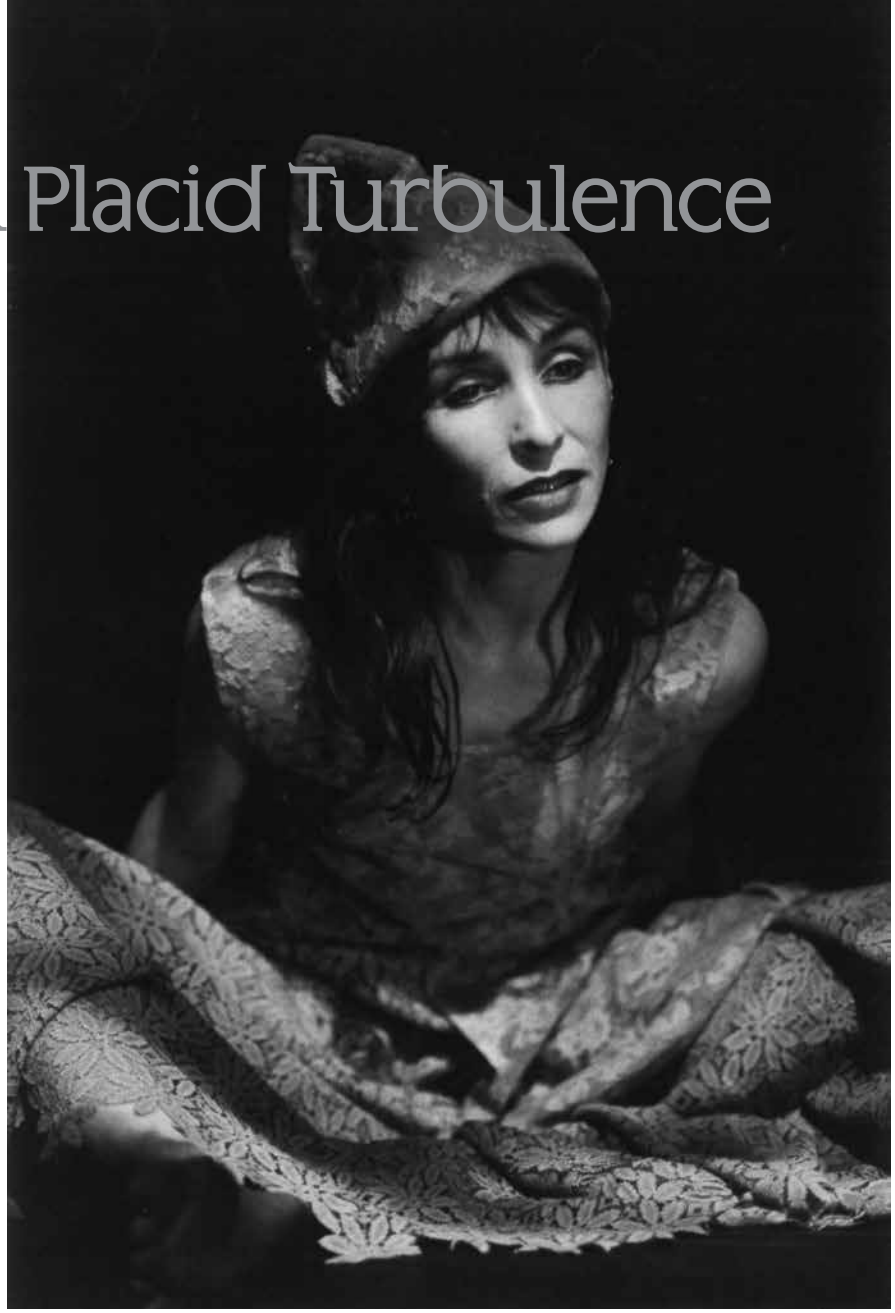
Louise Bédard

A Placid Turbulence

BY VICTOR SWOBODA



Louise Bédard in her *Elle ne se montre qu'aux siens*
Photo: Michael Slobodian

Louise Bédard is one of the prolific dance makers who, over the past three decades, has made Montreal a major contemporary dance force. Admired within Quebec's dance community, Bédard might not be as widely recognized as her contemporaries Édouard Lock, Marie Chouinard or Ginette Laurin – in part perhaps because of the intensely personal, fragmentary nature of her choreography, which fosters intimacy in smaller venues and avoids the extreme physicality and overt sexuality that more easily garners mass attention. Yet as a performer of compelling stage presence and as an award-winning choreographer, Bédard must be reckoned among the forces that have defined Montreal contemporary dance.

