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advancing european dance

Springback Magazine

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Sanjoy Roy Editor, page layouts
Clàudia Brufau Communications
Oonagh Duckworth Springback Academy
Becky Alford Design concept
John Ashford Publisher

springbackmagazine.com
editorial@springbackmagazine.com

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Are you a programmer, artist, manager or spectator who needs to keep in touch with contemporary dance in Europe? Stay connected with Springback Magazine.

Rather than follow the mainstream, we track the many streams of dance practice, performance and thought, embracing the radical, the grassroots, the current, the crazy and above all the creative. Together, they form a composite picture of European dance today.

The magazine is an integral part of the Springback project, supported by Aerowaves Europe, cultivating journalistic writing, critical discourse and media literacy around contemporary dance in Europe.

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Art, artist, audience, us

‘You can’t separate the art from the artist.’ This has been an axiom of socially responsible criticism, especially prominent in the wake of #metoo. To make such a separation is to obscure the very real connections that link art with artists, for example through the financial and reputational capital the artist and institutions may earn, or through the conditions under which artists create. To ignore these connections is to perpetuate bad practices and inhibit material progress.

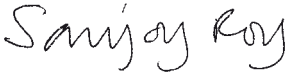
‘Criticise the work, not the person.’ This has been an axiom of artistically responsible criticism, and it relies on separating artwork from artist. Don’t write about a performer’s race or body shape, for example, unless the work itself makes an issue of it. Is it relevant to comment that this choreographer is Chinese, or that one a woman? Maybe it is – but if so, focus on it only to the extent that it illuminates the choreography. It seems like a good guideline to follow: in distinguishing art from artist, you do a service to both.

What are we to do? One guideline says: separate art from artist, it’s good. The other says: don’t do that, it’s bad.

Right now, the question has become especially loaded. Russia has invaded Ukraine, in a brutal and horrifying war. Trade sanctions have swiftly been imposed; cultural ones too. Artists and art workers in and from both countries are already as embedded into our cultural networks as food, materials and energy are in our trade. Cultural boycotts are blunt instruments, undoubtedly. Are they right? Are they effective? How can we tell?

‘You can’t separate art from audience.’ This too is axiomatic, though I hardly ever hear it said – perhaps because audiences are so unfathomable, perhaps because we find it hard to see ourselves. Nevertheless, the meanings that audiences – that we – give to art, as well as the value it has for us and the money we pay for it, are integral to this system of relationships.

The question, then, is not only about art and artists, it is also about us. We make distinctions, prioritising art in one context, artists in another, and deprioritising both in a third. These are choices we make and steps we take, depending on circumstance. That is politics.



Sanjoy Roy
Editor, Springback Magazine
March 2022

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Photo © Franzi Kreis

Claire Lefèvre
11 May 2021

Tanja Erhart and Katharina Senk on sensorial connection, technological pleasures and the aesthetics of access

Tanja Erhart and Katharina Senk are currently in the middle of a creation process for their new work *j e n g a* – a choreographic exploration of pleasure as a radical interface in the discourse between disability and feminism. But unlike many artists who are suddenly turning to digital media, these two have been using online formats as part of their artistic research way before the pandemic started: from intimacy to Skype, accessibility to care practices, they share insights on their digital and sensual working process.

As we gather to chat via three computer screens, I ask the two colleagues to introduce themselves in their own terms. Tanja proceeds: 'I would usually begin a digital meeting with an audio description of myself for participants who are blind or visually impaired: I'm a white woman with blue eyes and long light brown hair and I'm currently sitting on my olive green bed in London. My pronouns are she/her, I'm a dance artist, pleasure activist, cultural anthropologist and I identify as Crip (Disabled and chronically ill). I think of myself as a being with three different bodyminds – with my wheelchair, one-legged, or three-legged with my crutches – using each of their unique potentials in my movement practices.'

Katharina continues with this approach: 'My pronouns are she/her and I'm a non-disabled white woman currently talking from Vienna. My friends and colleagues call me Senki, which I love because it's a less gendered version of my name. Next to me is my dog Chili and I'm sitting on my living room floor, surrounded by green plants that I very much enjoy keeping alive. I'm a dancer, choreographer and facilitator. My movement practice is deeply influenced by my love of martial arts and sports and I'm interested in the intersections between post-humanism, feminism and social justice.'

The two artists met at a conference in Berlin in 2017 and have been collaborating ever since, developing unique methods along the way. Being based in two different countries, they have become experts at digital rehearsal processes, working from their bedrooms, and long-distance intimate relationships. Tanja explains: 'For us working online was a necessity, for ecological and economical reasons: We wanted to reduce our carbon footprint as much as possible and also we didn't have the money to travel back and forth between Austria and the UK. The decision to work on Skype was an easy one, because we both were equipped with laptops and a fairly good internet connection.'

Katharina elaborates on the embodied layers of their digital approach: 'For our first collaboration *non_yielding* we rehearsed and performed online via Skype. In this setting we used Tanja's crutches not only as an animated dance partner but also as a connective tool to bridge our different physicalities. This strategy became a baseline of our collaboration. In one of our performances, Tanja moved with one of her crutches in Berlin and I moved with one of Tanja's crutches in Bangalore. Of course we were very dependent on

Skype, crutches and pleasurable glitches





Tanja Erhart and Katharina Senk's *j e n g a*. Photo © Franzi Kreis

the technical set-up, but knowing that both Tanja and I felt the cold metal of the crutches on our skins simultaneously gave me a deep sense of connection. So in that way we were clearly nurtured by our online experience.'

At a time when frustration with online formats is ever-growing, it is refreshing to focus on the physical impact of technology. In their work, Katharina and Tanja wonder: what is the somatic feeling that the digital connection brings? How do the audience members participate in this constellation? By concentrating on shared haptic experiences, they also highlight our interconnectedness and interdependence.

Moreover, they find inspiration, and even pleasure, in the different pace provoked by technical difficulties. Tanja explains: 'I find it very interesting to have those glitches present, because they remind me of the concept of Crip time, in a very condensed and visceral way' She quotes Ellen Samuels (*Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time*): 'Crip time is time travel. Disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings'

She goes on: 'The moments of glitch ask for patience as well as passion, to keep going and not give up. The internet connection has been lost? Then we look for it again. The screen has frozen? Then we wait until it unfreezes again. It lets us be in the moment, very much with each other, going back where we started, if necessary, and spiralling to a new beginning. Limits are a matter of perspectives. I think working via a screen, it gave us different ways of looking at each other, listening to each other, confronting each other.'

Aesthetics of access – 'the ways in which accessibility concerns are not simply last-minute add-ons but actually influence and shape the work in wonderful, unexpected ways' (Paul F Cockburn, *The Aesthetics of Access*) – have been integral to the duo's working methods. In their new piece *j e n g a*, for example, they are working

> They use the digital interface as a sensuous breeding ground for pleasure and connection

with audio description and sign language interpreters to create a live version as well as an interactive video performance in which the audience can choose what they want to see. Or hear. Or experiment with their own bodies.

But they also apply this multi-sensorial approach to their movement research: the touch of a hard plastic handle meets the taste of a crutch on the tongue; the sound of a distorted voice suggests a movement score, indulging into sensual and playful choreographies with an ever-multiplying number of bodies and languages involved.

Finally, while they share their excitement about digitalising performances and the accessibility it inherently provides, Tanja and Katharina also point out concerns. Many people don't have access to the internet or to computers, so there is still a classist hierarchy about who can consume culture. Moreover, the overwhelming focus on video is only catering to audiences who can see. And of course, the switch to online mediums shouldn't be a replacement for making theatre venues accessible for folks who identify as D/deaf, Disabled and/or Crip to visit in person.

The speed with which the transition to online formats happened once the whole world was locked down also revealed the blatant unwillingness of institutions to address their ableism beforehand. Tanja elaborates: 'In my personal lived experience, the demands from D/deaf, Disabled and chronically ill people to access, attend and present at conferences or festivals, remotely from home, has been ignored for a long time. And then suddenly, overnight, it was possible for everyone to work, perform and visit the theatre from their living room. And I think that is what we should bring awareness to. When non-disabled people get access to different structures, we need to make sure that disability communities are not being left behind, pushed out again or even removed completely, so non-disabled people can make it bigger, faster and further, in a capitalistic sense of productivity and exploitation.'

Katharina agrees: 'Through the collaboration with Tanja I became aware of my responsibility as a non-disabled artist to keep fighting for access, to include strategies of access into my work and to give credits for this knowledge to the people who developed these strategies.'

It is striking when talking to both artists, how intimate their relationship has become over the years. Despite the long-distance nature of their working process, their excitement and care for one another is palpable, tactile, tangible. Together, they are joyously deconstructing what collaborations between Disabled and non-disabled artists may be, practising allyship with intersectionality in mind. They call each other out and in, and use the digital interface as a sensuous breeding ground for pleasure and connection. It appears that the patience, ingenuity and playfulness needed to work digitally has already permeated the way they relate to one another. Hopefully it will also reach an audience (online or in the flesh) very soon. •



Seen live, with love, Jordi



Jordi Ribot Thunnissen
08 June 2021

A letter to, and two postcards from, Spring Festival Utrecht

Utrecht, Netherlands

Katja Heitmann's *Motus Mori*
Photo © Hanneke Wetzer

The Netherlands is slowly but steadily reopening. The restrictions on theatres and museums, however, are more on the slow side. One week before it started, SPRING Festival Utrecht was granted permission to offer live performances, becoming one of the so-called test-events before theatres across the country followed suit after 5 June 2021. To the 1.5-metre rule and the use of masks upon entry, an added hurdle in the form of a negative test-result was asked before each performance.

The whole process leading towards each SPRING performance was tinged with slight sadness. Walking from the test-site to the theatre, amidst fully booked terraces and smiling people going for sunny shopping sprees, I felt a bit like a pariah. First-world problems, I know. But still. A feeling undoubtedly fuelled by the lack of cultural vision shown by the Dutch government so far. Asked on 11 May why cultural events were so late in the reopening schedule, the Minister for Health, Welfare and Sports Hugo de Jonge replied they were not essential. 'You can always play a DVD instead'.

What follows is a letter of sorts, and two postcards – three testimonials of experiences lived in the context of shared, artistic events. No DVD was found to be a valid alternative.

A letter to dancer Rebecca Collins

For the first hour (out of three) of Katja Heitmann's *Museum Motus Mori*, a 'personal encounter' with a movement archive, dancer Rebecca Collins and I sat down in one of the white rooms of Utrecht's Fotodok Museum, and we talked. Four or five neutral wooden boxes, big enough to serve as a small bench, were scattered across the floor. Rebecca asked me to show her the physical positions I played in as a child, the ways I remember my parents moving, and the way I embrace my partner – and asked me about what those positions and movements spoke of, what they meant to me. All the while, she observed and mirrored my gestures, telling me now and again what stood out and thereby also recording residual movements I make while I talk.

The 'Museum' itself had been explained to us (four) audience members upon entry. Moone Rovers, Heitmann's assistant, told us in the lobby about the people who had come before us since the project started in 2019. Scattered on the floor of the hallways leading to our designated galleries, sheets and more sheets of thick, grey paper with drawings and scribbles, always introduced by a name, a place and an age, proved her point.

Half way through our talk, Rebecca started proposing other gestures to me. Drawing from that archive, she connected my hand-to-chest combination to that of a 68-year-old nun from Düsseldorf. Then, she showed me how that woman slept, and asked me to mimic her and wonder if I related to that physicality.

Lying on my side with my eyes closed, picturing myself on the far corner of a bed, my whole body a knot of muscular tension (poor her, by the way), I figuratively turned a dark corner in my mind. I guess it was bound to happen after time spent rummaging through physical memories – but I did not see it coming. I had come for a performance event, not a therapy session. I hesitated – was this

the time, the place? – and when Rebecca assured me I need not go where I did not feel comfortable, I decided it was OK.

So I shared a story of grief, of perinatal death in my closest circle, of how during the months surrounding that event I would find myself just standing, my body in full tension. Everything, my feelings, my presence, my existence: unworthy. Cramping up as an attempt to become invisible. The conversation moved on, and other gestures by other people were linked to mine as Rebecca continued to gently recollect what I was willing to give. When the hour passed, I left the room.

After a short break, Moone led me back to my gallery-space. I was invited to sit on one of the boxes, now in a corner, with Rebecca standing on the opposite side, dressed only in a light-grey slip. Every fold of her body in sight, she engaged in a one-hour solo, threading gestures of mine in slow motion, one at a time, with those of others who now lived alongside me in this museum. The detail in her embodiment of physical actions that I truly recognised as mine was impressive, disarming. Avoiding my eyes at all times, 'Rebecca' herself seemed to disappear – as so often happens when people dance – and so this whole afternoon was, and continued to be, about me. Through me, it became a homage to my history and to the people in it. I wholeheartedly cried for most of the solo, and saw a tear on Rebecca's cheek too.

What is *Museum Motus Mori*? For one, it is a transparent celebration of a dancer's wisdom. Like the empathic Rebecca Collins, able to turn herself into a vast Memory Palace with close to a hundred mobile, metaphysically living sculptures in it. She explained how in the context of the project the company keeps on meeting to rehearse, nurturing and conserving the movement repertory – and all it entails – analogically. Other than the sheets of paper, no record of it all remains.

The way the project is set up – introduction, guidance, framing – shows Heitmann and Co. are very aware of the preciousness of what they ask of their audience. In exchange, at least in my case, I had an opportunity to heal, giving past events a new moment of existence, translated into beauty, into an artistic expression taking place outside – but still through – my body. What an enormous gift to receive in a one-on-one setting. A therapist would have charged me five times as much. The thought made me feel for Rebecca, and hope that she is protected and rewarded enough for the complex and sensitive job she does. But that is not for me to say. I just can say: thank you.

> **I had an opportunity to heal, giving past events an artistic expression outside – but still through – my body**

Postcard 1: Cosmic A*, by Charlie Prince

If Katja Heitmann asks her audience to concede part of their movement heritage to her Museum, dancer Charlie Prince offers us a guided tour across his own archive in *Cosmic A**. On a bare stage lit by ten square, orange glow lights in the back, he excavates his own body 'as an archaeological site', in his own words. Archive, site, museum: all places where things and traces of things survive. Front stage, in a corner, Joss Turnbull accompanies him mixing live percussion with recorded voices by Mouneer Saeed and Mustafa Said, all electronically modified on the spot.

Prince is a magnetic performer, one of those dancers who hypnotises the room by attacking his actions like a dog does a bone. For the first half of this hour-long solo he places different parts of his body under duress. He explores the hyperextension of his arms and shoulders, pressing the floor with one wrist while contorting his second arm behind his neck. Later, the struggle moves to his breathing, his chest, his face muscles – and if his upper limbs are freed in response to the less mobile input of his nose or tongue, the focus remains on the tension of his convulsions.

Sounds of a street, birds, distant voices speaking in what I can only guess is Arabic – Turnbull mixes it all in a suspenseful score. At one point, after being seated front stage for a while, looking at us while trying and failing to emit words, Prince stands up straight and starts turning before attacking a final spree. Vigorous and explosive, he now uses his limbs to their full extent, stomping the floor as he crosses the stage. His unwavering commitment in controlling his physical appearance is daunting. I even take it as a proud shoutout of beautiful and bitter dignity from a character who has not been able to find a voice.

'Beirut 2020.' I read the opening words in the programme referring to Prince's birthplace in Lebanon after the performance: 'A country that moves back and forth between its potential and its tragedy. Is he [the dancer] feeling the truth or is it just projection?' *Cosmic A**: a complex and personal story, expressed in physical brilliance and grounded in one of the multiple, restless contexts wherein he belongs.



Charlie Prince in Cosmic A*
Photo © Paul Sixta

Postcard 2: In Other Words, by Ingrid Berger Myhre

Speaking of stories told through dance: enter *In Other Words*, by Ingrid Berger Myhre. Created and danced with dancers Pablo Esbert, Chloe Chignell and Thomas Bîrzan, this choral choreography plays in the space between the words dance and language.

Physically, they use standard choreographic tools like repetition, variation, placement, level, or plane to modify a given move or phrase. Verbally, they combine these actions with verbal connectors and adverbs such as 'however…' or 'as opposed to…'. The four performers thus dance around the syntagmatic possibilities of this encounter, in an hour-long meta-performance which manages to remain light-hearted.

In using language, they ironically enhance a paradigm of dance – an artform that avoids literal meaning and favours concepts like reverberation or association instead. At another point, the dancers also underscore the different way in which words and actions have an effect over space and time – or open up a pathway for the listener/viewer's imagination. Introducing a phrase of movement, they say it happened 'several minutes ago' and a few minutes later, before repeating the action, that it therefore 'never really happened'. And yet, it very much did. Twice!

