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The 10th Berne Dance Days

Berne steps out

If you think that the seven fierce little Zytglogge bears dancing to the madman's bell are the only ones who dance in Berne, then you are very wrong. For the last ten years the Berne Dance Days have attracted thousands of dance creators and dance enthusiasts from Switzerland and abroad to the city on the Aare.

Modern dance is booming. This is obvious from the two big festivals, Steps and the Berne Dance Days. The Berne Dance Days have turned ten.

The Berne Dance Days started as a "crazy idea" in the mind of one person. Only 26 at the time, Reto Clavadetscher

*Marianne Mühlemann **

sprang out of nowhere one day into the firmament of Bernese dancing. His stars were right. He got the support of the

* Marianne Mühlemann is dance critic of the Berne daily, "Der Bund".

authorities, private sponsors and a team of voluntary helpers who have stayed true to him to this day.

All was ready by 1987. Even star choreographer Maurice Béjart honoured the 1st Dance Days. That year it was mostly local dance creators and some from French-speaking Switzerland who appeared at the two most lively weeks ever seen in Berne. But twelve months later the radius increased to include dance groups from Germany, Holland, France and the United States. The jump across linguistic, regional and national boundaries was achieved.

Since 1990 cultural exchange with eastern Europe has been developing. The Berne Dance Days Association invited groups from Finland, former East Germany, Hungary and Czechoslovakia to the federal capital, and in the opposite direction it also helped organise a dance festival in Prague in which Swiss dance creators could take part. This actually happened before the Berlin wall came down!

Artistic highlight

In 1991 the Dance Days celebrated their first jubilee. The motto of their fifth birthday, Made in Switzerland, was ap-

propriate. The Sinopia Ensemble from La Chaux-de-Fonds dedicated "Harold and Maude" to the jubilee, and this was an artistic high point not only in the history of the Dance Days but also in the history of dance. For the double part of Maude, choreographer Etienne Frey called two top-rate stars out of retirement back on to the stage. These were Rosella Hightower, born in 1920, who had not performed for 30 years, and Yvette Chauviré, born in 1917, who had been prima ballerina assoluta at the Paris Opera in the 1930s.

Crowned with love and glory

The fame of the festival grew from year to year. Dance groups came from lands ever farther afield, bringing with them increasingly demanding productions. Spectator interest grew steadily, but in a cultural climate geared towards austerity financial pressure was becoming a big problem. Then in 1992 something very special happened. The Berne Dance Days Association was awarded the much sought-after culture prize of the Berne Citizens' Community, worth Sfr. 100,000.

Over the years a fringe programme has grown up alongside the evening events. This includes dance workshops, exhibitions, dance parties and video dance programmes. These greatly extended the coverage of contemporary dance creation. People became not only spectators but also participants. This was successful, and dancing became a subject of discussion amongst the wider public as well as for insiders.

In addition, since 1989 a mini-festival, "Danse Noël", has been organised between Christmas and New Year and is extremely popular. This is run jointly by Reto Clavadetscher and his wife, Claudia Rosiny.

This remarkable adventure in which a one-man show has become a Bernese institution while keeping its modesty – the salary and organisation budget is only Sfr. 750,000 – has now entered its tenth year. The struggle for financial support has intensified and the danger of running a deficit is now that much greater. But at the same time its reputation amongst the public and amongst dance professionals has grown constantly. These will not abandon their Dance Days without a fight. ■

Dancing on a flooded stage: "Moving a Perhaps" by the Geneva company, "Alias", was presented in Berne in 1995. It is inspired by Samuel Beckett's theatre of the absurd and demonstrates the diversity of the art of dancing. (Photo: zvg)

The 10th Berne Dance Days will be from August 23 to September 7 in Berne's "Dampfzentrale". 25 performances by 10 groups are planned.