Born in 1955, Bédard grew up in Drummondville, a two-hour drive from Montreal. She began studying ballet jazz at age 16 in high school with a physical education instructor, Jacinthe Théroux-Lavallée, who also taught at a local dance academy. As often happens, one instructor played a pivotal role in the course of a young person's life. "Because of her, I'm dancing today," recalls Bédard. "I took her classes and then ballet at the dance academy. Jacinthe made me her assistant. I have great admiration for Jacinthe, who died young."

Sixteen-year-old Bédard was initially not in shape for ballet, so she took children's classes to learn the fundamentals. "My legs hurt a lot. I suffered but got through the early stages. I just wanted to dance and discover my body. Dance allowed me to do that. My parents encouraged me. My father installed a barre and mirror in my room."

After graduating from high school, Bédard began choreographing for the amateur dance troupe at Drummondville CEGEP, the pre-university college in Quebec's educational system. "It took me out of ballet jazz and into an exploration of my own style – a hybrid. It infected me with the desire to create." A show by Paul Lapointe of Montreal's early (1968-1982) contemporary dance troupe Groupe Nouvelle Aire (GNA) opened a different world. "There were dancers coming out of the walls, lying on the floor. It really unlocked something in me." Further eye-openers were provided by emerging artists such as Lock, Laurin and Paul-André Fortier during the summer dance workshops at Québec Eté Danse in nearby Lennoxville. In the years after high school, Bédard had been traveling to Montreal on weekends to take classes with Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal founders Eddy Toussaint and Eva von Gencsy. At their

Louise Bédard and Louise Lecavalier in Monique Giard and Daniel Soulières's *Le jet d'eau qui murmure*, Groupe Nouvelle Aire, 1981
Photo: Robert Etcheverry

invitation to become a company apprentice, she moved to Montreal in 1979, at age 23. Ballet jazz was not, however, where Bédard's strength lay. Ignoring company rules about working elsewhere, she auditioned for GNA where dancers such as Louise Lecavalier were performing. Bédard took classes at both places, notably with Linda Rabin at GNA.

> Outside the studio, I felt trepidation when I was alone in my rented room. It wasn't easy having to find out everything. I stayed at GNA for two years where I connected with people who later helped me – Louise Lecavalier, Marie Brodeur, Manon Levac and others. Lucky, otherwise I would have been lost. I think GNA encouraged me a lot because they saw a potential in me that perhaps I didn't see.

GNA co-founder Martine Époque gave Bédard a role in her 1980 work *Trilogie de la montagne.* "I think no one believed I could do it, including me," says Bédard "I don't know why she gave it to me – others were stronger technically." Époque recalls that she found Bédard perfect for the role:

> She was intense, technically and artistically strong – though she didn't know it at the time – with a charisma and rare stage presence, which she also didn't recognize in herself yet. Her lack of experience gave her the fragility and emotional transparency that I was looking for in the role. I sensed that she was a formidable artist whom the public needed to discover, and I wanted to be among the first choreographers to present her.

Over the next several years, Bédard performed works by the new generation of choreographers including Fortier, Laurin, Daniel Soulières, Daniel Léveillé and Jean-Pierre Perreault who put her

Louise Lecavalier, Alain Gaumond, Philippe Vita, Manon Levac, Louise Bédard, Gilles Brisson, Marie Brodeur and Ginette Boutin in Martine Époque's *La trilogie de la montagne*, Groupe Nouvelle Aire, 1981

Louise Bédard and Sylvain Émard in Jeanne Renaud's *Blanc ou Noir ou Rien*, 1991
Photo: Ed Kostiner

in the first professional cast of his famous 1984 work *Joe* in which the dancers sported overcoats and boots. Experimenting, dancing outdoors and improvising regularly with musicians gave Bédard confidence as a dancer. "Dancing with Louise was a gift," recalls choreographer Sylvain Émard, who often danced with Bédard for Perreault as well as for other choreographers, and later performed in three of her works:

> She gave herself completely and made you react in kind. Her gestures were so clear that you always knew where she was or where she was going. She was also very receptive to her partners, not like some stubborn artists who don't listen to anyone. The moments when we danced Perreault's duets were very dear. We felt strong chemistry between us. Her way of interpreting goes beyond technique.

Recognition came early. In 1983, Bédard won the Canada Council's Jacqueline-Lemieux Prize for contributions to Canadian dance. And Bédard's continuing curiosity led her to seek other influences. While in Europe in the early 1980s, she decided to visit Wuppertal, Germany, to see Pina Bausch who was becoming celebrated as a dynamic force in the dance world. A few years later in 1985, Bausch's company would perform at Montreal's inaugural Festival international de nouvelle danse (FIND).