All this – and more – choreographic wit comes supported by a swift dramaturgic rhythm, composing their experiments around dance and language – or dance as language – into a slightly absurdist whole. Hanging from several cables behind them, an almost stage-wide, brown, wrinkled sheet of paper: a map of sorts. Yet another accumulation of traces, composed on a given plane, and relating to both past and possibility. •



In Other Words – Ingrid Bergher Myhre, with dancers Pablo Esbert, Chloe Chignell and Thomas Bîrzan. Photo © Tale Hendnes

Strange Russian dances

Anna Kozonina
29 June 2021

What has been happening in experimental choreography in Moscow and Saint Petersburg?

While Russian ballet is always on tour worldwide, Russian contemporary dance remains so unseen one might even doubt its existence. Redressing this imbalance, Springback writer Anna Kozonina has just published a whole book on the subject, *Strange Dances: Theories and Histories Around Experimental Dance in Russia*, with the support of the Garage Museum of contemporary art in Moscow. Here, she summarises its first chapter, on experimental dance in Moscow and Saint Petersburg in the 2010s.

From Isadora Duncan to weird dances: a brief history of contemporary dance in Russia

Modern dance appeared in Russia in the early twentieth century with the explosive popularity of Isadora Duncan's school, and governmental support for movement studies. It is no secret that the great 'free movement' creator gained her main fame in Russia, and later in the Soviet Union. Duncan gave concerts in Saint Petersburg and Moscow in 1904–1905 and immediately won the hearts of the educated Russian public: the local audience absorbed the ideas behind free movement with great enthusiasm. Duncan's dances, celebrating the ideals of antiquity, the harmony of the carnal and the spiritual, freedom of bodily expression, and a certain hedonism, inspired many local movement experiments. Her followers established their own schools



Daria Plokhova, *Female Tool*. Performance Night.
Photo © Stas Pavlenko 2019

and dance groups, developed plastic art studios and amateur dance activities. Dance clubs multiplied even during the first world war and after the revolution: almost every city had its own dance studio.[1]

The Soviet authorities quickly acknowledged the disciplinary and ideological potential of working with the body. At first, the enthusiasm of the 'free movement girls' was supported, for example, by Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Commissar responsible for the Ministry of Education: these dances were affordable and democratic, did not require large investments, and could become a tool for educating a new Soviet citizen.

But a few years after the opening of the Duncan School in Moscow in 1921, party

1 Сироткина И. Свободное движение и пластический танец в России. М.: Новое литературное обозрение, 2011. С.43–45.

leaders already considered her style a bourgeois threat. Cultural policy redirected attention to physical education and disciplinary bodily training, and Duncan's experiments were replaced by 'dancing machines', and 'scientific organisation of labour' (Soviet versions of Frederick Taylor's 'scientific management'). Individual bodily expression could not develop in the new reality of socialist machine-like culture. As theoretician Bojana Kunst said, if in the west 'clumsy, still, expressive, lazy, dreamy, everyday and marginal movement is understood as an intervention of liberated singularity, in communist societies, such movement sabotages the whole social machine.'[2] Conservative ballet became an official choreographic art – one reason for the tension that still exists between contemporary and classical dance in Russia. Until the 1960s, ballet was not allowed to be modernised either: dance in performances had to be justified by the plot (the form was known as 'choreodrama'). There would have been no chance for Georgiy Balanchivadze to become George Balanchine had he stayed at home: socialist art didn't make friends with abstraction.

Contemporary dance re-emerged only in the late 1980s and early 1990s, along with the fall of the iron curtain and Perestroika, with the appearance of dance performers (and dance freaks!) who desired experimentation. Since then, several generations of choreographers have brought dance to the broader fields of contemporary theatre and art. The forerunners of the post-Soviet scene were diverse – including pantomime, amateur dance collectives, folk dance, and choreographic departments of cultural institutions – but rapid development started when western dance techniques and aesthetics flooded into the country. Post-Soviet dance did not trust words, the very words of official culture and bureaucracy, which had been 'performing' Soviet everyday life for so long. The 'truth' was sought in the life of the body, so early Russian choreographers relied on bodily expression, reproducing the conceptual framework of modern dance.

The late 1990s and 2000s were the heyday of the Russian contemporary dance theatre. Kinetic Theatre directed by Sasha Pepelyaev, Olga Pona's Chelyabinsk Contemporary Dance Theatre and Tatiana Baganova's Provincial Dances were popular with the audience both at home and on tour. Dance theatres appeared all over the vast country: not only in Moscow and Saint Petersburg but also in Chelyabinsk, Perm, Yekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, Yaroslavl, Krasnoyarsk, Vladivostok, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, and other cities. For theoretician Natalia Kuryumova, this was for many reasons. In Russia 'the concept of "theatre" was long comprehended as a space for free thinking and experimentation; choreographic "heresies" were free to roam there'. In addition, 'the synthesis of widely differing art forms did not demand virtuosity and artistic perfection from dance'. Finally, 'Russians favoured allusions to theatrical plots, as orality remains the main axis of Russian culture.'[3]

The 'truth' was sought in the life of the body, reproducing the conceptual framework of modern dance

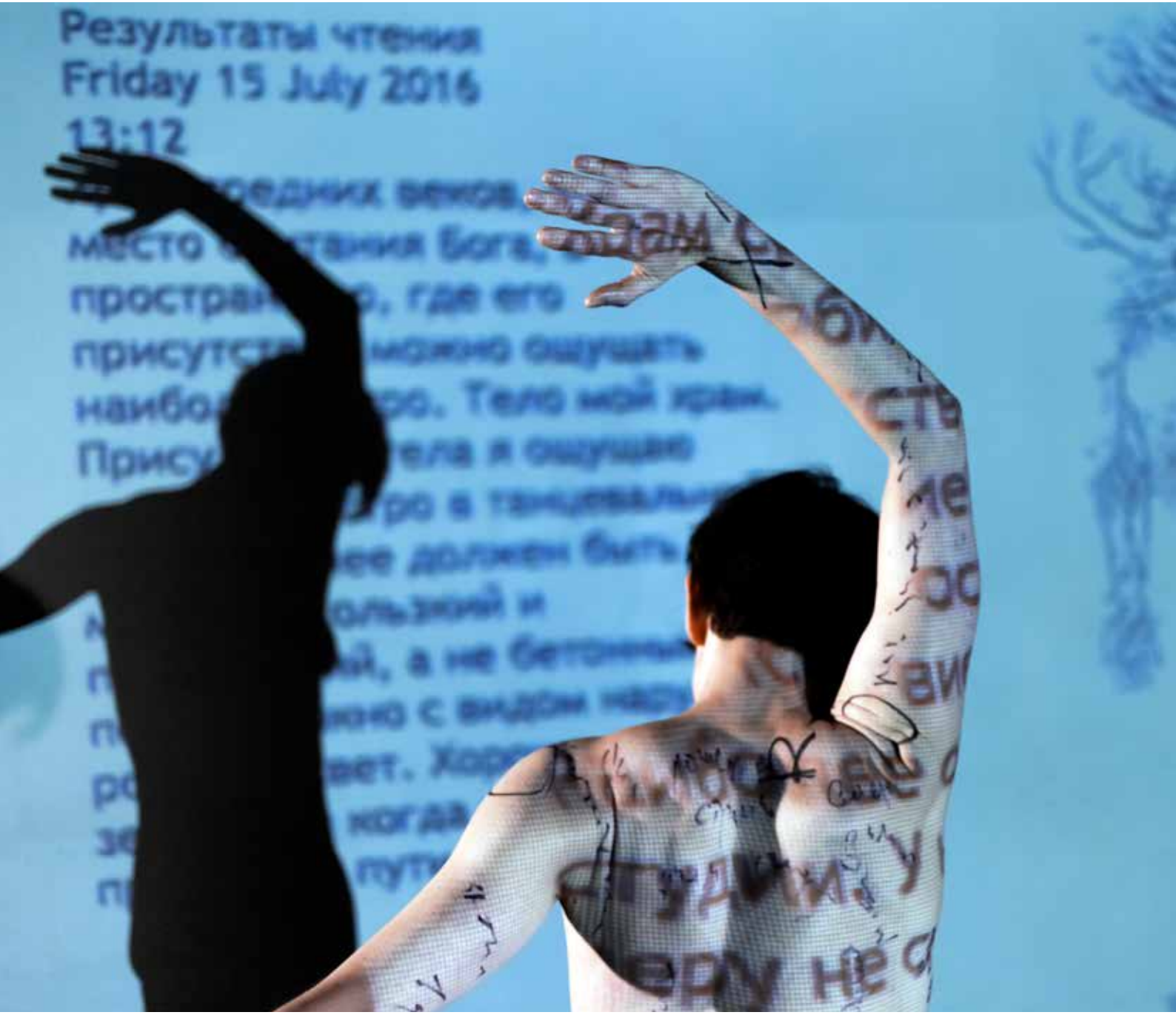
2 Kunst B. *Artist at Work. Proximity of Art and Capitalism*. Zer0 Books, 2015. p.109.

3 Kuryumova N. Russian *Contemporary Dance // European Dance since 1989. Communitas and the Other*. Warsaw / New York:

Darya Yuriychuk, Ekaterina Volkova, Natalya Zhukova: *Landscape for the Dead Dog*. Photo © Margarita Denisova 2018

Dance theatre leaders developed diverse aesthetics, but all were united by a wider common approach. The shows would often feature well-trained disciplined bodies dancing more or less articulated characters in staged settings, supported by background music or sound design. It was essential to show the individual at last separated from the collective body. It was important to impress the audience with technical skills and 'original' dance languages. Moscow-based dance agency TSEKH, which appeared in 1998, gave impetus to the development of new dance in Moscow: it produced shows, conducted international festivals, and organised showcases and tours, so that Russian dance could be shown abroad. The field gradually started to collapse when foreign funds began to leave the country in the late 2010s because of political reasons, and important venues and festivals closed.




Результаты чтения
Friday 15 July 2016
13:12



Tatiana Gordeeva, Ekaterina Bondarenko: *Stop on a Winter Evening Near the Forest*. Photo © Roman Kanaschuk 2016

If the early 2000s were associated with dance theatres built around choreographer-directors with a strong authorial style and a focus on creating a troupe, by the 2010s this smacked of conservatism. A new generation of choreographers, today constituting the experimental dance scene of Moscow and Saint Petersburg, usually create pieces with a different logic, often based on a synthesis of seemingly contradictory approaches to dance and the body. The first is connected with movement research and somatic practices, the second with theorisation, cultural and institutional critique. In other words, the body is not used as an instrument of expression, but perceived on the one hand as living matter, on the other as cultural artifact. Though the artists could rightly call this a crude generalisation, I propose it as a tool for understanding the new scene.

This scene is not big, but is essential in moving the Russian dance field forward. Among the important dance artists are Alexandra Portyannikova and Daria Plokhova ('Isadorino Gore' dance co-operative), Tatiana Gordeeva, Nina Gasteva, Anya Kravchenko, Alexandra Konnikova and Alberts Alberts, Taras Burnashev, Anton Vdovichenko and Techno Laboratory group, Tatiana Tchizhikova and Anna Semenova-Ganz, Alexander Andriyashkin, Dina Khusein, Olga Tsvetkova, Asya Ashman, Katya Volkova, Natalia Zhukova, Darya Yuriychuk, Vik Laschonov, Vera Schyolkina, Alena Papina, Yulia Arsen, Marina Shamova; among grassroots initiatives, 'Deystvie' Laboratory and SDVIG community; among curators, Katya Ganyushina, Anastasiya Proshutinskaya and Anastasiya Mityushina.

Somatics and criticism: a thriving union

When newly reborn Russia became part of the globalised world in the 1990s, there was little left for experimental choreographers other than to learn from foreign colleagues. Dancers strived for universality, technical skills and virtuosity, and presented their achievements to audiences. In the 2000s, other approaches started to proliferate in a scattered way, outside formal dance education. Little by little, the dance community started to immerse into somatics: Alexander technique, contact improvisation, Axis syllabus, peculiar forms of ideokinesis, Body-Mind Centring, release technique started to leak into festival and summer school programmes.

For many, it was a revelation, as several post-Soviet dance pioneers confessed. Po.V.S.Tanze dance theatre's co-founder Alexandra Konnikova (who had previously worked with Sasha Waltz, among others) said she was shocked when she discovered that the movement could arise from bodyweight release, not just muscle contraction. The former Kremlin Ballet soloist and Kinetic Theater dancer Tatiana Gordeeva, who contributed a lot to the spread of somatic knowledge in Russia, said: 'It was scary to allow "regression", to lie on the floor and listen to the body'.

The departure from the balletic vertical, the dissemination of somatics, and practices of anti-spectacular dance suggested reassembling the very understanding of the body. It started to be seen as *the material Other*, as something possessing irrational wisdom, decision-making ability, and its own will. No longer concerned with showing

it off, choreographers became interested in looking at its liquids, fascial tissue, skeleton and cells (things which in other arts often appear as 'abject', but in dance constitute very common somatic practices).

Though not everyone was immersed in somatics per se, the dance of the 2000s and 2010s was interested in 'regression' and fallings. Their main apologist, perhaps, was Olga Tsvetkova, a native of Yekaterinburg and a graduate of Amsterdam's School for New Dance Development, and now a curator at V-A-C contemporary art foundation, who even created the performance *Falling Alphabet* in 2014.

On the one hand, in new experimental dance, disciplined bodies and ostentatious virtuosity have been replaced by softer movement research. At the same time, the world of dance theatre illusion – with its theatricality, spectacle and synthesis of arts – gave way to 'anti-representative' aesthetics in which 'the extraordinary' was found in the 'ordinary'. For Russian dance, historically associated with the figure of the monarch and with strongly hierarchical structures of power (ballet in tsarist Russia, disciplinary bodily control through physical education and sports in the USSR), the permeation of such trends also had a deeper political meaning: the discovery of bodily vulnerability, a rejection of displays of strength and superiority, the development of sensitivity and empathy, the study of biopolitical forces acting on the body. (Russians, always seeking utopian communities, have also managed to turn individualistic somatic practices into means for creating collective performances – a story I cover elsewhere in my book[4]).

On the other hand, the new scene did not turn into a closed dance therapy circuit, since its representatives were able to develop another skill: critical analysis of the processes taking place both in society and in the field of art. So the study of the body 'from the first-person viewpoint' (as philosopher Thomas Hanna defined 'soma') was enriched by a conversation about the body as a cultural artifact involved in the work of theatre institutions, identity and gender politics, and biopolitics in general. Choreographers also started to question the boundaries of dance and spectatorship practices. In other words, Russian dance began to deal with the general problems of contemporary art and culture, adjusting them to its local situation and means of expression.

Dance performances of the 2010s often balanced somatics with cultural criticism. In *Disability Knights* (2015) by Isadorino Gore, for example, performers moved in leg braces to explore the physical limitations of a traumatised body. The multi-part project, which began when one of the artists sustained a leg injury, started with somatic laboratories, in which participants investigated their experiences of wearing braces. Another part of the project was a series of interventions in different cities in front of big theatres (such as the Bolshoi in Moscow) before their shows. Though the artists were still in the movement research phase, these markers of disability appearing

4 Anna Kozonina *Strange Dances: Theories and Histories Around Experimental Dance in Russia* (2021)

Such trends had a deeper meaning: the study of biopolitical forces acting on the body

in front of temples of Russian dance art questioned the place of people with disabilities both in art and society in general.

Many feminist performances would use the same somatic-critical approach. In *The Garden*, made in 2018 by Natalia Zhukova, Katya Volkova, and Daria Yuriychuk (performed in Russia, Helsinki, Dresden and Berlin), three dancers put themselves into a greenhouse-like landscape, presenting their bodies as an erotic spectacle and dancing a sort of ritual dance or twerk – but on all fours, so that they resembled funny animals. Starting as a light, pleasant show, the performance gradually shifted into an uncanny sexual carnival in which they seemed to mate with plants and other sets and props. Repeating the same monotonous movement but in different strange positions, these sexy girls thus became dangerous creatures, undermining the borders between bodies and objects, the living and nonliving.

In a solo *Princess/Mermaid* (first shown in 2017 in Russia, also performed in MDT in Stockholm), Daria Plokhova searched for womanhood beyond gender constructs. Concentrating on her bodily experience, she performed wave-like movements going from her legs through the body, crowned with a wave of hair. That 'feminine dance' then was suddenly performed backward – as if we were watching a video being rewound, not a live performance. Thus Plokhova destroyed the link between the ideas of the feminine and the natural: the dance of the wave was subverted by something perceived as technical. Dancing in skimpy shorts, she drew attention to her legs – another symbol of femininity and an eternal fetish. At first confidently staying



Isadorino Gore. *Disability Knights*. Photo © Victor Zhukov 2015

on her feet, she then suddenly fell down, scrambling on her elbows and dragging her body as if she were maimed, or a mermaid. This mermaid tail then split, and she became a strange monster who crawled towards the audience, grinning and primping. Thus, working with the semantics of movements and gestures often perceived as 'feminine', Plokhova created ambiguous images calling stable identities into question.

