *Dance Code* (working title), for three dancers who sign (she will not perform in it). Planned for presentation in 1999, *Dance Code* will be La Ribot's first group piece after seven years of developing primarily solo work. She particularly wants to work with ideas of fate and chance and whilst *Dance Code* will on one level be a dance performance it will also resemble a game in which there will be specific materials, rules and codes based on texts and actions (as per the research process) but their playing out will be purely random and open to each performer's free will. Elements of chance and tension will be furthered enhanced by the addition of dice rolls and performance extras!

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## Reference

1 & 2 La Ribot, August 1998.

La Ribot's choreographic research project was supported by London Arts Board, The Place Choreodrome and an Artsadmin Bursary. *Dance Code* has been co-commissioned by Canary Wharf Arts and Events and Dance 4 and can be seen next May. Contact Eduardo Bonito on +44 (0)171 247 5102 or email <all@artsadmin.co.uk>