> I went to her studio and sat in a corner to watch a rehearsal. Next day, someone asked me whether I had permission. For that, I had to see Bausch. Clearly she had seen me the day before so I introduced myself and said whatever came into my head – I was a timid person – and she said "okay". I stayed three days, came to know the dancers, and I'm still in touch with the rehearsal mistresses. I could never work like Bausch, but I admired her.

Bédard was one of the dancers in the 1986 ENCORE! ENCORE! project, initiated by Lawrence and Miriam Adams, to reconstruct Canadian dance works from the 1940s and 1950s.

> In my thirties, I worked with older dance makers like Françoise Sullivan and Jeanne Renaud. It was special being in contact with their work. I knew that people were no longer doing such choreography, but working with them, especially Jeanne, showed me there were things that I still didn't know.

At GNA, Bédard had begun to develop her musical ear, which would serve her when working with composers. "GNA worked with great composers – André Prévost, Michel Longtin. Consciously or not, my ear developed." Over the years, Bédard collaborated several times with composers such as Michel F. Côté and Robert M. Lepage. "When I had the means, I used composers – Côté, Lepage, Diane Labrosse and others. It's not easy working with a composer. You imagine one thing and they propose something that shakes you up." The music of Côté and Lepage – loud, dissonant, machine-like – became a defining staple of Montreal contemporary

Louise Bédard rehearsing with Jeanne Renaud during the ENCORE! ENCORE! reconstruction project, 1986
Photo: Cylla von Tiedemann

Luc Ouellette and Sylvain Émard in Louise Bédard's *À l'Ombre*, 1991
Photo: Robert Etcheverry

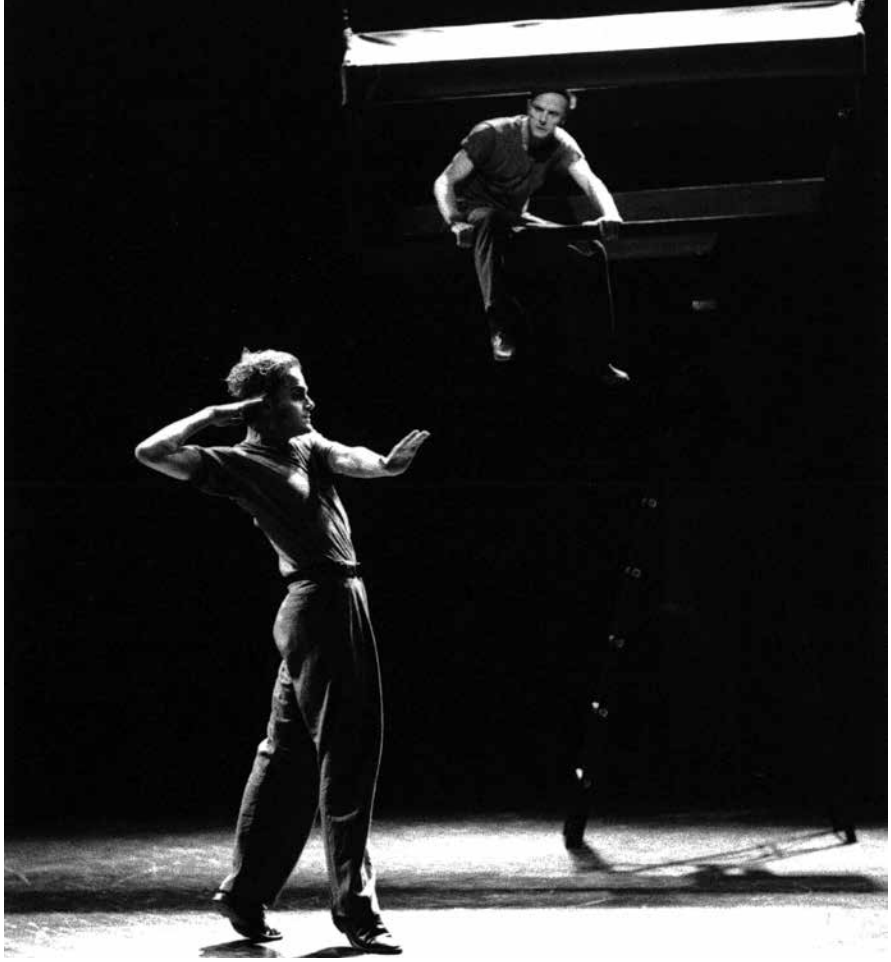
dance. "Sometimes I thought the music was a bit much for audiences. I myself never sought to dance to really contemporary music, but Lepage and Côté made music that somehow spoke to me personally." GNA's fruitful "choreographic exchanges", or Choréchanges, invited the public to the studio to witness and discuss works-in-progress. "Choréchanges was a place to put on our own work. In the 1980s, everything seemed possible," says Bédard, who credits Soulières, Fortier, Perreault and Laurin with opening many imaginative doors.