The same formula can be found in the extensive project Performance Night, all-night parties featuring new dance pieces which regularly took place in SDVIG, a self-organised performing arts venue in Saint Petersburg. From critical twerk to divination sessions, from musings on the Soviet past to participatory practices such as shamanic shaking or



Olga Tsvetkova, Yana Isaenko, Tanya Podkorytova: *Ghosts of Altufevo*. Photo © concierge Edik

pseudo-therapy – Performance Nights united somatic experience, artistic reflection and popular entertainment in an attempt to bring new dance out of the ghetto. The parties themselves became a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk which both created a space of extended sensuality and challenged traditional approaches to festival organisation.

These same elements were developed by several projects and educational programmes which appeared in the 2010s. The most important include: the SOTA dance programme (2015–2017) curated by Dina Khusein, a native of Moscow and a Rotterdam Dance Academy graduate, which established essential connections between the dance and visual art scenes in Russia; a residency and reading seminars at ZIL cultural centre in Moscow curated by Anastasiya Proshutinskaya, a moment when dance entered into an alliance with cultural and performance studies; SDVIG space, an independent venue for performing arts established in 2017 and run by dance artists Anna Kravchenko, Anton Vdovichenko, Kamil Mustafaev, and Masha Sheshukova; and the 'Artistic Practices of Contemporary Dance' master's programme, which opened in 2011 at the Vaganova Ballet Academy in St Petersburg. That programme is really special: with no militaristic drill, it includes dance techniques, somatic practices, composition classes, contemporary philosophy, and art history in the students' curriculum. From the very beginning, it has been supervised by choreographers Tatiana Gordeeva, Nina Gasteva, Alexander Lyubashin, and philosopher Alexander Montlevich. The phenomenon of 'Vaganovka' is very interesting: the ideological antithesis of ballet, that nevertheless shares the same building.

It's important to say that the somatic-critical union allowed for the proliferation of multiple forms of dancework. Audiences could expect anything: a 'proper' dance, a collective practice, a stand-up sketch, a set of instructions to perform on their own, a durational piece, a pseudo-therapeutic session, or a rave. Choreographers started to question not only genre limits but also the very idea of dance, movement and the body. The urge for such research included references to all sorts of 'avant-garde' western as well as 'mystical' eastern traditions: minimalist experiments of 1960s postmodern dance, self-reflection and the institutional critique of 1990s 'non-dance', participatory projects in museums, social

> Cultural policy is directed to the preservation of heritage, not strategic planning for the future

choreography in public spaces, borrowings from oriental philosophy and so on. Russian dance overcame its boundaries; putting movements into sequences that would smoothly match with music in nice decorations was no longer enough to make a good piece.

Although there has been a shift in the understanding of contemporary choreography, Russian dance has not established institutions and schools to support the new movement. Anyone watching an experimental dance piece in Russia should understand: these people get very little, if any, infrastructural or financial support. Moreover, Russia is an authoritarian state, and cultural policy is directed to the preservation of heritage, not strategic planning for the future. Experimental dance is, therefore, extremely marginalised – in terms of education, institutional support, funding, and representation at festivals. Today there are several mainstream festivals featuring contemporary ballet (Dance Open, Context Diana Vishneva), modern dance (Open Look), and contemporary dance classics like Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker or Akram Khan (Territoria, NET festival), while experimental dance – which does indeed exist in Russia – remains almost without financial support. To survive, it tries to collaborate with visual arts institutions and create self-organised venues.

The 2010s have also seen a convergence of dance and contemporary visual art in Russian capitals. Dance not only occupied museums and gallery spaces from time to time, but suddenly started to share similar topics and agendas with more elitist visual art. This wasn't always the case. As theoretician and curator Ekaterina Dyogot wrote, Russian contemporary art, whose forerunners were underground artists in the 1970 and 1980s, originates from a very text-centric approach to art that was suspicious of the body as something which lacked meaningfulness and reflection. This was probably a reaction to socialist art representing the power of a collective body that repressed individuality. In contrast, visual art and new dance have more recently grown closer, as art developed an interest in materiality and the body, and dance became more theoretically articulate.

Who the hell is a dance artist?

The idea that it's not necessary to have a classical or modern dance background to make contemporary dance pieces allowed people with different educations and experiences to enter the field. Visual artists, theatre performers, scholars in cultural studies, translators, managers and programmers started to try out dance and choreography. This liberalisation and conceptual shift pushed choreographers to question their sense of self. The term 'dance artist', pointing to concept-making rather than pure craft, began to pop up more often in public discussion. But who is a dance artist if not a person composing movement combinations? Works of the late 2010s give different answers.

Take *Professional* (2018), a lecture-performance by Tatiana Gordeeva and Ekaterina Bondarenko that began with the viewers performing small bodywork

exercises in preparation for the piece. For the next hour, performers discussed different stereotypes about what an authorised dance show should be (meaningful movement, emotion, catchy choreography, costumes, background music). At the same time they conducted career 'fortune telling' sessions with Gordeeva as a 'dance oracle'. The audience began by asking questions about their own professions, but little by little the performers started speculating more on their own jobs, their skills, vulnerabilities and insecurities, and professional plans for the next 20 years, acting out absurd scenes of job interviews. As the 'dance oracle', Gordeeva looked for the answers in her body, coming up with awkward word combinations which were 'decoded' by Bondarenko. Thus the whole conversation about ambitions and skills turned into magical and ironic practice. Career building turned out to be inaccessible to reason, a field of prediction and mysticism. This was both a tribute to recent western trends of dance dealing with alternative forms of knowledge and magic, and of course a comment on the state of Russian contemporary dance, which mirrors the general situation of the precarious creative labour market.

Another example from 2018: Vik Laschonov, Vera Schyolkina, and Dmitry Volkov's *Imposture Lab*, a project about impostor syndrome in contemporary dance that invited people into a workshop-performance. On the surface, it looked like bodily training to help participants cope with the psychological discomfort of a new job (coming from other fields of activity, the artists themselves were 'new to dance'). In fact, the laboratory consisted of absurd, ambiguous exercises designed to cast doubt on the ethics and pragmatics of self-development, with participants performing confidence-boosting movements including throwing imaginary fireballs, imitating authority figures from Donald Trump and Queen Elizabeth to celebrity Instagram cats, and learning dance combinations. It was the first work to recognise therapy and somatic training as important parts of the dance field – yet it also mixed 'authentic' practices with pseudo-techniques such as bizarre combinations of poses from Soviet monuments and American cartoons, which prevented us from seeing somatic practices as something 'neutral', outside politics. *Imposture Lab* is a nice example of how new dance uses creative movement practices as its base while also keeping a critical distance from them.

Russian experimental dance has certainly developed both significant self-awareness and a sense of humour in the past few years. The new scene differs a lot from what audience sees at big festivals and, it seems, severs its connections to the canonical Russian dance heritage. Yet I sense a new tendency arising, with dance artists starting to look at their own, multiple roots – avant-garde, classical, amateurish and Soviet. In many new pieces, choreographers reflect on the post-Soviet body, ballet heritage and early modernist roots, overcoming the inferiority complex originating from the idea that they owe everything to recent western dance trends. •

Anna Kozonina's book *Strange Dances: Theories and Histories Around Experimental Dance in Russia* was published in 2021 available from garagemca.org

Going forward to normal

Gaia Clotilde Chernetich
08 July 2021

Michele Di Stefano on curation, choreography and the possibility of a 'new normal'

Rome, Italy

After several months of lockdown, Italian cultural life is awakening again. Between theatre venues and exhibition spaces, dance is resurging in Rome, too. Michele Di Stefano (Silver Lion, Venice Biennale 2014) has curated a programme called *Buffalo* for the Theatre of Rome, where he is in charge as a consultant for the dance season titled Grandi Pianure [Great Plains]. Subtitled 'the open body', *Buffalo* presented artists such as Yasmine Hugonnet, Nicola Galli, Ginevra Panzetti & Enrico Ticconi, Jérôme Bel, Industria Indipendente, Cristina Kristal Rizzo, Francesca Grilli, Daniele Albanese, Collettivo CGJ, Jamila Johnson-Small, Alexandra Bechzetis, and video projections by Francesca Grilli, Trisha Brown Dance Company and César Vayssié. The following interview is from a conversation with Di Stefano at an event organised by Palaexpo, the Swiss Institute of Rome, and the Museum of Contemporary Art (MACRO).



Altrove by Daniele Albanese
Photo © Salvatore Insanal

> There is a certain exuberance that flirts with hysteria

Michele, where did the inspiration for the title Buffalo come from?

This title comes from a desire and an intuition. The project I conceived for the Theatre of Rome, *Grandi Pianure*, presents the symbolic image of a solitary bison. It is not intended to suggest an immediate meaning, but more generally, the animal is the reference through which I believe we can better understand the human body.

Buffalo takes place inside exhibition spaces. What is your perspective on 'alternative' dance spaces such as museum halls?

In Italy, dance performances in museums are often perceived as borderline works, even a bit extreme. However, if we look back in time, for example at American postmodern dance, we can see how even then there was regular dance activity in non-theatrical spaces. I am convinced that the choreographic body can manage to inhabit any space if it works with an amplified perception. The idea is to give back to bodies a power which can be transformative. Dance can have the power to change different contexts, and therefore the world.

The point of *Buffalo* was not simply to design a programme of shows to present to the public. Even if we mainly programmed works which had been previously completed, artists agreed to have their performances placed in dialogue with this specific context. I would like to stimulate artists to orient themselves in a different way, combining materials and putting strength of presence at the centre of their actions. We have entrusted the programmed artists to present works on the body for a collective experience – that of the audience. I turned to artists who believe that dance can bring visions of the body, of the gaze and of being together. Particularly after the period of isolation from which we are emerging, I decided to involve artists who have shown themselves willing to test what the body puts into play now, without worrying about the precise grammar of the theatre, which has its own rules of lighting, timing and duration... Dislocating dance to a non-theatre environment goes hand in hand with the possibility of probing the body and its relation to shared feelings, in a context where boundaries are blurred.

What do you think is the relationship between curating, dramaturgy and choreography?

I consider contextualisation a very important part of my mission. Starting with the placement of the artistic work means being aware of the 'pre' and the 'post' of the shows. This can lead us to consider how dance reverberates in dialogue with



Below left: Alexandra Bechzetis, *Private Song*
Photo © Nikolas Giakoumakis

Right: Yasmin Hugonnet's *La Ronde/Quator*
Photo © A-L Lechat

situations and contexts that, just as clearly, are somehow asking to be choreographed.

When considering dance curatorship in museums or outdoor spaces – such as in Bolzano, Matera, or for Rome's Tropici dance programme – I treat choreography in a more expanded way than as single performative objects. I have been trying to guess the possible encounters and relationships viewers would meet. I don't think about programming in itself, but try to reckon with the broader horizon in which the viewers immerse themselves. In consort with the institutions and artists, I can dig into the space between the viewer and the context. I don't like the idea that curating consists solely of selecting shows.

I am interested in seeing what I don't know rather than what I already do. I engage artists who are willing to take a more vulnerable stance, which can offer the public a curatorial experience that may not be affirmatory but is based on the complete confidence that dance can change the world. I firmly believe that dancing is one of the fundamental gestures of existence. All roads leading to the presentation of shows can develop from here, in relation to their contexts. Over time, I have realised that in this way I can continue discovering. Curating is, therefore, a choreographic gesture.

How do you think the Italian dance system is awakening from the months of the pandemic?

There is a certain exuberance that flirts with hysteria. There is a crowd of enthusiasm, made up of a desire for recovery. I try to pay attention to those signals that have moved



the dance through this exceptional moment. This period has allowed us to relocate some contexts of reference and ways of working and relating.

In my opinion, contemporary dance always seems to be treated as 'exceptional' in Italy. What can be done to make dance 'normal' in the entertainment and arts system?

I agree. Making dance normal is what I tried to do while working within an institution like the Theatre of Rome. A collective reflection upon this theme is needed. We need to get to that point where it will no longer be necessary to circle the field, because dance will be planned and enjoyed as a normal part of it. Our artistic circuits must be able to evolve and align to what happens abroad, and the 'dance system' must no longer leave the main effort to artists. Innovation, even in the choreographic field, must be deepened on a structural level. There are good signs that a collective responsibility is consolidating. We hope that this will allow dance to develop and grow as a neural and plural network, inclusive and finally 'normal'. •

Sanjoy Roy
05 January 2022

Can we opt for rail tracks instead of flight trails? We share both practical and life lessons from our test trip

Photos on Unsplash by
Sitjn Doors (this page)
Gonzalo Facello (overleaf)
Bernardo Lorena Ponte (p28)

Over the last three decades, the arts and culture sector – like education, tourism and others – has been fuelled in no small part by the rise of budget airlines. Performing arts presenters, producers, artists and entourages leave flight trails across the globe as we go about our business. Yet we know this to be what we euphemistically call unsustainable ('destructive' would be more plain-speaking).

As the Covid pandemic grounded flights around the world, many of us sensed an opportunity to make changes to harmful habits. At the same time, against an increasingly obvious backdrop of environmental deterioration (heat records broken, then broken again), we saw and sometimes experienced more catastrophic climactic events worldwide: fires, storms, floods. Yet as we began to move beyond the pandemic's first phase, many norms seemed simply to return. Flights began to take off again, airports to push for more runways, and airlines to argue against fuel tax.

It was during this period – autumn 2021, just before the COP26 world climate summit – that I had an opportunity to travel internationally for work again. Would I fly? I knew that CO_2 emissions per passenger are typically 80–90% lower by train than by plane, not to mention other pollutant measures (check ecopassenger.org for detailed journey comparisons). One of my meetings was in Rotterdam (WArd/waRD), easily accessible by rail from my home in London, but the other events were in Prague (Czech Dance Platform) and Oslo (CODA International Dance Festival), and getting there by train seemed almost unthinkable.

Still, I had already flown once in 2021 (to Ljubljana, for Aerowaves' Summer Recollection) – which happened also to be the European Year of Rail – and so, stricken with *flygskam* ('flight shame' in Swedish), I decided to not passively accept flying as the easiest and cheapest option, and see if I could make train travel feasible.

Personal and professional circumstances (including flexible working hours, solo travel, no dependents and many other factors) helped me hugely to achieve this. Though it was certainly a struggle to overcome the patterns of thought and behaviour that favour aviation, in the end, this became one of my most rewarding trips, not only because of the events I attended but because of how I travelled.

Of course, large-scale systems change lies in the realm of transport and energy regulation, taxation and policy. Yet individual choices do add up and multiply. Below I share some of what I learned through my choice, not by way of model or moral example, but in the hope that it proves useful to others facing similar decisions.

How to get there?

With a flight, you can generally buy one ticket that gets you from A to B, even if you have to change planes en route. With long-distance trains, there are often multiple routes possible, with multiple rail companies each issuing their own tickets. How do you begin to navigate your options?

The German Erasmus by Train site (erasmusbytrain.eu) was launched to encourage rail travel by students in the



KEEPING ON TRACK

A EUROPEAN CULTURE TRIP BY TRAIN

European Erasmus scheme, but the clear advice and simple steps on its 'plan your journey' page make this an excellent starting point for anyone, student or otherwise. As with other guides, it will soon direct you towards international journey planners on sites such as Deutsche Bahn (bahn.com, covering far more of Europe than just Germany) and The Trainline (thetrainline.com). Another good starting point, with more detailed options, is Stay Grounded's 'travel differently' page (stay-grounded.org/lets-stay-grounded/travel-differently). Pretty much any guide will at some point lead you to the amazing Seat 61 (seat61.com), an old and old-fashioned looking website that is jam-packed with useful information. Though based in the UK, it covers swathes of travel through Europe and beyond. Combine its riches with the brevity of Erasmus by Train, and your poles are covered.

In my case, much the best option was an Interrail pass. Often thought of as a way for youngsters to bum around Europe on the cheap, it's actually available to people of all ages, though you get a good discount if you're under 28 – or over 60. It's available for people resident in Europe, but those from elsewhere can get a Eurail pass, which is effectively identical. The pass gives access to a vast range of rail networks, even some buses and ferries, and it charges you not per journey but per day of travel. Two bits of small print to flag up that I found out about the hard way. First, no matter how many travel days on your pass, you get only one journey out from and one back to your country of origin. Second, some journeys require seat reservations, which can become complicated and sometimes costly. If you are considering Interrail, there's a handy routemap with general info on the Interrail website, and a detailed guide on Seat 61.

One more important point. Big action plans are already under way to improve and facilitate train travel in Europe, including the creation of a Single European Rail Area (SERA) and upgrades and integrations of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T). In policy terms, the direction of travel in Europe is clear: towards rail. Why not get on board now?

