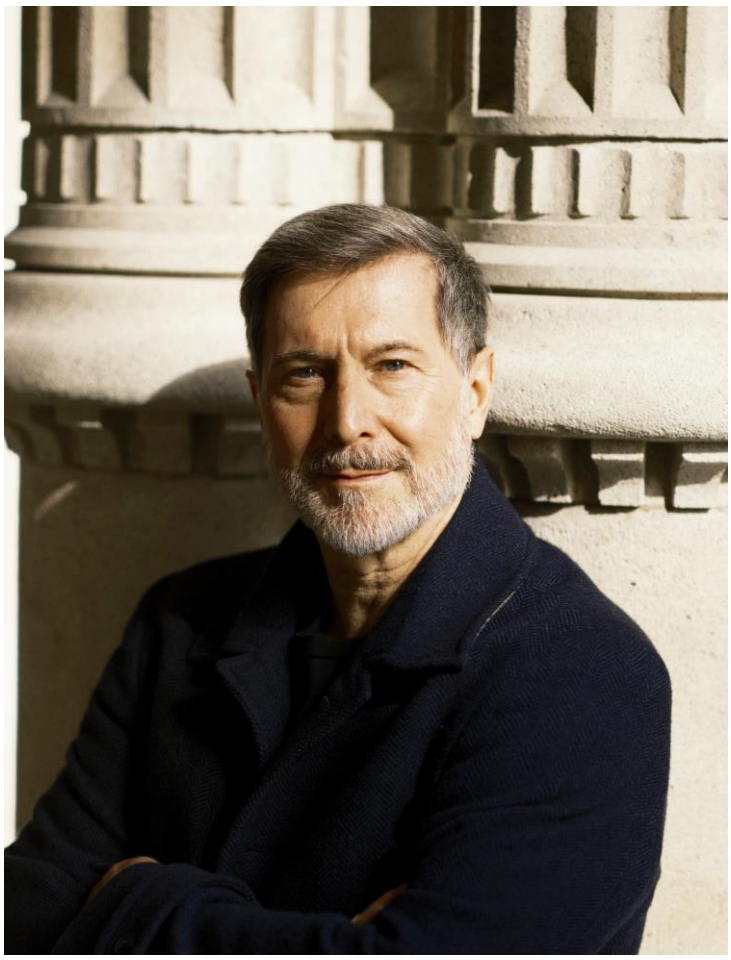
Martin Schläpfer

HONOUR FOR LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT 2027



Martin Schläpfer ©Andreas Jakwerth

Jury statement

Dancer, teacher, choreographer, ballet director – Martin Schläpfer has dedicated his life to dance.

Whether as a dancer in Basel under Heinz Spoerli or as chief choreographer and ballet director at the Stadttheater Bern, at ballettmainz at the Staatstheater Mainz, at the Deutsche Oper am Rhein in Düsseldorf and Duisburg, and at the Vienna State Ballet – Martin Schläpfer has consistently developed artistic expression of the highest calibre. Through this struggle, exploration and creation, he has impressed

as a dancer and led the ballet companies with which he worked as a choreographer and director to excellence.

Cultivating classical technique is just as important to him as developing his own movement language from it. The use of pointe shoes is just one example of how classical technique and vocabulary are reflected upon and re-contextualised within the choreographic exploration of the present. Martin Schläpfer has shaped generations of dancers who engage with the times, 'face the wind', contribute passionately and, at the same time, detach themselves from their own selves.

For decades, Martin Schläpfer has brought his creations to the stage almost without respite. His choreographic oeuvre comprises over 80 works created for his ensembles, as well as world premieres for the Bavarian State Ballet Munich, Het Nationale Ballet Amsterdam and the Stuttgart Ballet.

He saw his dual role as choreographer and director as an essential link – enabling him to shape the structures for the art form and to facilitate its development. Martin Schläpfer has not only strengthened the visibility and structures of the companies with which he has worked. With the initiative for the Ballet Centre of the Oper am Rhein Düsseldorf/Duisburg (built in 2013/14), he set a special example – for the future of ballet and for contemporary working conditions in dance.

