

# Performance Now

"Performance Now" curated by RoseLee Goldberg

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## Michèle Steinwald on Jérôme Bel

French conceptual choreographer Jérôme Bel directed *Véronique Doisneau*, a commissioned performance for the Paris National Opera Ballet that premiered September 22, 2004. Bel, known for his provocative questioning of what is considered dance, was at a loss for how to approach the invitation to set a piece on the Paris Opera Ballet. Although only a few subway stops from his own home in Paris, he felt the institution was "like a tribe in the middle of the forest... a little community [he] didn't have the key to communicate with (Bel)." Bel interviewed Véronique Doisneau, the subject and performer of the final creation, in an effort to understand the culture around this historic institution and the work of a dancer inside of it.

The stage is shockingly bare; empty compared to the ornate surrounding hall. There is only general lighting, no special effects, and no scenery. The dancer walks to the edge of the stage and stands before the audience with her rehearsal clothes on and a practice tutu under her arm. No make up, with her hair loosely tied up. She has a body microphone attached to her side so that she can address the patrons and sound technicians directly. She speaks her name, her strengths and her weaknesses, her desires, and her limitations. She lets you know that she never progressed beyond *sujet*.<sup>[1]</sup> At 42, she is performing for the last time on the Paris National Opera's stage. She will retire in 8 days.

Bel had already built a reputation for pushing audiences' expectations of what a dance performance could be. For example, his first performance, *nom donné par l'auteur* (1994), was a choreography of objects with the two performers seated the entire time. Placed opposite one another and armed with a vacuum cleaner and a hair dryer, they made stuff dance from the resulting suction and air currents of these household

appliances. The invitation to create the work on the Paris National Opera Ballet, a prestigious appointment, came 10 years into Bel's career as a choreographer.

As the *enfant terrible* of French contemporary dance, the stakes were high for Bel. Opening night was sold out. Bel gave Doisneau the stage to live out her dream. The material of the work is personal to Doisneau, however Bel's hand in the creation is recognizable and bold. In *Véronique Doisneau*, this dancer's experience is brought to the foreground. Bel draws out her "thoughts, ideas, problems, sufferance (Bel)," revealing the inside world of the dancer. Nothing is left to chance or to fate. Bel reverses destiny. Doisneau's dancing is timeless, effortless, and perfectly engrained in her body. Her story, told chronologically, is moving and fully captivates the audience, even as she pauses to catch her breath. Her naked honesty is rewarded with their respect. The performance is a tragedy and an act of redemption.

This solo portrait was well received by the audience and profoundly influenced the trajectory of Bel's career. What had been an attempt to solve the problem of creating an original, contemporary choreographic work for a renowned classical ballet company became the first in a series of five theatrical, documentary-style, lecture/demonstration performances to date with dancers from around the world, directed by Bel.

## Works Cited

Bel, Jérôme. Interview with Justin Jones. "[Jérôme Bel on Cédric Andrieux.](#)" *TALK DANCE*. Walker Channel. 11 October 2011. Web. 10 August 2012.

[1]'Subject' in French ballet is a position in the ranking of the company that determines the ability of a dancer and is between a soloist and corps de ballet, under principal, the top position in American ballet, or *principal* and *étoile* in France.