Admin and accounting

Accounting systems often favour the 'boomerang' trip (go there, come back). One outward and one return journey for one event – all entered on the same line of the spreadsheet, with receipts matching expenses. But a multi-destination trip also has in-between or onwards journeys, with each event administered by a different company or organisation, each with its own financial and procedural requirements. So even when a round trip makes sense in terms of time, money and carbon cost, the systems seem stacked against such joined-up thinking: costs have to be divided between different administrations, and demarcations are often not clear cut. Essentially, you have to organise a tour, not a trip.

My solution was to agree a travel budget in advance with each organisation, estimating on the high side so that my final invoice would come in lower than the estimate. It was not straightforward for anyone, but having shown that I'd done the legwork to find the best travel options, and divided



costs as fairly as I could, I did encounter a lot of support for the underlying motive: to avoid aviation. Accounting for journeys with multiple stakeholders, and which may blend necessary work with optional personal travel, is never going to be easy, but goodwill can go a long way.

Overnighters

Sometimes you can't do a long trip in day, in which case you have to arrange overnight accommodation – a major expense. Mindful of overall costs, I went ultra-cheap (€45 for a hotel room in Hamburg, for example), which was OK for a sleepover, if not a stay. A work colleague very generously let me stay in Brussels, three times, which made a huge difference not only to the cost, but to the quality of my journey.

Consider sleeper trains too, which combine overnight accommodation and travel in one stroke. They are making a comeback.

Time adds up

When doing your sums, remember to count times (and costs) from door to door, not just the length of the plane or train journey. Once you factor in airport transfer and waiting times for both arrival and departure, you can often easily be adding another 6 hours to the scheduled flight time.

On my trip, on every leg of the journey apart from London, I could walk between my accommodation and the station in under 30 minutes, and generally arrived 15 minutes before departure time. Bliss.

Counting just travel days for the whole trip (including an unforeseen stop in Antwerp, arranged mid-trip), my sums worked out like this. By train, I needed 11 travel days for work, to which I added two days of my own during the trip (in Denmark), and two days afterwards (in France). By plane, it would have taken 8 travel days for work, with no separate travel.

Connecting trains

Trains get delayed, so don't cut your connection times too tight. Give yourself some breathing space when changing trains and your nerves will thank you. If you end up hanging around for an hour, make the most of the opportunity: take a stroll around the city you're passing through, or find a non-station café.

One way to allow for missed connections: if you're doing a very long travel day, see what the shortest journey time is for your day, then get an earlier train out (preferably the earliest). You can usually nod off on the first (probably pretty empty) part of the journey, and if there are delays en route you can still count on getting to your destination.

Stay grounded

Long-distance rail journeys are easier travelling solo or in a pair, maybe a very small group. You need to travel light, too. A significant number of arts and culture professionals reading this magazine fit that profile (presenters for example, who often visit multiple destinations over short periods). If that's you, find out about alternatives to flying, and try them out – especially if you can get to your destination in a day. Keep in mind that you can do a lot more work on the train –



with wifi connections, comfy seats, tables and sometimes even compartments – than in the cramped, dead space of the airliner. And if you're into team-building then there's no competition: aeroplanes and airports are losers.

Phonesmart

The smartphone has transformed rail travel. I had everything I needed on mine except my passport: Interrail pass, vaccination certificate, seat reservations, timetables, platform info, live updates. Since most trains had wifi too, I could update my journey options on the go if necessary. Don't leave home without it – or without a backup charger.

Don't leave home at all?

Though the live encounter is irreplaceable, we have become far more accustomed to online substitutes and alternatives, for which the technology continues to develop apace. By way of example, Aerowaves' annual meeting in 2020 comprised 10 people live in Athens with another 40 joining internationally via Zoom, while their Springback Ringside project explores audience access to performance through virtual reality recordings to develop alternative modes of travel and distribution.

Life is a journey, not a destination

I've spoken a lot about practicalities, but my biggest revelation from this trip was a matter of heart and mind: the value of a journey lies in its process, not in jumping from starting point to end point.

Yet that shortcut is what aviation aims for. No one flies for the sake of the trip. We do it to get somewhere far, fast. In exchange, we agree to become cargo, transported from point A to point B – cargo that may



be primped and pacified with music and movies, or otherwise sold to and advertised at, but is cargo nonetheless. That's the deal: enter the purgatory of passenger aviation, and return to life and the world someplace else.

In contrast with the dead space of the airliner, train travel was a lived experience, in touch with the world it traversed. Landscapes changed, languages changed, and customs, and currencies. En route, I took walks around Regensburg and Copenhagen, and a boat trip in Hamburg. I took a day for myself, cycling solo through the coastal heaths and woods of North Jutland.

Of course, there were irritations and hassles. Alongside the train's soothing sway and ample legroom, its agreeable transits and stop-offs, there were also missed connections, signal failures and several anxious on-the-hoof recalculations of routes through transport systems I didn't understand. But these were inconveniences, not disasters, easily tagged as #firstworldproblems. Some contained unforeseen blessings – a crisp twilight walk around Köln cathedral was thanks to a cancelled train – and all were intrinsic to the journey's flow and flux.

The man in Seat 61 could have told me that. He set out not for any environmental motive but because he found that 'every flight is the same stressful non-experience' while 'trains show you more of the country you're visiting and its culture'. Still, you learn life lessons by living them, not listening to them. Beforehand, I had been mentally weighing up the sacrifices of time, money and convenience, but I had to actually go and travel myself to discover that the journey could be not a penance at all, nor even a means to an end, but its own life-affirming reward. •



Mette Ingvartsen on The Dancing Public

When Mette Ingvartsen started working on her solo *The Dancing Public* back in 2019, a series of questions was the driving force of her dance. How to create a dance space that would be like a shared public space, even in a theatre? How to open the possibility for the public to be part of the dance, but without any obligation? Then, just as the Brussels-based choreographer delved into the history of dancing epidemics, the first Covid outbreak burst in Europe. Over the course of the crisis, the project took on a whole new colour and some more questions came up: how to stand side by side and dance together without apprehension in 2021–2022?

Marie Pons
24 January 2022

Choreomanias, contagious movement and collectivity – Mette Ingvartsen delves into the background to her topical solo

This is an edited version of an interview originally published in French by *Ma Culture* magazine

Main image: Mette Ingvartsen in *The Dancing Public* Photo © Hans Meijer

Inset: 'Dance of Death' Woodcut Liber chronicarum Schedel, Hartmann (1493). © Wellcome Library, London

To begin with, I would like to discuss the title, The Dancing Public. Was the desire to dance with the audience the starting point of the project?

Indeed. This title appeared five or six years ago, when I was working on the creation of *69 Positions*, where the question of audience participation was already at stake. A reflection started then: how would it be possible to engage the audience further within the performance itself? I began to wonder what function dance could have in our society, in our physical existence, as a social activity. I had in mind to work on social dances like clubbing, but also on the dancing marathons that took place during the Great Depression in the United States. I realised that I was interested in examining the connection between dancing and a state of crisis, in order to observe closely certain moments in history when the need to dance expressed itself urgently. I did not want *The Dancing Public* to be a party, to only convey the feeling of celebration.

How did you work then to create a space where people could dance together without it being a party precisely?

I made an extensive research about dancing epidemics or choreomanias, which took place in public spaces. They can be described as unplanned outbursts of movements that proceed by contagion: one person suddenly starts to convulse, to dance, and other people are dragged into the dance, creating an uncontrollable mass movement. I began to dive into these phenomena that punctuated Europe throughout the Middle Ages, and there I found a link between dance, public space, a state of crisis and a sense of urgency.

The Dancing Public might feel as if it is starting off like a party, but then I mention the Black Death quite early on in my words. We slip from one register to another, and it can be unsettling. When imagining how to stage a performance inspired by this material, I first thought about how in the Middle Ages, performances were often staged on wooden platforms or wagons that were easy to set up and take down on the town square. When I started working with Minna Tiikkainen who did the scenography and the lighting, this idea remained and we built three wood and metal platforms, a bit like scaffolding, the basis of our shared space.

But two elements are nonetheless close to the atmosphere of a party in the piece: music, which is omnipresent, and the lighting which can recall the neon lights of a club.

The lights are hung up on metal poles, which can be a reference to street lighting, but also indeed to a club in a big city, or could be the lighting of a rave organised in a forest. The scenography as a whole suggests a space which could simultaneously be a public square, a club at night, an open-air rave, a mix of these different settings. As for the music, it did come very early in the process. As dancing epidemics thrived through contagion of movement I wondered what would make the urge to dance contagious now. For me, that has a lot to do with rhythm. I am easily impacted by rhythm, so I worked from

this idea of a beat sustaining the duration of the whole piece.

Did you know from the start that speech was going to be a big part of the choreography?

I've had several conversations with collaborators who asked me at the start: 'But why do you need to talk?' Dancing epidemics are made of uncontrollable movements, to the point where the dancers are not themselves any more, language and rationality are somehow disconnected from the dancing body. But it was very important for me to take in charge a narration in the piece, in order to share the different layers of history that precede the movements that I do.

Some movements look like they come from club dancing, some from contemporary dance, but there are also bursts of laughter, moments when I bark or compulsively scratch myself, which are movements drawn from descriptions of choreomanias that I read. It was important to me that the audience could grasp these historical connections. I am very interested in history, especially to witness how our bodies today are impacted by discursive perspectives from the past. With this in mind, talking and dancing at the same time made sense.

When you appear at the beginning of the piece, you're almost like an MC heating up the room and setting up a rhythm. From this moment on, you are in charge of the energy, of its fluctuations, its contagion. It is an intense performance for you since the movement and the speaking hardly ever stop.

Rambling, speaking in loops, mumbling on pieces of sentences or chatting without being able to stop, these are traits that I have been able to notice in people involved in choreomanias. In my mind, *The Dancing Public* had to contain everything at the same time: I would be dancing and talking and crossing the space and be among the audience and be alone at the same time.

Trying to do everything at once has to do with the unstoppable movement that is specific to dancing epidemics, where an invisible force is pushing the body to be out of its own control. In this sense, I tried to invent my own ways of losing control, while still choreographing a performance. Speaking is therefore a way for me to create a great mass of information that is somehow beyond my control, and it pushes me as a performer to fuel this uncontrollable mass of energy. All the text is written, I do not improvise on the words, the choreography is written as well but not down to every little detail. There is always latitude and surprise coming in. In what happens with the public too, of course everything is left to the surprise of the moment and to improvisation.

About you speaking, you go from a pedagogical discourse to spoken word to a poetic text in verse, to singing... Why these variations?

I focused on working on the rhythmics of language, the poetics of the phrasing. In my previous pieces I often spoke to convey information. This is also the case in *The Dancing Public*, in part, but the sentences are quite short, interspersed with movement



and physical engagement. Sometimes the text does indeed rhyme, sound like slam. One song takes us back to the 1930s and is about the dancing marathons. Another one at the end of the piece is more emotional, I mention escaping, being outside in a forest.

I had no preconceived idea of what these changes of atmosphere would be like, but I think it has to do with the way I worked with the music. Because of the Covid crisis I started working on my own. I researched and found some tracks of electronic music that I liked, over which I composed the text. The more I tried this text-music coexistence, the more I liked the track I was working on, so we asked for the rights to use it and keep it in the piece. It has been rearranged then by Anne van de Star.

The text is therefore very much connected to the presence of music that made me want to dance first of all, which was a real, powerful source of inspiration. I rehearsed the text over the music, to witness how the phrasing could be modified by the rhythm. The desire to sing came like that for instance. I spent some time improvising, learning the text by heart and saying it at a pace that seemed to work. By combining music and language, I wanted to produce like a ripple effect, a shared pulse, like in a concert.

The special atmosphere of The Dancing Public is due to contrasts, we are between joy and fear, pain and pleasure, the Black Death and the dance. We navigate between euphoria and worry constantly.

It has to do with this idea of not having 'simply' a party, even though planning a good party is difficult. I was interested in experimenting with forms, with choreography, with sources rooted in cultural history that go beyond the existence of our bodies in the present. The piece is also experimental in the way it challenges certain codes of representation. Several people told me that they had wanted to dance during the piece but had not really dared to. They were not sure of what was expected of them. Each spectator negotiates a lot with him or herself during the performance. They stand close to each other, look at each other, it toys with what one allows oneself to do or not.

Our relationship to norms is also at stake here in my opinion. It is interesting to me to experiment with existing norms that teach us how to behave as a spectator in a theatre. It is part of this desire to create a potentially uncontrollable and unusual response from the public, it is possible anyway. The point is not to propose to the audience to go into a dancing mania, but rather to destabilise our frame of vision, our attitude towards a performance. Hopefully it questions everyone about the place they want to occupy in the space, whether you want to be close to me or not for instance.

How did you research choreomanias? How did the process to identify certain movements and integrate them into the choreography go?

My primary source was the book *Choreomania: Dance and Disorder* by Kélina Gotman, an important historical research on dancing epidemics, going from the Middle Ages to the present day. I was very



Above: Hendrick Hondius I (after Pieter Bruegel de Oude), *Pilgrimage of the Epileptics to the Bridge at Molenbeeck*, 1642, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, donation of Mr GJ Boekenoogen, Leyden. © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Right: Valeska Gert, *Tänzerische Pantomimen*, 1925. © Images des collections du Centre national de la danse CN D, Pantin

surprised to find the dance marathons of the 1930s and the rave parties in the book: the connections I had made at the start of the project suddenly appeared there. These two examples are mentioned as contemporary versions of excess movement, inexplicable physical overflows in their own way. This book has been an important enlightenment. Gotman mentions the work of Doctor Hecker for example, who wrote down several descriptions of dancing manias. I looked for these writings and I found out different behaviours depicted, giving shape to erratic, uncontrolled movements: people who barked, meowed, acted like birds… I kept the descriptions and worked on translating them into my body.

At one point you talk about hysteria and Professor Charcot's work. Why?

There is a section devoted to Charcot and his research on hysteria at the Hospital of La Salpêtrière in Gotmann's study. Charcot got interested in dancing manias because he found similarities between descriptions from the Middle Ages and what he was observing in the behaviour of his patients. I immersed myself in that story, and I also read the feminist theory which sheds a critical light on Charcot's work. Because it turns out there was an element of performance in the way the patients were presented to an assembly of doctors – only men of course – gathered to observe the pathologies and crises of hysterical patients. The women were under hypnosis and it was about performing the different phases of hysteria. I have observed pictures of these movements which are extreme in their own way. In the different phases of hysteria listed by Charcot we find the phase of contortion clownesque, the phase of trance or *attitude passionnelle*, the moment of resolution… These poses are integrated into the choreographic vocabulary of the piece. I also found out that Valeska Gert referred to these images in her work. This link was made visible in the Danser Brut exhibition which was on at BOZAR in 2020 in Brussels. It blew me away, because it was teeming with all these references I was working on, and it was suddenly amazing to see this network of connections woven through the archives. The choreography of the piece draws on the journey of this extensive research based on texts and images.

Even though you are working with loss of control, you don't seem to be interested in going into trance states. You maintain a connection with us in the audience, there is no gap.

I'm very interested in trance states, but for this solo that's not where I'm headed. I think it's related to the importance of speech and storytelling, to this attention that I have to propose a kind of understanding of what I'm saying to the audience. If I had leaned towards going into a certain state, I would have let go of that reflective aspect. We could have imagined a piece in which we all would have danced together until a point of exhaustion… But as it is impossible to initiate a state of trance that could last for days and days, I centred my research on how to convey the possibility of an infinite dance, the unrolling of an uncontrollable movement which could never end, in a framework which allows you to experience it.



However, I am interested in this duality between listening to my historical speech and being fully in the body, following the rhythm by tapping your feet on the floor or swinging your head, dancing. It is also for these reasons that after the piece is over, after the applause, the music is turned back on and people can stay dancing in the space. It's still not exactly like a party, although the first five minutes may look like it. The music is on loop, and the original idea was to initiate a dance that might never end, a dance that people could engage in for as long as they want. The dancing manias lasted for days and days, sometimes weeks. Theatre space seems very restrictive in comparison, but it was a challenge to give shape to the work precisely in this space.

The starting point of the project, dancing with the audience, or creating a situation where people can dance together, suddenly became impossible with the arrival of Covid. In what ways has the core of the piece been shaken?

I started to work in December 2019, just before the crisis hit the European continent. I was intensely in it when the restrictions and curfews came up in Belgium. I went from working on a subject that interested me intellectually to finding myself stuck at home without being able to go to the studio or to the theatre, without being able to perform, rehearse, research with other people. This period was very intense, and violent, I felt that my body was accumulating an excess of energy that had nowhere to go, as if my cells were vibrating. Going from reading books to experiencing excess in real and physical ways was like a sudden understanding of what it was all about. I started dancing at home, in small spaces. Stress, frustration, control, fear, all became very real, bringing closer some information I had read, about how in some cities people started dancing to ward off the Black Death and ensure that it would not enter the city. Dance had different functions at the time: it was sometimes the cure, sometimes the symptoms of a disease and sometimes it would help cure the disease... All of this suddenly appeared in a very concrete way.