When he stepped down as director of the Vienna State Ballet in June 2025, Martin Schläpfer could look back on 50 years of dance work, including 31 consecutive seasons as ballet director. The Swiss-born artist has shaped and transformed the dance and ballet landscape in Germany in an extraordinary way – both in terms of artistic development and institutional structures.

The jury of the German Dance Prize honours Martin Schläpfer with the Honour for Lifetime Achievement.

Biography Martin Schläpfer

Martin Schläpfer is one of the outstanding choreographers of our time and, as a ballet director, has had a decisive influence on the European dance scene over the past 30 years.

Born in Altstätten (Switzerland), he studied with Marianne Fuchs in St. Gallen and at the Royal Ballet School in London. As a member of Heinz Spoerli's Basel Ballet, he rose to become a charismatic soloist beginning in 1977. An engagement with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet took him to Canada for one season.

As director and chief choreographer, Martin Schläpfer shaped four distinctive companies: the Bern Ballett (1994–1999), ballettmainz (1999–2009), the Ballett am Rhein (2009–2020), and the Vienna State Ballet (2020–2025). After the Ballett am Rhein was named "Company of the Year" four times, the magazine "tanz" named the Vienna State Ballet the "Highlight of the Year 2022."

Martin Schläpfer's body of work comprises over 80 pieces created for his companies—the Bavarian State Ballet, Het Nationale Ballet Amsterdam, and the Stuttgart Ballet—and has been staged by the Zurich Ballet, among others. For the

Vienna State Ballet, he has created, among other works, the large-scale productions “4,” “The Seasons,” “Sleeping Beauty,” and “Pathétique” since 2020, as well as works for the Vienna Philharmonic’s New Year’s Concert, the Vienna State Opera’s Opera Ball, and the youth company of the Vienna State Opera Ballet Academy.

His close collaboration with Hans van Manen led to the 2014 world premiere of “Alltag,” in which Martin Schläpfer—as he had done two years earlier in the Dutch choreographer’s “The Old Man and Me”—returned to the stage as a dancer.

With the founding of the Basel-based Dance Place school in 1990, Martin Schläpfer established the initial foundation for his intensive pedagogical work, which also gave his four ensembles a distinctive character. In 2017, he was a guest at Canada’s National Ballet School in Toronto. As Artistic Director of the Vienna State Opera Ballet Academy, he fundamentally reformed the training concept of Austria’s largest performing arts academy and adapted it to today’s standards.

After winning the Prix de Lausanne in 1977 as “Best Swiss Dancer,” choreographer and director Martin Schläpfer went on to receive numerous awards, including the Rhineland-Palatinate State Art Prize (2002), the Spoerli Foundation Dance Prize (2003), the Prix Benois de la Danse (2006), the Gutenberg Medal from the City of Mainz (2009), and the German Theater Prize Der Faust in 2009 and 2012. In 2013, Martin Schläpfer received the Swiss Dance Prize, and in 2014, the Taglioni – European Ballet Award in the “Best Director” category from the Malakhov Foundation. His full-length ballet “DEEP FIELD,” set to a commissioned composition by Adriana Hölszky, was nominated for the 2015 Prix Benois de la Danse; in the same year, he received the Music Prize of the City of Duisburg. The magazine “tanz” named him “Choreographer of the Year” in 2010; the same award followed in 2018 and 2019 from “Die Deutsche Bühne,” and he was nominated again by “tanz” in 2022. Since 2017, Martin Schläpfer has been a member of the North Rhine-Westphalian Academy of Sciences and Arts. In 2018, he was awarded the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, followed in 2019 by the Grand St. Gallen Culture Prize. In 2023, he served as a member of the jury for the Prix de Lausanne.

Several of Martin Schläpfer’s choreographies have been recorded for television. Also available on DVD are *Swan Lake* with the Ballett am Rhein (EuroArts) and *4*, set to Gustav Mahler’s Symphony No. 4, with the Vienna State Ballet (Unitel). Directed by Annette von Wangenheim, the film portrait “Preserve the Fire—Don’t Worship the Ashes” was released in 2016. In 2020, Henschel Verlag published his conversations with journalist Bettina Trouwborst under the title “My Dance, My Life.”

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