

Ikonen

Choreographies by Angelin Preljocaj, Stijn Celis, & Diego Tortelli
Staatstheater Saarbrücken, 31 October 2025



Noces, choreographed by Angelin Preljocaj. Staatstheater Saarbrücken. Photo: Bettina Stöss

At the end: standing ovations after the audience had rapturously received the long 45-minute dancework *ICONIC: Pink Floyd* with choreography by Diego Tortelli. In the beginning: a modestly annoying program leaflet handed out to us, in which the dramaturg tries to explain the meaning of the word “icon”, citing definitions from a dictionary, the *Grosse Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*. The first two dances on the premiere program of the Staatstheater Saarbrücken Ballet (starting the season 2025-26) had little if any connection with the title anyway, and thus one may not need to worry about expanding the range of definitions. If “icon” once had a clear relationship to sacred art and painting, it surely nowadays can mean a lot more things in popular cultural usage.

Starting the evening with an older piece, *Noces*, first created by French-Albanian choreographer Angelin Preljocaj in 1989, was a clever move the Saarbrücken company director Stijn Celis, since the music – Stravinsky’s dance cantata “Les Noces” – is certain to keep us on the edge of our seats from the very start. We watch a mysterious opening scene where several men in proper attire, white shirts and ties are slumped on elegant benches looking rather downtrodden, while a female dancer (Sidney Ramsey), enters from stage left in a beautiful, embroidered blue dress. She guides another young woman (Alva Inger Armenta) in a red dress slowly towards the center, carefully directing her path, touching her gently on knees and shoulder, since this young bride, we gather, with her right hand covering her eyes, does not want to see what lies ahead.

Stravinsky’s cantata was completed in 1923, written for four vocal soloists, chorus, percussion and four pianos; intended for the peasant wedding that Bronislava Nijinska choreographed for the original staging with the Ballet Russes. The short score used a libretto Stravinsky himself had written using Russian wedding lyrics; and we hear a stridently fragmentary and contrapuntal music, an atavistic world of shrill voices evoking the wilder side of a wedding feast to begin soon, a ceremony that will become a debacle of gender struggles, violent coupling, and worse anticipations once the men join the scene.

First they roll on the floor, as if warming up for the competition, they also rearrange the five benches several time to alter the scenography, occasionally leaving them tilted upright, as if they were cranes overlooking the construction site of the battle of the sexes. When Preljocaj brought his company to New York in 1991 (where I saw *Noces*), the raw energy of the dancers was stunning, and rather than staying with the original Nijnska wedding, we see a traumatizing event that implies the bride – and here all women represent her and are also doubled – walking into a consensual rape. The Saarbrücken compagnie is superb too; very quickly duets and group choreographies ensue that gradually involve the “doubles” – five puppets dressed in weddings gowns. Two of them could be spotted from the beginning, leaning against the curtain near the back, somewhat ominously, and Preljocaj choreographs a full-out male-female confrontation in which

both the men and the women fling the puppets into the air, smash them on the floor and toss them around, just as they themselves are tossed around in the frantic physicality of this dance, which accelerates and leaves them breathless. The concluding moments are painful to watch, as the puppet brides are being hung up, one after the other, high on the benches, their veils distorted. A harsh and pitiless lynching.

Celis's own new choreography, "Alte Erde," placed right after this crescendo, could not have provided a better contrast. It is a tranquil, exquisite trio with three male dancers dressed in loose white jackets and short trousers (Marco Marangio, Flavio Quisisana, Shawn Throop), who are first seen lying on the floor, huddled together like in a dream. Then they awake to the rousing voice of Malian Wassoulou singer Oumou Sangaré. Her song "Saa Magni" provides the gentle atmosphere for the trio's intimate, earth-bound movements and soothing careful gestures that evolve slowly, after a lengthy cloth is brought in, into a series of transformative uses of the fabric.



Alte Erde, choreographed by Stijn Celis. Staatstheater Saarbrücken. Photo: Bettina Stöss

The brown and ocher-colored cloth, associating natural clay and earth pigments, becomes a prayer carpet, a dress, scarf, rope, burqa and protective coat, and gradually we realize

its interrelationship with the large-scale video projection upstage. A sudden musical change to elegiac piano music by Philip Glass (“Les enfants terribles: Paul is dying,” arranged for two pianos) introduces the filmic captures by video artist Michael Koob of a painting by the local painter Till Neu. During the remainder of the dance, we can watch the dancers in front of the looming immersispectacle of Neu’s golden-ocher painting “Altes Weltbild,” a landscape with occasional references to stars, the sun, Egyptian goddesses and ancient Greek Korai. First the projected canvas moves slowly to the left, as if we were seeing a tapestry or Aztec mural glide past, then the camera begins to zoom in and show us details from the painting, distracting us sufficiently from the three dancers who often seem rooted to the ground, legs spread out wide, their arms gently swinging. The choreography is rather understated, and the elegiacal mood with the constant filmic “image vehicles” (Aby Warburg) tends to shift our attention to the visual remembrances of mythic pathos, eros and death. Warburg of course felt that *Bilderfahrzeuge*, for example in his famous Bilderatlas, are significant testimonies tracing lines of continuity between antiquity and modernity, but Celis’ grasp of such migration is quite muted. “Death spares no one,” Oumou Sangaré sings, but we wonder where Celis wants to drag us with these *Pathosformeln*, since his dance cannot conjure up the weight.

Luckily, the final piece of the evening transports us into the Rock 'n' Roll era of Pink Floyd and some of their well-known songs from “The dark side of the moon.” Not ever having been a fan, or listening to the bombast show of “The Wall,” I was however content to focus on the dancing of the sixteen superb ensemble dancers, dressed in Eleni Chava’s tight black costumes with semi-transparent tops and silver belts, who excel interpreting the exacting choreography by the relatively young Italian, Diego Tortelli. He attracted attention a few years ago with his contribution, *Fo:No*, to the Venice Biennial and has worked in the independent scenes in Hamburg and Munich as well as creating dance films. His working from Pink Floyd music surprised me, especially since his choreographic style and versatility, his extraordinary command of stage space and architectural scenographic ideas (including moving screens, projections, plexiglass mirrors and inverted visual perspectives), does not need “iconic” music. I take his title to be ironic.



ICONIC : Pink Floyd, choreographed by Diego Tortelli. Staatstheater Saarbrücken. Photo: Bettina Stöss

I am satisfied just watching his movement language, which ranges wide, from Riverdance stiff upper body postures with whirling leg moves to wild break dance, from William Forsythe's geometric neoclassical ballet abstractions to tanztheater expressionism (he once created an homage to Raimund Hoghe), including perverse and macabre comic facial derangements and other provocations. I admire the dancer who can stick out his long tongue and twist it downward. In the first sequences I became particularly attracted to the foot movement, a strangely beautiful waddling penguin walk that captivated my attention immediately. In later scenes, he has a male dancer walk up to the edge stage right, opening his arms wide, as if to embrace us; in the next moment he is gone, fallen into the abyss of the orchestra pit. Then the tilted glass panel wall comes down and we suddenly see five female dancers reflected and doubled in their elaborate lightning-speed gyrating motions. The staging of the dance is a constant sequence of innovative surprises, and one can admire Tortelli's guts and the dancers' total commitment to this language. And to offering some very eloquent gestural evocations, near the end, when they walk downstage to the edge, opening their arms as if offering their souls to us, then abruptly turning around and vanishing to the back of the parallel columns, only to return again, and again, in a staccato rhythm. The finale to this dance concert was breathtaking.