How did you manage to keep working alone, as the presence of other bodies is essential to The Dancing Public?

The first pressing question for a long time was: when will it be possible to create a piece where strangers can stand close to each other and have the freedom to move around? Six months of working with uncertainty passed before the work premiered.

There are still many points of negotiation between the solo and the context today, and it keeps moving along with the issues we face as we go. The fact alone that the audience is masked or not is a game-changer, since it is lot about looking at each other, being side by side, communicating. It is a very sensitive space, which makes us work with our coexistence. The piece can be cancelled any time, whenever the rules change again, because it does not respect social distancing, it is not Covid-safe at all. But again, we are right at the heart of the matter, questioning how to become social beings again, how to dare staying close to someone you don't know, how is it to see



Mette Ingvartsen in *The Dancing Public*
Photo © Hans Meijer

strangers' mouths talking or smiling in front of you?

As you explained when the solo ends, music returns and the audience can stay in the space and dance. Was this ending present before Covid or did it appear in contact with the crisis?

The idea was present from the start, yes. Conceptually, that dance part was there from the very beginning, because as long as I am in the space, people's attention is focused on what I'm proposing, on the performance, that is a particular type of gaze. When I disappear, the entire space stops being a place of observation and becomes a place of possible participation. No one is supposed to do anything in particular, everyone is in some way equal because there is no longer a performer to watch. It seemed important to me to keep the space open when leaving it. And it is also a sort of nod to the 1990s rave parties, places where I used to dance a lot as a teenager, which is very much a part of my movement as well.

This ending was a very strong moment in Brussels, a kind of liberation, joyful and intense. I have the feeling that it can also be a space of relief, like taking a moment to realise that we are indeed still here, standing, dancing, alive.

It is also the feeling I actually had, because indeed we have already spend a year and a half disconnected from each other, and the piece is working to reconnect something between us. It is in a way an invitation for us to try to understand the power that lies in being together. In Brussels, I felt that the public also needed to express themselves. On the first night, people were screaming, vocalising their reactions tremendously, encouraging me, which was both surprising and fascinating. There seems to be a need to release something physically and I have the feeling that the piece works as a receptacle for suppressed, contained energy, finally bursting. I am fascinated by the collective reflection on where our bodies are today, what kind of overflows or excessive energy we feel, how ready we are to be social again in a time where all of these aspects have been suppressed and stifled. I don't know yet how far this blooming political potential of our coming together could carry us. I am careful because I have yet to see how the piece will evolve, but one thing is for sure: if we are depressed, tired, and repressed then nothing good will come out of us. •

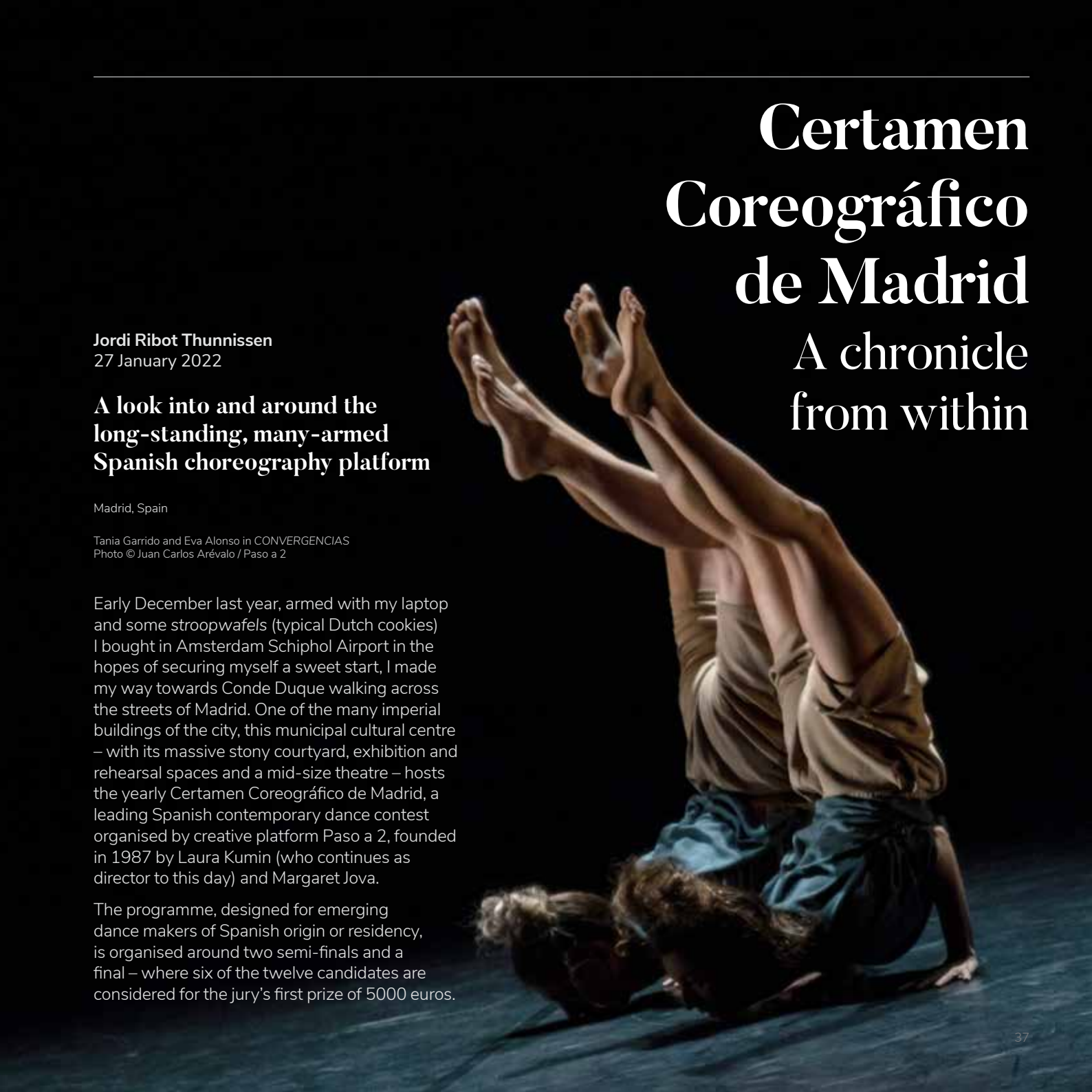
Certamen Coreográfico de Madrid

A chronicle from within

Jordi Ribot Thunnissen
27 January 2022

A look into and around the long-standing, many-armed Spanish choreography platform

Madrid, Spain



Tania Garrido and Eva Alonso in *CONVERGENCIAS*
Photo © Juan Carlos Arévalo / Paso a 2

Early December last year, armed with my laptop and some *stroopwafels* (typical Dutch cookies) I bought in Amsterdam Schiphol Airport in the hopes of securing myself a sweet start, I made my way towards Conde Duque walking across the streets of Madrid. One of the many imperial buildings of the city, this municipal cultural centre – with its massive stony courtyard, exhibition and rehearsal spaces and a mid-size theatre – hosts the yearly Certamen Coreográfico de Madrid, a leading Spanish contemporary dance contest organised by creative platform Paso a 2, founded in 1987 by Laura Kumin (who continues as director to this day) and Margaret Jova.

The programme, designed for emerging dance makers of Spanish origin or residency, is organised around two semi-finals and a final – where six of the twelve candidates are considered for the jury's first prize of 5000 euros.

Yet Kumin cringes at the word 'contest': for her, the programme is all about 'nurturing, getting new audiences to see new work and supporting the growth of starting and mid-level career artists'.

For example: over twenty Spanish cultural centres, platforms and dancehouses (plus some internationals, like OperaEstate in Italy) contribute to the awards list by means of creative residencies or by programming one of the competing works – regardless of whether they make it to the final. Next to the accompaniment and development such opportunities can provide, the Certamen itself offers all artists the opportunity to have individual conversations with the jury, and tries to bring them all to the attention of the European networks it is a part of, such as Aerowaves.

Furthermore, Paso a 2 uses the contest as a pretext to bring dance to other communities in Madrid – another dimension of Kumin's pedagogical resolve. The Certamen thus counts on several supplements. One is La Colé, an all-female dance company offering a step towards professionalisation to young dancers. During each Certamen, La Colé is invited as a guest to show new work made in collaboration with local choreographers.

Paso a 2 is also part of the European-funded project Performing Gender: Dancing in Your Shoes, an intersectional and international audience development project connecting dance to marginalised LGBTQ+ communities as a tool for empowerment. In Madrid, this has translated into the gathering of a group of people around a weekly movement practice, active since last March, three of whom participated in this year's Palabras en Movimiento project, another side activity to the Certamen – and the reason that I was there.

A writing workshop initiated in 2016 to 'spark or strengthen the interest in writing about dance among cultural journalists', Palabras en Movimiento (words in movement) has also attracted choreographers, programmers and dancers with a desire to work on their analytical and writing skills. I was invited to facilitate the 2021 edition, and this time around we agreed to take it one step further, openly framing the workshop as an opportunity for anyone – with or without prior writing or dancing experience – to spark or strengthen their love for dance by discussing and writing about the pieces seen during the Certamen.

Kimi was the first to arrive. Olga and Maykol came in together and fashionably late. They all loved the *stroopwafels*, and expressed their insecurity and curiosity right off the bat about what we were about to do. They claimed to have no experience, they had never written about dance before, they were afraid of not doing the artists justice. Bringing down the barriers and convincing them that their gaze upon any performance was as valuable as anyone else's became, very naturally, one of the main goals of the workshop. It started by noticing how this fear of being unjust or saying the 'wrong thing' in a 'wrong way' was a shared concern of the whole group, including myself.

Rosanna and Catalina, two practising professional dancers within the group, also worried about how they could stay true to their experience of a given performance without harming those who have put so



> Access to the art world seems to be a step up the social ladder

much time and effort into its making. Blanca, an anthropologist with a long and diverse career in cultural projects in several African countries (École des Sables in Senegal included) brought forward the inequality between word and movement in a world still very much driven by the former. Criticism can be a genuinely well-intentioned gift, a trigger for conversation, a sign of respect. But how can we prevent it from becoming a poisoned apple? Questions around the responsibility of the writer kept piling up.

After a first session where these questions were gathered and discussed, and where I gave some tips and tricks on taking notes and identifying different levels of analysis to help them root their opinions and reflections in what actually happened on stage, Palabras en Movimiento consisted of going to see the different performances and informally commenting on them afterwards. The aimed-for results: to publish at least one review each, and collectively decide which one of the finalists would be given the 'critics award' – something we inherited from the workshop's original design.

It was during those informal moments where we also got to know each other better that the broader value of this activity hit me – certainly in the case of the participants invited by Performing Gender. Olga explained about her experience as a trans woman growing up in a small village in Colombia and of how, after two difficult years in Madrid under the pandemic, she was now working her butt off in a cleaning squad dedicated to refurbishing public spaces within the city. Proudly, she showed me pictures of an abandoned courtyard now turned into a community garden, and of the sportspark next to Conde Duque – where they had made the graffiti disappear. She told me of how she enjoys working on something that allows her to channel her creativity, and doing stuff with her hands. Another picture: a beautiful image of a trans-flag dissolving into butterflies, painted by her hand on a self-made, recycled wooden structure designed for children to play on.

Participating in Palabras en Movimiento – inside the very walls she had been scrubbing some weeks before – was no small thing for her, even without the power and the responsibility of the award decision. Faced with her nervousness and excitement, I was confronted by the paradoxes surrounding this system, where access to the artworld seems to be a step up the social ladder. How could I be there to 'teach something'? Humbled by the life stories within the group, I felt uneasy. Yet, I assumed and tried to play my part in the best way possible: accompanying their conversations, validating their gaze and, finally, nurturing their words during the editing process.

Far from aiming at the perfect review, this Palabras en Movimiento thus became much more about motivating them all to be boldly and bravely themselves. Their words, their voice, their person. I'm a romantic, I won't deny it: during those days I felt that if, by my doing, someone like Olga could feel an ounce more empowered as an audience member (and, thereby, a citizen), my whole life's experience within the dance world up to that point would have made sense. How big a small thing can become – or momentarily feel, at least.

The 2021 Palabras en Movimiento workshop at Conde Duque
© Juan Carlos Arévalo / Paso a 2

As for this 35th Certamen, the twelve selected pieces varied considerably in approach. Ranging from more evidently political and decolonising projects such as *El Mal comío no piensa*, by Malvin Montero, to more conventional work where the focus lay solely on the research of a single movement quality, motive, or strain. *CONVERGENCIAS*, by Tania Garrido and Eva Alonso, and *Tan a prop*, by Júlia Godino and Alexa Moya, stood out in this department. Finally, the international jury coincided with the participants of Palabras en Movimiento as both the first prize and the critics' award went to *Intempestiva*, by Elahood company – a duet by the two young Galician dancers Julia Laport and Sabela Domínguez, combining waacking with their personal stories and that of (also Galician) poet Xela Arias. Stories about precarity and womanhood, and about the coexistence of the global and the local in their processes of self-determination. The paradoxes surrounding the need to leave one's own contexts to find a way back to their roots floated over it all.



Julia Laport and Sabela Domínguez of Elahood Company in *Intempestiva*.

Right above: Cecilia Colacrai in *R.A.V.E.*

Right below: ***El Mal comío no piensa*** by Malvin Montero

Photos © Juan Carlos Arévalo / Paso a 2

Next to the contestants, there was one guest performance which beautifully stood out, and exemplifies another side of the impact Paso a 2 has in the Spanish context. The solo *R.A.V.E.*, by Cecilia Colacrai, premiered in Madrid after winning last year's edition of Me, Myself and I (another of the supplements organised by Paso a 2, an annual contest-within-the-contest selecting and co-producing a solo originally presented in a germinal state). By far the most interesting piece I saw during those days, *R.A.V.E.* plays with the notion and the physicality of vibration in a way similar to how Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker relates to Bach's Goldberg Variations. With a brilliantly put together soundscore made solely of percussion elements by Miquel Vich, and a clever, elegant and earthy dramaturgy of lights by Iván Cascón, Colacrai moves. She trembles. She focuses inwards and goes out like a savage. In everything she does, her full commitment translates into a diverse repertoire of very human yet also mythical possibilities of decodification. That is, in the end, what a strong stage-dance presence can do: take you places – but places only you can find.

Originally from Argentina, Colacrai arrived in Spain in 2002. That same year, with barely a seed planted in the city of Barcelona, she won the second prize of the Certamen with her company Viento Sur. Twenty years later, she is a well-known choreographer and teacher, and part of relevant companies and collectives like the Big Bouncers. Marking a full circle, in 2021 her *R.A.V.E.* shone on the stage of Conde Duque as a solid and mature piece by a solid and mature choreographer; and as a promise and a proof of the Certamen's worth. •





A strong stage-dance presence can take you places – but places only you can find

Embodied literature
An interview with Ben Duke

Emily May
03 February 2022

On blending literature, theatre and dance – Ben Duke talks about storytelling, embodiment and the classics

Before ever stepping foot in a dance studio, Ben Duke – 2011 Place Prize winner, artistic director of Lost Dog, and creator of works for the likes of Rambert and Scottish Dance Theatre – obtained a first class degree in English Literature from Newcastle University. 'I was fed all the usual dead white men stuff: Dickens, Thomas Hardy and so on,' he says wryly during a phone call from his London base. 'I think I've always been most interested in writers with a completeness of imagination, people like Tolkein with his Lord of the Rings series, and Shakespeare. There's a whole world outside of what they've written. The stories they tell are just snapshots of entire universes.'



Despite loving his academic studies, Duke soon began to feel something was missing from the traditional, cerebral approach to literature. 'I was bored of being inside my head, and felt like there was a whole other part to the human experience that isn't to do with words, analysis, and this logical, rational approach,' he says. He decided to train at the Guildford School of Acting to discover a different way of relating to his favourite texts, but when he arrived, he realised 'we were still just studying and looking at words. But Shakespeare wasn't imagining that when he wrote his plays. He created works to be embodied on stage.'

Duke's quest for embodiment led him to dance and a three-year degree at London Contemporary Dance School. Since then, he's gone on to combine his passion for literature and theatre with movement to create his own unique brand of physical theatre. To date, he's adapted two classic works of literature, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, into a 2016 one-man show and a 2020 duet respectively. Far from chronological retellings of the original narratives, his shows often place well-known fictional characters in new contexts. *Juliet and*

> **I left drama school not wanting to do anything with words. Then I left dance school thinking: we're so silent.**





Romeo imagines what would have happened if Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers survived to become a middle-aged couple undergoing relationship therapy. Similarly, his latest work, set to premiere in February 2022, is a reimagining of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* through the eyes of Lucie Manette, one of the novel's female characters whom Duke considers 'underwritten – all her psychological complexity left on the cutting room floor.'