During this period, Bédard and other choreographers were rehearsing in a loft in the low-rent Montreal neighbourhood of St. Henri. The loft belonged to her boyfriend, dancer and playwright Richard Simas with whom she performed along with Vincent Warren and Christina Coleman in Fortier's 1985 work *Chaleur*. Fed up with constant rehearsals in his loft, Simas spoke to the owner of a former ball-bearing factory in downtown Montreal. The owner agreed to charge only a small rent if Simas renovated the place. In 1987, Circuit-Est studios opened its doors. Bédard and nine other choreographers formed a collective to handle upkeep of the space. Over the past 30 years, hundreds of dance makers have rehearsed and created there. "We were lucky to get that place," recalls Bédard. "Without it, we would have all dispersed. We could leave our things there. We could encourage each other. It wasn't easy at the beginning. Sometimes we wondered how to pay our rent."

In 1990, Bédard formed Louise Bédard Danse. Although it has always been a pickup company, Bédard often engaged dancers she knew such as Fortier, Luc Ouellette, Soulières, Marc Belleau, Anne-Bruce Falconer, Tom Casey and Ken Roy. She founded the company, not through any great ambition – Bédard never reached for the skies – but because an incorporated company made it easier to get grants.

> I wasn't really ambitious. I just wanted to do things – dance, create. My works really came out of my inner being. At that time, they were based on my own body. What fascinates me about the human body is how we approach it in dance. You have six dancers and you say, "We'll work on this," while having only a vague idea of what it might be. You try certain things and then retrace your steps. Finally you get something you like – it's important that I like what I create. Choreography for me is a lot of to and fro with problems of dance that I can't solve in my head. It's both simple and not so simple because you find yourself face to face with who you are and who you are not. That's hard to admit.

By the end of the '80s, Bédard had been thinking largely beyond solos. Her output in 1991 included a landmark 30-minute duet for Sylvain Émard and Luc Ouellette called *À l'Ombre.* Émard and Ouellette, dressed in plain shirts and pants that Bédard picked up in thrift shops, engaged in a sort of dialogue in which both, at times, used facial movement in expressionist style to denote pain. A visitor



Harold Rhéaume and Paul-André Fortier in Louise Bédard's *Métamorphoses clandestines*, 1991
Photo: Yves Dubé

from Europe who came to view some performances at FIND, saw the duet at Circuit-Est and, thanks to his recommendation, the piece toured France. "We rehearsed it in Jean-Pierre Perreault's studio after rehearsing Jean-Pierre's works – it was an intense period," recalls Émard. "The duet demanded a good deal of endurance. I particularly recall my polyester costume – I detest polyester!" Émard remembers that Bédard gave precise directions, quickly choosing movements that she wanted and rejecting anything unsuitable. "Her instincts were strong and the piece was created rather quickly. It was the time when she was getting interested in adding texts. There was a somewhat improvised text at the end."

Bédard's works for small groups can be likened to collages, a visual art form that she has keenly practiced, cutting out photos from magazines and arranging them. "Female artists such as Paula Rego, Tina Modotti and Hannah Höch brought me down incredible paths," says Bédard, who persuaded Montreal curators to stage exhibits by Höch and Modotti, and who has also exhibited her own collages. "Women artists influenced both my aesthetic sense and my musings about women." Perhaps her signal work about women is *La Demarquise* (2016), inspired, wrote Bédard, "by the iconographic work of Paula Rego." Five female dancers showed women in many different guises, roles and stages in life, with emphasis on women in difficult situations.

Like a collage, Bédard's choreography strings numerous small episodes revealing an endless variety of gestures. In *Métamorphoses clandestines* (1991) for four male dancers, an initial sequence of walking in formation was followed by an increasingly aggressive "game" with large-sized blocks on a checkerboard floor. The men then flapped their arms or teetered. One man climbed a ladder to a suspended cage and shouted commands. Two men engaged in lifts and a physical struggle. A football formation with shouted signals was followed by a sort of folksy dance and much frantic bouncing. Scene transitions were helped by the lighting, which created pockets of light so that the dancers disappeared into gloom and then transcendentally reappeared. *Métamorphoses clandestines* demonstrated a wide variety of movement styles, but with its evident theme of male bonding, it was less abstract than many Bédard pieces, which rely more on their play of dynamics to suggest psychological and emotional states.