Blending literature, theatre, and dance didn't come naturally to Duke at first. 'It took me a really long time to get there because I kept swinging between different ideas,' he says. 'I left drama school not wanting to have anything to do with words and just wanting to move. Then I left dance school thinking: we're so silent. Why aren't we talking? Maybe I should bring back some words.' While various other choreographers and companies working at the intersection of theatricality and physicality inspired Duke – such as DV8 Physical Theatre, Complicité and Alain Platel – their approaches weren't quite what he was after in his own work.

'*Paradise Lost* was probably the first time I felt like I'd made something that was the closest I'd got to what I'd been trying to do,' he says. 'Making the show really helped me discover the anchor of the book' – which appears with him onstage as a performative companion – 'as both a physical object and as a narrative construct,' says Duke, confessing that as he can easily wander off topic when creating work, the presence of a printed copy of Milton's novel forced him to stick to his initial inspirations.

While Duke's works to date have reinterpreted serious, heavyweight texts from the English literary canon, his performances are surprisingly comedic. 'There's something about the ridiculousness of trying to do tragedy on stage that I've always found quite funny,' says Duke. 'That funniness can sit right next to something that makes me want to cry. The stage is particularly good at holding all of these things together.'

For Duke, humour is also an effective way of addressing the suspension of disbelief in dance and theatre. 'I've never been convinced by the idea that I sit in a theatre, forget that I'm there and disappear into a different world,' he says. 'But if a dancer or actor tells me: I know this is ridiculous that I'm trying to convince you that we're all dead on the stage, or that I've murdered someone, I somehow feel more open to going there. I trust them.'

Left: Ben Duke reading *A Tale of Two Cities*. Photo © Sara Weal

Above left: Solène Weihnachter and Ben Duke in *Juliet and Romeo* Photo © Jane Hobson

Above right: Ben Duke in *Paradise Lost (lies unopened beside me)* Photo © Zoe Manders

While this may be a self-defence mechanism – 'there's part of me that's fearful of taking myself too seriously, or being seen to take myself too seriously, which may be a slightly English characteristic' – the use of comedy makes his work more accessible to a wide range of audiences, especially those who may not be familiar with the texts he works with. 'With *Paradise Lost* and *Juliet and Romeo* I assumed a bit of knowledge, but with *A Tale of Two Cities* I'm really trying to make it make sense for the people who haven't read it,' he says. Half of his cast hadn't even read the novel at the beginning of the rehearsal process. 'This was actually really useful, because it helped us work towards a clarity of storytelling.'

Accessibility can often be used as a dirty word in contemporary dance – a synonym for selling out. Duke, though, 'loves the idea of accessibility, that people who wouldn't normally watch a dance piece may be attracted to my show because of the novel it was based on, or that dance audiences may be tempted to read Dickens, Shakespeare, or Milton because of encountering them in my shows.' A famous work of literature can also help secure funding and support, especially in the early stages of creation, when it's very hard to explain to others what you're trying to achieve. While Duke 'started off feeling like it was maybe a cheap trick,' he says that 'as long as I feel convinced that people would enjoy it when they get to the theatre, I feel OK about doing it to draw people towards dance – which isn't always an easy sell.'

For his upcoming production, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Duke is working with his largest cast yet, a move he made to explore a range of characters and tell multiple stories. 'There are just so many amazing performers in the world. It's a joy to be with other people who can do things much better than I can.' He could never have known, however, that gathering multiple people from multiple countries in one space would suddenly become incredibly difficult.

The pandemic and Brexit have influenced *A Tale of Two Cities* on both organisational and artistic levels. 'In Dickens' book, the characters move between Paris and London with an ease that makes me really sad to think about now. There's this feeling of connection between the two cities which I feel has been really damaged by Britain leaving the EU,' he says. 'Yet Dickens writes in quite a binary way about the city and the French revolution, portraying London as civilised and Paris as barbaric. He offers this black and white view of the world which I think some have held onto. Even if people haven't read Dickens, the ideas he espoused are part of our English identity. I'm curious about what gives us our sense of Englishness. I feel like that somehow sits at the root of why people voted for Brexit.' (Curiously enough, Duke's *Juliet and Romeo* also hinged on Franco-British discord, French performer Solène Weihnachter a foil to the very English Duke as the couple argue about their failing marriage.)

The Covid-induced shift towards the digital sphere also inspired Duke to use live camerawork on stage in *A Tale of Two Cities*, setting up the show as if the main character is making a documentary about her castmates.



Temitope Ajose-Cutting, John Kendall and Hannes Langolf in Ben Duke's *A Tale of Two Cities*
Photo © Camilla Greenwell

Re-examining and reframing existing stories is endlessly interesting

‘During the pandemic we suddenly had to become comfortable with the digital version of ourselves being the way we were interacting with the world,’ says Duke. ‘People were suddenly invited into each other’s bedrooms or sitting rooms to have work meetings through Zoom. There was a strange sense of confusion of privacy. So with this piece, I was thinking about the idea of the private internal worlds of Dickens’ characters.’

Despite embracing technology for his latest project, Duke is still attached to simple methods of conveying narratives – ‘standing around a campfire and telling stories, the directness of that, and the immediacy of that’ – a passion that suggests he will continue to reimagine written words as live dance for years to come. ‘It’s funny… when I started making *Paradise Lost* I didn’t consciously think: from now on Lost Dog is going to be a dance company that adapts existing works of literature. But that seems to be what’s happened. Re-examining and reframing existing stories is endlessly interesting to me. I can imagine that will carry on a while longer.’ •



Practice, continuity and infinite limbs



An interview with Isabelle Schad

Berlin-based choreographer Isabelle Schad is known for her large group works in which many bodies move as one. Inspired by her training in aikido and shiatsu, she mixes eastern philosophy with principles from body-mind centring, embryology and European folk dance. In 2012, with lighting designer Bruno Pocheron, she founded Tanzhalle Wiesenburg, a former ruin-turned-dance-studio in the district of Berlin-Wedding. There, she hosts artist residencies and performances as well as free 'Open Practice Sessions'. In the summer of 2021, Beatrix Joyce joined the sessions and approached Isabelle afterwards with a few questions.

Beatrix Joyce
16 February 2022

German choreographer Isabelle Schad, is known for large group works and for mixing eastern philosophy with somatics and folk dance

Berlin, Germany

Photos: Isabelle Schad, 'Perceiving the Whole. Propositions from a Practice', part of Somatic Charting. The House is the Body, curated by Elena Basteri and The Institute for Endotic Research, 2021. © Sara Pereira. Courtesy of The Institute for Endotic Research.

Isabelle, you came to Berlin in the early 2000s, after leading a somewhat nomadic lifestyle. Do you feel you've found stability, since founding Tanzhalle Wiesenburg?

Yes, it was one of my main wishes to find my own space. I wanted to build a sense of continuity, which was very difficult in Berlin. At the time I was living in Berlin-Wedding, and after some long walks Bruno Pocheron and I came across Wiesenburg, a homeless shelter and cultural initiative that had some spare space in their back yard. Back then it was a complete ruin, full of rubbish and over-growth. So with the help of a grant from the EU, we decided to patch it up and make it into a dance studio and theatre. Now we have a beautiful pearl in the middle of the city, where we can work with people on a continual basis and host residencies and performances that are accessible to the free scene.

When you perform in your own works, do you gain a different kind of view, from the inside, than when you choreograph on others?

It's the same, really. When I'm on stage, I constantly sense the connection with the outside. If someone else is performing and I'm on the other side, and I'm not quite sure what they are doing, I might get nervous. I ask myself: 'why is it going that way?' Usually this doesn't happen when I'm on stage myself because my focus is directed both inside and outside at the same time. And now I learned just to hold the space and not to worry about it any more.

Yes, that reminds me of an exercise we did during the workshop: one group was performing, one group was watching, and the people in the groups kept swapping over. It felt as if creating and watching was reciprocal, as if any one of us could be in either role.

Yes, that's true at the beginning, but at a certain stage things become very skilful and require a great deal of experience. This type of knowledge needs to be constantly reformed, renewed and remembered. The impact and the essence of what can be transmitted through a solo or group work develops when the group has spent more time together and undertaken the same training. With certain things you can jump in, other things grow through time.

You trained in the Japanese healing practice of shiatsu. How does shiatsu and your current work as a practitioner feed into your choreographic work?

In my classes, I try to teach the techniques and the theory as accurately as possible, such as the grips, the meridians and where they are located. In my choreographic practice I then take bits and pieces from my shiatsu practice and compose playful little loops or movement patterns. My creation process is thus shaped by attentively watching and observing, as well as through filming the material. This I learnt from my collaborator Laurent Goldring, who helped me see that framing is a means to sculpting the movement and identifying that which becomes visible.



During the workshop you likened the body to a machine. With the many devices that surround us in our digital age, are you busy with technology and the notion of the body as cyborg? Or would you rather reject technology and work with other means instead?

Oh, I choose a different way of working, that's for sure. What we invent, from our industrial past to our current digital world, has to do with what we are surrounded by and where we are coming from. Nature and biology and machine-like mechanisms are sometimes so closely intertwined: is the movement reminding me of cogs in a machine or is it reminding me of cells reproducing, or the double helix structure of our DNA? When on stage I create a body with infinite limbs, composed of many bodies, these things blend into one another, and we see that in essence everything we touch is connected. Like a tree with its many leaves that all look similar, but each is different. This is the kind of togetherness I'm searching for.

Embryology studies the formation and growth of the embryo. How has it informed your practice?

I am interested in experiential ways of repatterning ourselves through understanding how the body developed in the womb. And this process is very horizontal because no matter our origin, culture, race or education, it exists for all of us in the same way. We are all formed through processes of folding, wrapping, and creating space. This fascinates me as a way of seeing choreography as something we are made of.

When you start to position the body on stage, do you consider it as a spectacle? Or do you rather see it in these terms of a natural organic being that has movement already ingrained in its form?

There are different types of presences, such as the material body, the emotional body, the spiritual body... Each has a different type of outreach, energy and aura. As a performer, you simultaneously perceive yourself as a whole and as in the whole. The spectator, in the best case, also perceives themselves as both self and whole, swinging their focus between detail and overview. I aim not to pinpoint any specific message or narrative, but rather ask of my audience to allow their life story to be a part of it.

Indeed. What I think is undoubtedly graspable from your works is the importance of the live body, the importance of physical presence.

Yes, very much so. That's also why I don't like sharing recordings of my performances on YouTube, as I don't think this kind of video manages to transport the energy of the evening and the vibrations of the bodies present. And the joy of being in a space and feeling togetherness! It's very difficult to document this in an adequate way. Alternatively, you can make an art film, which is another medium governed by its own set of principles.

I'd be interested in asking you what your opinion is regarding dance writing. As part of the Open Practice Sessions, you commissioned writers to reflect on the workshops. Does text appeal to you as a valuable way to document your work?

I think it's an interesting medium, as writing is channelled through an individual's experience, much like the physical experience of a workshop or a performance. And finding the right words can be considered an artform in itself. We just need to be careful that we don't end up with too many words that might inflate the work and turn it into high knowledge. But if it's written from an experience, one can feel it.

Yes, absolutely. I think it enables a different kind of description, which is filtered through a mind rather than through a device such as a camera.

Indeed, but it really depends on which type of medium and which kind of engagement suits the descriptor. If your preferred medium is film, like it is for Laurent Goldring, then you speak through images. If you have a close relation to words and to writing, you can talk through text.

Lastly, I am curious about one more thing: had you not chosen the career path of artist and choreographer, what would you have been instead?

As a kid, I always had two dreams: one was to be a dancer, the other was to be with animals. I still have an affinity for animals, as communication with them is so direct! When I'm cycling through town and I cross a crow on the street, I'll call to it, 'hello crow!' and they'll give me a funny answer – perhaps not a verbal one, but it's an answer all the same. •

There are different types of presences, such as the material body, the emotional body, the spiritual body



A necessary transformation

The performing arts and VR in Taiwan

Jonas Schildermans
22 March 2022

Covid and climate change have accelerated the creation of VR and performance hybrids, especially in Taiwan



In the Mist, directed by CHOU Tung-Yen
Image © Kris Kang

Having relocated from Belgium to Taiwan in 2021, I've seen how well the island has managed to keep its pre-pandemic lifestyle, thanks to its efficient policies, community efforts and geographical isolation. But my outsider optimism isn't always shared by the locals, who are feeling increasingly isolated by ongoing government-imposed travel restrictions. Such regulations obviously also have a huge influence on an international sector like the performing arts. In the last couple of years, Taiwanese stage productions have only rarely been seen outside the island, and vice versa. But something has been brewing inside Taiwan's safe cocoon: a necessary transformation.

For many good reasons, Taiwanese performing artists are taking the step to VR. To be able to present their work abroad despite the disruptions of the pandemic. To look for less environmentally damaging alternatives to touring.
To experiment with and cultivate new available technologies. VR shows are indeed an artform with still great potential for development. And artists in Taiwan,

whether filmmakers, choreographers, theatre directors or photographers, find themselves on exceptionally fertile ground to engage in this new form of artistry.

Not only has the island developed a leading position in the global ICT industry over the last decades, there are also a number of government-supported organisations that actively boost the rise of VR art. These favourable conditions are reflected in the success of Taiwanese VR shows at last year's Venice VR Expanded, the virtual reality selection of the Venice International Film Festival. Seven out of 36 entries were produced or co-produced in Taiwan. Five of those seven were made with the support of the Taiwan Creative Content Agency (TAICCA), the intermediary organisation supervised by the Taiwanese Ministry of Culture promoting the development of Taiwan's intellectual property through consultation and funding. Another important facilitator for VR projects is the Kaohsiung Film Archive, located in the south of Taiwan. This government-funded institute offers not only comprehensive support to VR projects through funding and talent cultivation, but also showcases VR works at their VR FILM LAB ('The first experimental VR theatre in Taiwan') and through the VR competition at the annual Kaohsiung Film Festival.

I crossed the island to experience two such projects: *In the Mist* by theatre director and filmmaker CHOU Tung-Yen at Taipei Film Festival, and *Afterimage for Tomorrow* by director Singing CHEN and dancer-choreographer CHOU Shu-Yi at National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts Weiwuying.

CHOU Tung-Yen and CHOU Shu-Yi are no strangers to each other, nor to the use of new media. Together they created the dance production *Emptied Memories* in Taipei in 2012 – a time when they were already experimenting with panoramic 360 filming, the same technique used in virtual reality, but then with the images projected onto moving screens. Today, they are each developing their idiosyncratic artistic worlds with the help of VR technology. Slightly sceptical, I surrender myself to the VR headset once more, for the first time since last year's Springback Ringside sessions during the Summer ReCollection Festival in Ljubljana, but this time with the knowledge that both shows were especially created for the medium.

A single headset awaits me inside a replica of a steam room, a real version of the virtual one I'm about to be teleported into. At Taipei Film Festival, CHOU Tung-Yen's *In the Mist*, a wordless, erotic poem in the form of a 14-minute VR 360 film, is presented as an individual experience (although the film has also been screened for larger audience groups at different events). When the movie starts, I'm suddenly not alone any more, but find myself surrounded by 12 naked men, who seek to fill emotional and physical voids. The men cluster and recluster in pairs, trios and larger groups to kiss, caress, lick, suck or to downright do-the-deed.

We only need our instincts to understand this primal body language, the uncensored interactions, the gestures of seduction, whether it leaves us appealed or repulsed. One of the men keeps turning his gaze towards the spectator, and that's how you

know you're not just a fly on the wall, but an immersed thirteenth participant in the event. His repeated glance keeps asking me the same question: what have you come to do here?

The fact that I take it personally is probably what makes this work so powerful. And indeed, in this meeting between virtual and real bodies I experience many of the same feelings I have while watching live performance: the pleasure gained from watching others; the voyeurism, plainly; the awareness I get about my own body; the distraction and relief from the real world, but also the sudden return to that world and the feeling of being caught when one of the performers seems to notice me.

In the Mist is not just a deviceful porn film. Aside from all the complex questions it raises on spectatorship, it is also infused with theatrical elements. The play of light and shadows is not just beautiful to watch, it ingeniously enhances the hazy ambience in the room, with layers of mist cloaking the men's identities. When closer to the viewer, their bodies reveal sweat pearls slowly drizzling down their curved skins. When far away, they become dehumanised ghosts. This spookiness presses on when a suited man rushes into the steam room, pointing his flashlight at the sauna goers in search of something – but no one seems to notice him. Or when one of the characters enters the room again, while he was already there, and watches himself as four other men indulge in his body.