Bédard's 1990 solo *Quelque part* involved a long passage in silence in which she gingerly walked, often pausing on one foot, falling forward, then moving backward. Little shock waves flowed through her body. A sequence followed with her running, hopping and stomping like a child. The movement seemed to take control of her body, suggesting perhaps the force of the unconscious influencing her choice of direction. Louise Bédard Danse was among the first to perform at a small, renovated downtown theatre, La Chapelle, which opened in 1990. Formerly a church, La Chapelle had not been fully remodelled and its big cross was still hanging on the white concrete wall when Bédard staged her quartet, *Rive cour, rive jardin*. In 1992, Bédard gave birth to a son, Milan Simas. In the same week as his birth, her male quartet, *Les Métamorphoses clandestines*, was staged at La Chapelle. Just two months after giving birth, Bédard danced in Léveillé's work, *Les traces*, at the Canada Dance Festival in Ottawa.

Her creative work continued apace. In 1996, Bédard created *Cartes postales de Chimère*, a visually power-

ful solo in which she danced under long hanging strings of photos representing past thoughts, feelings and events. The piece had an uncharacteristic lyricism enhanced by the Brahms string quartet that accompanied it. Nineteen years later, Bédard, a skillful teacher, restaged the solo with two young dancers, Isabelle Poirier and Lucie Vigneault, alternating in the role.

In 1997, Bédard won the first Jean A. Chalmers National Dance Award. "I had some difficulty dealing with winning the prize," recalls Bédard. "It's nice at the beginning but then it becomes more difficult. I was getting some grants and I felt appreciated. But your peers start assessing you and your next work differently." In 1999 she created *Urbania Box, je n'imagine rien* to Côté's music – a multi-faceted, playful sextet – performed in front of a wall décor. There was hopping and crawling on the floor, party hats and men in masks who menaced a girl sitting on a stool. *Elles* (2002) had two women sitting on chairs under swinging overhead lamps. *La Femme Ovale* (2003) was a solo for Bédard in a memorable hoop dress that impeded free movement. After frantic moves, the dress came off and she walked finally without constraint. Jean Derome's soundscape encompassed loud rumbling, creaking, breaking glass, bells, gongs and thunder.

Elles and *La Femme Ovale* were poorly received by a jury of peers reporting to the Quebec arts funding agency, Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec (CALQ), which found that she was a good dancer but had weaknesses as a choreographer. Subsequently CALQ cut Bédard's grant funds. At a meeting with Bédard, a CALQ agent suggested that henceforth she would do better to ask for individual project grants than for company grants. "I replied that I was shocked that an agent could say that to someone. What the agent suggested was to take a step backward and to start again from scratch. Of course, I wasn't going to do that."

Louise Bédard, c. 2017
Photo: Angelo Barsetti

Bédard persevered. A wide dance vocabulary and eclectic soundscape marked the 2005 sextet, *Ce qu'il en reste*. Some balletic-style moves were followed by dancers moving in a circle, then individuals twirling and posing. The sextet's music changed radically – bongo drums, machine sounds, First Nations drumming and chanting and hard-rock electronic music. The 2008 sextet, *Enfin vous zestes* unfolded in front of boxes stacked like buildings to suggest an urban backdrop. Diane Labrosse provided a loud, throbbing soundscape. "In my latest works, I let the dancers improvise more than I used to. But I still bring a lot of material and there are days when I want to work only with that."

A guest professor in the dance department of Université du Québec à Montréal between 2006 and 2010, Bédard today has her headquarters in Circuit-Est's second building, a former church that Jean-Pierre Perreault had converted into magnificent studios. Since 2008, its studios have served as a choreographic centre with offices for Bédard and others.

Bédard has heard said that her works are too long. Perhaps they give this impression because they are episodic and have no rising dramatic arc. Presumably this represents Bédard's view of the world, a place where events occur unexpectedly and metamorphose into new episodes with their own rhythms and colours. Watching her work demands patience and an appreciation of minute detail. Bédard makes no apologies. "The length was necessary for me to uncover certain things about dance … and about me."

Victor Swoboda has observed the Montreal dance scene for more than 30 years, contributing articles to the *Montreal Gazette*, *Dance International*, *Dance Spirit* and *CBC Arts*. He has studied classical ballet, ballet jazz, salsa and ballroom dance, and for the past 25 years has avidly danced Argentine tango.