At the end of the film, the viewer rises above the steam room and sees how its walls open up. The fog diffuses, the men spread out, and what remains is only emptiness and distance. *In the Mist* manages to wonderfully combine the capacities of physical theatre and VR in a thought-provoking total experience. The show will get a second life at Taipei Arts Festival 2022, when it will be expanded into a hybrid VR and live performance.

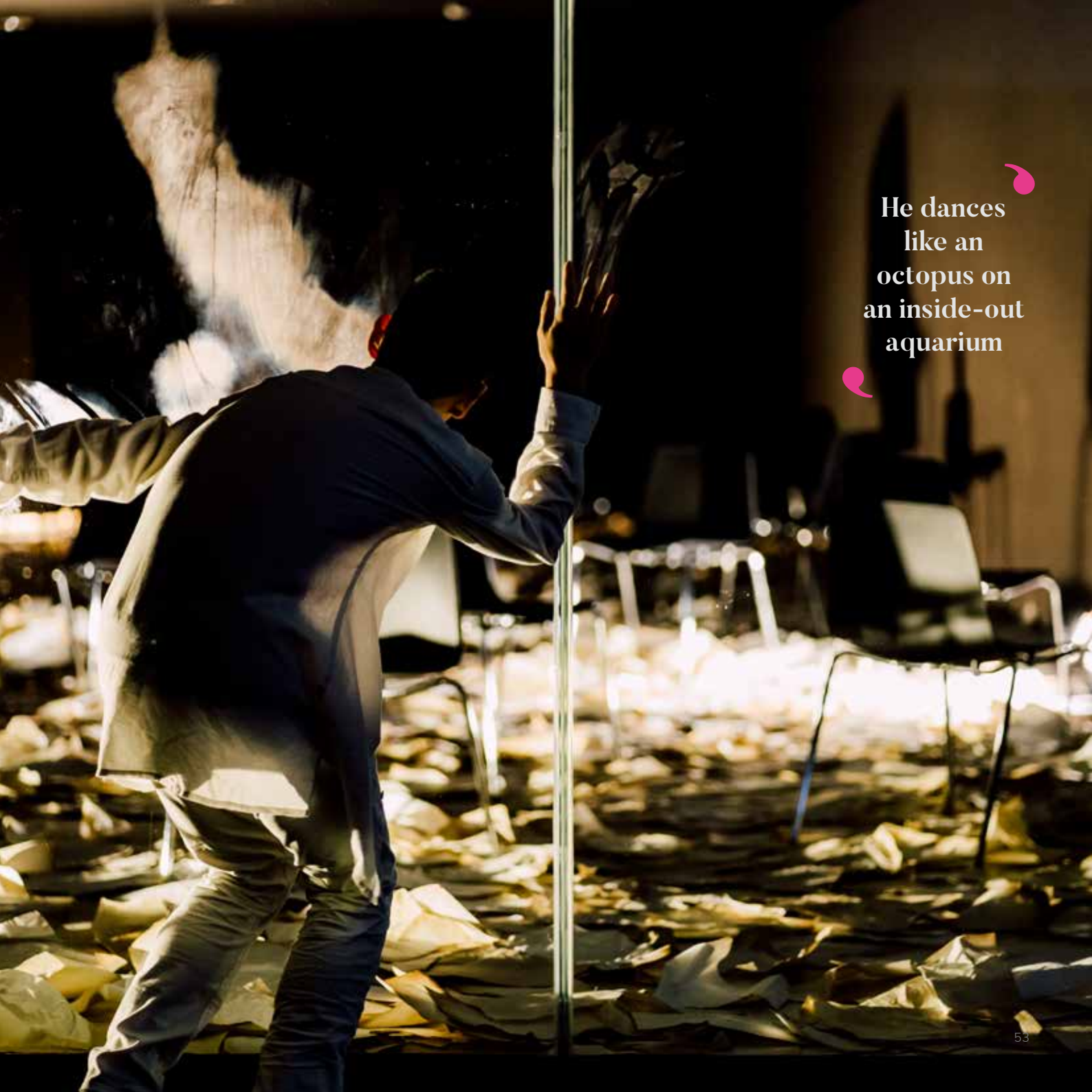
Afterimage for Tomorrow is already living that second lifetime. Originally made in 2018, this 20-minute VR 360 film by director Singing CHEN features dancer-choreographer CHOU Shu-Yi in the main role. Especially for Weiwuying in Kaohsiung, the duo has now expanded the piece into a hybrid work that blends the film with a site-specific live performance. One of the atriums of this state-of-the-art building became the framework, hosting about 20 spectators per session.

From under Kaohsiung's bright blue sky we get swept into a dark factory hall with colonnades stretching out in every direction. A narrating voice navigates the journey, but asks more questions than it provides guidance. A man wakes up in a parallel reality. The viewer flashes between various perspectives on this distorted world: on the crease between a mirrored group of dancers, flying over a coast like a bird, and peeking inside the main character's bedroom.

In this more intimate space, Shu-Yi wears orange clothes, evoking the idea that he is imprisoned there. The walls of his room are covered in papers and have stacks of books leaning against them, of which the content fades and eventually disappears over the course of the film.



CHOU Shu-Yi: *Afterimage for Tomorrow.*



He dances like an octopus on an inside-out aquarium

> The very thing that unsettles us leads us to transformation

Sounds of crinkling paper overlap, from the headphones but also from the actual space. They form a bridge back to reality. As we take off the VR headset, the atrium is filled with those same empty sheets of paper, whirling in the wind. Behind the windows of the atrium, inside the theatre foyer, appears Shu-Yi. This time dressed in liberated white, he dances in 360 degrees around the glass box. Pressing his hands firmly against the glass, while his body fluently twists and crawls on, he dances like an octopus on an inside-out aquarium. To see the same performer in those two different states works to great effect: the captive and the free dancer are not different, they exist at the same time in different realms.

Even in a chain of worldwide disasters, there is always art to demonstrate how well humans are able to adapt. It's like some natural law, that we always find a way to express ourselves even if something holds us back. The very thing that unsettles us leads us to transformation, and new ties to become stronger together. And before you know it, the most remote of places suddenly becomes the centre stage for a whole new way of art making. Taiwanese artists and producers have been particularly isolated over the last couple of years, but have kept an open outlook on the world and changed the game for both VR and the performing arts, which they have brought together in something new, something bigger. One plus one equals more than two. •



Viewers at Wiewuying's hybrid performance of *Afterimage for Tomorrow*

REVIEWS



Isabelle Schad: Pieces and Elements / FUR

Emily May
15 July 2021

Slow, steady, serene – an open-air double bill by German choreographer Isabelle Schad

Berlin, Germany



Photo: Aya Toraiwa in *FUR*.
© D. Hartwig

A group of seven performers emerge from within the audience. Arms linked above their heads, they continuously twist their torsos left and right, slowly gravitating towards each other and the haphazard, wooden stage before them.

This is Isabelle Schad's *Pieces and Elements*, a 2016 work reimagined for the open-air stage of Globe Berlin. Described as an exploration of how dancers can 'negotiate their collective body in motion, which can only function as a whole', the performance is exactly what it says on the tin.

Almost imperceptibly, the cast shifts between a series of repetitive motions – including firmly massaging their upper backs, lifting up their t-shirts to obscure their faces, and drawing continuous circles with their arms in opposite directions – that are introduced by individuals and subsequently ripple through the group. Watching them feels like observing the gradual changing of seasons, or a kaleidoscope continuously morphing into new configurations.

Surprisingly for a piece about connectivity, contact between dancers is rare. In the wake of the global pandemic, it feels poignant to see this example of how people can build relationships without physically touching. The piece also notably lacks climaxes. Yet at only 30 minutes, *Pieces and Elements* holds my attention from beginning to end.

FUR has a similarly steady pace. Created on Japanese dancer Aya Toraiwa, it's intended as a movement portrait of her unique characteristics. The main focus is her knee-length hair, which extends her motions, twisting behind her as she rolls across the floor, and slicing the air as she draws circular pathways with her torso. At times, it almost engulfs her entire body like a shield which she slips her fingers through to perform intricate gestures against its jet-black backdrop, and uses to obscure her partial nudity.

Even when Toraiwa's movements get faster, she always seems to be in calm control of her luscious mane, and never succumbs to a moment of wild abandon. As *FUR* is a portrait of the dancer, perhaps this is deliberate, to reflect a serene disposition?

The bottom line: A double bill of intriguing yet undramatic choreographic investigations

Pieces and Elements
Concept & choreography: Isabelle Schad / Co-choreography & performance: Jozefien Beckers, Barbara Berti, Frederike Doffin, Naïma Ferré, Josephine Findeisen, Przemyslaw Kaminski, Mathis Kleinschnittger, Manuel Lindner, Adi Shildan, Claudia Tomasi, Nir Vidan, Natalia Wilk / Theoretical advice: Susanne Foellmer / Dramaturgical advice: Sasa Bozic / Artistic assistance: Claudia Tomasi / Light: Mehdi Toutain-Lopez / Sound: Damir Simunovic / Costume: Charlotte Pistorius / Production management: Heiko Schramm / Costume assistance: Maja Svartåker / Assistance: Angela Millano

FUR
Concept & choreography: Isabelle Schad / Co-choreography & performance: Aya Toraiwa / Sound: Damir Simunovic / Light: Emma Juliard / Production management: Heiko Schramm

Protein Dance: En Route


Photo © Foteini Christofilopoulou

Covid has pushed dance increasingly into the digital realm, but also into the implacably analogue: outdoors. Can a soggy British summer play host to a truly satisfying theatrical experience?

Certainly, there's a rich cultural history underpinning Protein's latest work. Artistic director Luca Silvestrini's choreographed journey through Woolwich extends across this largely ungentrified corner of southeast London, taking in the vast expanse of the grassy Common to the hustle of General Gordon Square, guiding audiences through time and space.

To begin, the performers invite us in with verbal and physical cues like trails of breadcrumbs, and it's pure whimsy to follow their lead through the Common's dappled dells, where memories are drawn by bodies and voices, music drifting across the grass. Under a canopy of trees, we encounter the musicians who accompany our onward journey. A playful romp across the imposing grandeur of the Royal Artillery Barracks leads to the beautiful, war-ravaged Garrison Church where a eulogy to lost lives sees broken-looking bodies carried across stony paths to the earnest military strains of brass and drums.

Approaching General Gordon Square, energy ramps up to a carnival high with whoops and cheers, leaps and lunges. We reach the heart of Woolwich as an angry protest with megaphones and rousing clarion calls. Then the show softens and cracks open, sweeping across the square, inviting in a wider audience with bird calls and soft song. It's artfully managed by the performers, even if there's not quite enough thrust to draw the diverse onlookers through the gates of the rather exclusive Royal Arsenal.

The company rolls river-ward regardless, voices and bodies providing a swell of miraculous momentum in the third hour. As we arrive among the solemn circle of standing figures by sculptor Peter Burke that herald our journey's end, there's a moment of pure theatrical magic as the heavens open and everyone is soaked to the skin, faces skyward, dancing our hearts out to a celebratory declaration: 'WE'RE HERE!'

The bottom line: A three-hour travelogue connecting motion to location and sensation – and yes, you can rain on this parade

Lydia Wharf
24 August 2021

An antidote to digital dislocation, guided experiences such as Protein's En Route reconnect us with place and presence

Woolwich, London, UK

Conceived & directed by: Luca Silvestrini / Performed & devised by: Temitope Ajose-Cutting, Sophie Arstall, Eryck Brahmania, Sonya Cullingford, Anders Duckworth, Thomas Goodwin, Folu Odimayo, Rachele Rapisardi, Kenny Wing Tao Ho / Original music: Helen Chadwick, Matteo Fargion, Orlando Gough, Andy Pink / Design: Yann Seabra / Musicians: Toril Azzalini-Machecler, Ruby Barber, Anna Carter, Wilf Diamond, George Garford / Music director: George Garford / Assistant music director: Sonya Cullingford / Voice coach: Melanie Pappenheim / Stage manager: Bethan Shaw / Co-commissioned by: Woolwich Works (UK) & Marche Teatro (IT)

26 reviews

Claire Lefèvre
26 August 2021

Vienna's sprawling ImPulsTanz Festival – in verbal snapshots


© Mathias Voelzke

Alexandra Bachzetsis: Private Song

Toy boys and femme Dom in acid wash serenade one another in tantalisingly toxic threesome.


© Thomas Zamolo

Frédéric Gies & Weld Company: Tribute

A ravishing cast of techno sylphides raves in formation, in an ecstatic and delicate homage to Dominique Bagouet; think Berghain cancan with extreme somatic smarts, and bass resonating all the way to your ribcage.


© Martin Argyroglo

Meg Stuart/Damaged Goods: Cascade

Nine explorers visit, nurture and destroy an artificial galactic landscape, exploring thrilling peaks and tiresome valleys, always spectacularly lost.


© Alex Brenner

Marc Oosterhoff/Cie Moost: Take Care Of Yourself

Baudelaire spleen meets fratboy energy in this booze-fuelled, stunt-driven and knife-sharp magic show.

in 1 sentence

Vienna's annual ImPulsTanz festival is too vast to grasp – but you can easily read these zippy one-liners by intrepid show-goer Claire Lefèvre. Then, why not revisit the festival in the company of Lena Megyeri (page 68) to compare?



Sophia Rodríguez: Ostentation Project

An acrobatic, sensual, glitter-adorned middle finger to patriarchy and colonisation, from Venezuela with love.



Raja Feather Kelly: UGLY (Black Queer Zoo)

Emotional and virtuosic, UGLY challenges perceptions of the black queer body in a yellow kaleidoscopic (dis)play of hyper-pop images and supple-sleek-seismic mood shifts.



Petar Sarjanović: Everything I Don't Know, I've Stolen

A hermetic contemporary dance piece for contemporary dancers about contemporary dance, where a couple of poetic memories punctuate an otherwise niche self-referential layer cake.



Astrit Ismaili: MISS

Expectations skyrocket when this musical begins with three hilariously sharp solo songs by a flower, Cicciolina and Miss Kosovo, yet the energy plummets when the choreographer takes over the stage and transforms the two other protagonists into their backup singers.



Ian Kaler: Points Of Departure Hyphen

Emo teenager vibes meet dis-combobulated text, great ghost jokes and butter-smooth dancing.



Cie. Maguy Marin: Umwelt

The hypnotic dramaturgy, visual poetry and original cast members have aged beautifully, but culturally inappropriate costumes, overwhelmingly heteronormative representation and unsolicited dick flashes have not.



Neopost Foofwa – Foofwa d'Imobilité: Dancewalk – Retroperspectives

A film about the Dancewalks project backs dancer Alizée Sourbé as she narrates and echoes the ramifications of this choreographic public intervention, which seems to have grown from a humble poetic proposal to a global, political and at times questionable protest format.



Louise Lecavalier: Stations

Lecavalier's skills as a dancer are undeniable, but the dramaturgy and staging don't match her powerful and hypnotic presence.



ZOO/Thomas Hauert: How to Proceed

How to address your privileges without getting demoralised asks the choreographer, before spending an hour not addressing them at all and presenting mediocre dance constellations instead.



Meg Stuart/Damaged Goods: Violet

Accompanied by a live drummer, five dancers gesticulate and circumvolute in and out of transcendental states in an epic, sweaty and trippy journey across the empty stage.



Lau Lukkarila: NYXXX

Gliding around a sleek multimedia altar, Lukkarila summons the Greek goddess of the night in a highly lubricated and intimate offering of erotic intelligence.



Jérôme Bel: Isadora Duncan

A lecture performance in which Bel narrates the tragic life of modern dance pioneer Isadora Duncan, while 70-year-old Duncan technique teacher Elisabeth Schwartz expertly demonstrates some of her choreographies (but doesn't get to speak).



Idio Chichava, Converge+: Sentido Unico

A sensuous and impeccably executed duet where playful seduction between a man and a woman dismally ends with him choking her, without warning or explanation.



Raja Feather Kelly: Hysteria (UGLY Part 2)

Immersed in a bubble-gum-pink life-size doll box, Kelly activates his monochrome surroundings and takes us on a glamorous yet meticulous emotional roller-coaster.



Madeleine Fournier / O D E T T A: Labourer

A tap-dancing mime laboriously finds her voice amidst automated drums and archive videos of growing plants.



Deborah Hazler/Angry Agnes Productions: That Rant and Rave

Huffing and puffing as a choreographic strategy turns out to be an articulate, uproarious and at times monotonous method to denounce the raging horrors of the capitalist patriarchy.



Tamara Alegre, Lydia Östberg Diakité, Nunu Flashdem, Marie Ursin, Célia Lutangu: FIEBRE

Three mega-babes slide, splash and slurp slime in gooey game of flesh and fluids; hotness has never felt so fresh.



Frank Van Laecke, Alain Platel, Steven Prengels/NTGent & Les Ballets C de la B: Gardenia – 10 Years Later

A cabaret of grief, decay and extravagance brings ageing queer performers to the spotlight, but touching moments get lost between inexplicable fight scenes and problematic jokes.



PRICE: Melodies Are So Far My Best Friend

Gathered around a sloped runway, the audience witnesses a performance concert where melodrama encounters tender humour, while both time and magnificent costumes fold and stretch, transforming endlessly.



Platform-K/Michiel Vandevelde/ Philippe Thuriot: The Goldberg Variations

Choreographer creates very pretty dance on very pretty music, juxtaposes it with videos of violent right-wing extremists and calls it political.



Ruth Childs/Scarlett's: fantasia

Starting and dropping ideas as often as she changes her multi-coloured wigs, Childs' nervy composition lacks any sense of urgency; classical canons are upheld but the audience's attention isn't.



Raja Feather Kelly: BLUE (UGLY Part 3)

Couture-wearing alien abducts himself from the constraint of sense-making and favours refusal to perform and sensory overload as alternative strategies.

Edinburgh Festivals Diary
August 2021

Róisín O'Brien
21 September 2021

Big festivals are cautiously opening up – but what is it like to be there? Róisín O'Brien sampled summer dance in Edinburgh

The run-up

'Please note that Phoebe Waller-Bridge is currently unavailable for interview.'

So reads a line at the bottom of 2021's Edinburgh festival fringe launch release. Waller-Bridge, star of the hit TV series *Fleabag* who first performed the theatrical version at the Fringe in 2013, was announced as the first president of the Fringe Society – the administrative body which facilitates the fringe – in February 2021. As I comb through a mixture of online and live listings, in newly Covid-safe venues by artists who have been out of action since August 2019, I wonder if I would have wanted to interview Waller-Bridge... An interview with a celebrity figurehead, albeit a Fringe success story, is not the festival experience I'm hunting for.

In pre-pandemic times, the Edinburgh festivals (including but not limited to the Edinburgh Fringe) were both all-consuming and interior, the city likewise transformed by them even though the performance areas remain stubbornly localised. If you're in it, your world morphs into early press calls, bad late-night comedy shows and last-minute dashes to the Next Big Thing. Even though it is a tiny percentage of the overall programme, there is a comparative glut of dance, a descending of international companies and experimental work from abroad that doesn't often make it past London.

If you're out of it, though, it can completely pass you by. This feels particularly exacerbated by the pandemic this year: preview nights are replaced by on-demand shows, eager flyering teams by (environmentally friendly) QR codes, and spontaneity by even more limited and socially distanced seats (the bubbles of 'one' ominously circled in red).

Going out

Edinburgh itself becomes more of a stage. MultiStory, a collaboration between the venues ZOO, Gilded Balloon, Traverse Theatre and Dance Base, is a new, specially constructed outdoor stage dramatically erected under Edinburgh Castle.

Here I catch **Ben Okri** and **Charlotte Jarvis**'s *Starting From First Position*. Using dance and words, poet Okri and dancer Jarvis move through a series of musings on responsibility, action and creativity, particularly in relation to the climate crisis. They dip into each other's worlds with sensitivity and a certain amount of success: dancing with precise idiosyncrasy, Jarvis speaks crisply and with direction, while Okri has a vigour in his movements across the stage. *Starting From First Position*, though, remains a series of questions: emphatically asked but not answered.

Elsewhere, and likewise focusing on the outdoors, the Edinburgh International Festival's dance offering comprises four

specially commissioned international films of dancers in their home towns, including *Field – Something for the Future Now* from Edinburgh-based company **Curious Seed**, conceived and directed by **Christine Devaney**. A four-hour durational work set in Holyrood Park, with the now inactive volcano of Arthur's Seat in the background, dancers of all ages and backgrounds emerge in and out of vast green landscape. Dog-walkers skirt the edges; dogs carry on through, sniffing.

Recognising the outdoors as co-creator rather than a second-tier performance space, *Field* is at its strongest when it embraces that big open space. Groups form out of the corner of your eye without you noticing; lines, relations, territories emerge slowly. Amongst the groups of performers are young people from Lyra, an Edinburgh-based company making work with young people, and Dance Base's PRIME, Scotland's first semi-professional dance company for the over-60s. The latter





Christine Devaney's *Field – Something for the Future Now*
Photo © Matt Beech

> Dog-walkers skirt the edges; dogs carry on through, sniffing

regale the audience in evening wear and silk gloves, with a certain joie de vivre.

Field contains both a sense of a futuristic wasteland through the torn grey flags that outline the performance space, and medieval pageantry. Young children in brightly coloured capes and swords gallivant across the space, conducted by a bow-waving cellist. The piece, nonetheless, is primarily a slower pace of 'entertainment', the contract with the audience gentle and minimal.

A digital turn

Back in my flat, I tune into some of the digital offerings. Is it just me and other critics here?

In **Frauke Requardt** and **David Rosenberg**'s *Future Cargo*, a truck pulls up into a deserted urban location. Its driver is mysteriously not answering their radio. The camera zooms out to show the whole container, the side of which lifts to reveal silver-clad figures moving inside the container on a conveyer built. With no facial expressions visible under the morph suits, there's an alienness to the creatures, who interact with everyday objects such as house plants, tennis bats or balloons. Are they going somewhere, or have they arrived here? *Future Cargo* sits somewhere between sinister and playful, and while it doesn't hook the audience on a discernible narrative, it's an enjoyable enough ride.

I don't manage to catch nearly as much as I would like of Ian Abbott's collaboration with ZOOTV, which showcases a variety of hip-hop works. I'm drawn to the blurb of *Boys Don't Dance* from Germany company **E-Motion** and conceived by Takao Baba, which informs me – an old person – that it will take inspiration from TikTok. Turns out, if you're not on TikTok, you probably won't catch what they're referring to. *Boys Don't Dance* is an invitation to find dance in the everyday and to not feel embarrassed about dancing, regardless of gender. The concept is fun, the delivery slightly unstructured: it's about halfway through the performance before we are invited to move with the dancers.

A digital standout is *Fugue in Two Colours*, an excessively competent work from 2015 Aerowaves artist **Carl Knif** that is brilliant in its coldness without losing something human. The additional frame of the recording amplifies the work, which crosses thresholds between audience and performer, life and death, here and there.

'Crisp' kept coming to my mind when watching it – from the silver gleam of the costumes, to the starkly cut panels in the side of the stage that the dancers enter from. Starting from a loosely staged set with microphones and a table, the performers (a mixture from Carl Knif Company and Helsinki Dance Company) shift between stage and auditorium, dance costume and puffer coats, and from controlling to following, always expertly attuned to one another. Skeletal branches appear, as do darkly clad figures under cold blue lighting. The music of Dmitri Shostakovich and sound design from Janne Hast moves from exacting piano to synthesised sounds and eerie music-box chimes. *Fugue in Two Colours* constantly wobbles in and



Left: *Fugue in Two Colours* by Carl Knif / Helsinki Dance Company Photo © Yoshi Omori

Right: *Boys Don't Dance* with E-Motion company, conceived by Takao Baba

out of certainty, but disorientation is not the endgame, unlike most pieces of its ilk. Rather, it's simpler: the darker side of the work, of the performers, of life – whether that is memory, the subconscious or the unknown – surfaces and makes itself felt.

Dance Base

Normally a stalwart of August dance programming, Dance Base has, like most venues, a more modest offering this year. Dance Base Unwrapped is an installation piece where you can walk between film screenings of work made in lockdown, to **Luke Pell**'s *Take Me To Bed*. Pell's work is designed as a space for people to view bodies they may feel 'discomforted' by. The vertical screens, which show bird's-eye views of the performers filmed in bed, placed in a studio of bean bags, allow a soporific curiosity. In the hallway of the Dance Base building, there is also a tribute to Raymond Kaye (King), a dance artist and teacher who worked in Scotland and passed away 20 years ago. In amongst other people's memories of his witty retorts, I recall my own experience in a ballet class when we turned to execute the exercise on the left-hand side, to which he quipped: 'it's hard when you've got two legs, isn't it?'

Separate to the Dance Base Unwrapped programme, **Barrowland Ballet**'s *Family Portrait*, made with director **Natasha Gilmore** and her children, is an intelligent and warm interactive video installation. Four screens on four sides of a grey square with a compass drawn onto it, hug the studio. A recognisably purple, yellow, and green Scottish cinematic landscape sets the scene. Under each screen are bottles containing things picked up from the forest: a pigeon's wing, some bark, sheep's wool.

A game is in process as we enter, Gilmore and her children jumping out of the foliage and trees to make animal sounds. It's enjoyable to glance between the four screens, always hunting in amongst the 360° soundscape. There's an honest contrast between the urban flash of the children's Nike trainers and Angry Birds references with the scraggy woods in which they and their mother proceed to play in, narrate over and dance in for the duration of the work. The play across the four screens is inventive without tipping into a gimmick: the group march across the screens sequentially, their costumes changing from frame to frame.

Family Portrait feels fraught in its poignant capturing of time, through the very act of filming Gilmore and her family (rather than through the heavier metaphorical images, such as the children poking a dead bird). At points Gilmore carries all three young children, which will soon become physically impossible. The exuberance of their youth

contrasts with moments where we see Gilmore struggling to cope, both figuratively through movement and in one brief flash where we see the youngest child crying.

Isn't it a bit weird to be reviewing someone's kids? Yes, maybe. *Family Portrait* does feel like exactly that though, a portrait – we are not seeing the family, but the family in this moment of creating a film. A poem read out by the oldest son is both brave in its honesty and honed in its craft and delivery. There is a slight loss of drive towards the end of the film, after the succession of many different setups, but overall this is a nicely intimate rather than raw documentation.

Final days

In the final week of the festivals, I'm working on a theatre project and don't see much dance. I watch the temporary venues subsequently get pulled down to make way for students to return. I read Jan Martens' State of the Union address at Het TheaterFestival in The Netherlands, where he talks of the created work as containing form, content and process.

On the last Sunday in August, a friend asks me: 'what was the quality of the dance this year?' Nothing immediately stands out – there is a lot of piecemeal, works devised over Zoom and in bouts, put together in separate rooms and studios. But the artists' tenacity is accompanied, perhaps, by a better sense of how hard it is to get into that room; to work in an industry so rudely yet easily shaken by the pandemic.

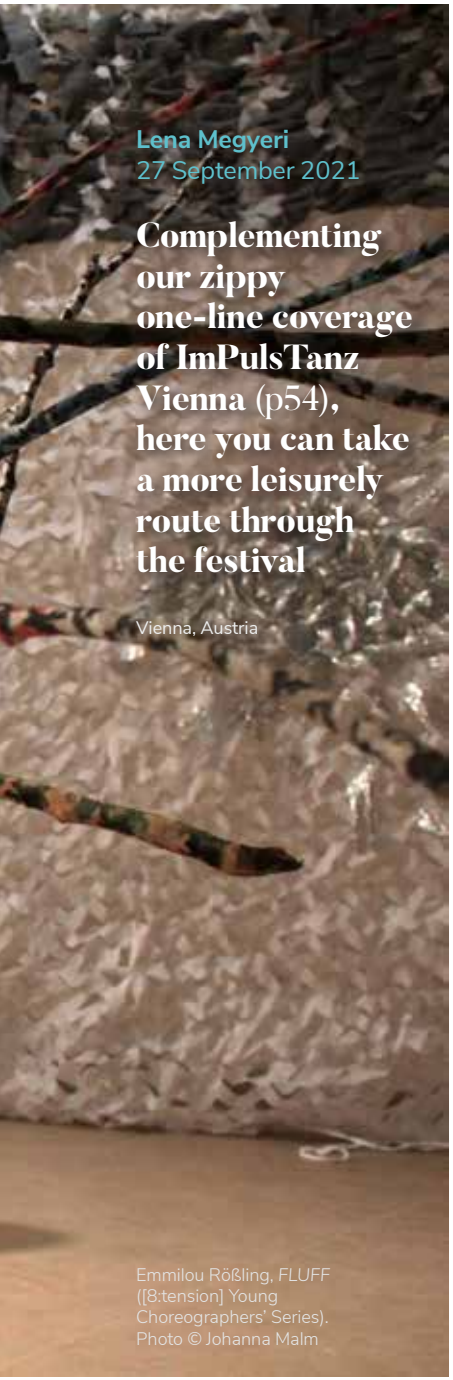
Did August really happen? For some, I think it did.



Isn't it a bit weird to be reviewing someone's kids?

A week at ImPulsTanz Vienna





Emmilou Rößling, *FLUFF* ([8:tension] Young Choreographers' Series). Photo © Johanna Malm

Lena Megyeri
27 September 2021

Complementing our zippy one-line coverage of ImPulsTanz Vienna (p54), here you can take a more leisurely route through the festival

Vienna, Austria

For one month every summer, Vienna's ImPulsTanz festival can make you believe that contemporary dance is important enough to take over a whole city. Festival posters are everywhere, you bump into people carrying the festival tote bag at each corner, and in the evening, it feels like everyone is going to or coming from one of the countless events. When you attend one of these events yourself, it can give you the feeling of belonging to a pretty cool community. To sum it up: it's a special time of the year for dance lovers.

With 155 performances, 185 workshops and thousands of participants, the 2021 edition of ImPulsTanz felt like a new beginning after the previous year's pandemic-related hiatus. Of course, it was a bit different from before: there were safety measures to keep to, some performances could only take place with modifications, and most importantly, this was the first festival without one of the founders of ImPulsTanz, Brazilian choreographer Ismael Ivo, who died of Covid in April 2021.

Most of the performances in this year's line-up were created before the pandemic, as the festival had made a pledge to show all the works that had been invited to the cancelled 2020 edition during the next three years. It was a wide and diverse programme, the imprint of the issues that have concerned dancemakers in the previous couple of years – mostly before the turbulence of the pandemic, but already in rapidly changing times. In this article, I try to give an overview of some of these issues through the seven performances that I was able to see during my seven days at the festival.

The last few years has seen a growing interest in dance history among creators: many choreographers have been inspired by dance heritage, especially of the 20th century. This was traceable at ImPulsTanz as well, in the form of reconstructions, homages and new creations. Seventy-year-old French dancer **Elisabeth Schwartz** showed her lecture-performance *Isadora Duncan*, created by **Jérôme Bel**. There was an evening dedicated to Viennese Dance Modernism and its leading female dancers. And then there was **Ruth Childs**, niece of Judson Dance Theater member Lucinda Childs, who brought three of her legendary aunt's early solo pieces to Vienna: *Pastime* (1963), which was Childs' first ever solo; *Carnation* (1965), which made her famous in Europe; and *Museum Piece* (1965). There are no surviving recordings of these pieces, and except for *Carnation* they have never been presented outside the USA, so it was a rare chance to be able to experience them live.

Pastime explores the relationship between movement and object. We see Childs taking up different shapes and imitating different objects – a boat, a crib, a bathtub – while moving inside a piece of stretchable fabric that is expanded between her feet and shoulders. *Carnation*, called 'a perfect and meticulous nonsense' by one critic at its 1965 premiere, revolves around the animation of everyday objects, like hair curlers, sponges, a rubbish bag and a salad bowl, accompanied by exaggerated facial expressions. In *Museum Piece*, the performer explains Georges Seurat's painting *Le Cirque* by putting enlarged coloured dots from a section of

Right: Elisabeth Schwartz in Jérôme Bel's *Isadora Duncan*
Photo © Veronique Ellena

Centre: Ruth Childs recreates Lucinda Childs' Judson-era *Carnation*
Photo © Gregory Batardon

Opposite: Michiel Vandevelde's *The Goldberg Variations*
Photo © Tom Callemin





the painting on the floor, and thus placing herself inside the work of art.

Reconstruction is always recreation at the same time, and Ruth Childs managed to make these works her own. Instead of interpreting a piece of dance history, she made the solos look personal and contemporary. Common to the three pieces is humour, and she has enough wit and a strong stage presence to be authentic in them. The evening was completed by the video recordings of two other Lucinda Childs works: *Calico Mingling* (1973), a piece for four dancers, and a solo, *Katema* (1978), which made for an interesting meeting of aunt and niece, past and presence on the stage.

The Goldberg Variations by Belgian artist **Michiel Vandevelde** is inspired by another iconic figure of the American postmodern: Steve Paxton. The title is an allusion to Paxton's solo improvisation that he performed from time to time in the 1980s to Bach, here played live on stage by Philippe Thuriot on the accordion. Like Paxton, Vandevelde is interested in the social and political contexts of our time, and questions the relationship between dance and democracy. Like many choreographers of the American postmodern era, Vandevelde also builds up his choreography from seemingly simple, everyday movements, strung together in highly complex sequences and rigorous geometrical shapes.

While Vandevelde and his two partners, black dancer Audrey Merilus and Oskar Stalpaert, a performer with Down's syndrome, dance on stage, we see clips of riots and demonstrations from recent years from around the world. The choreographer – this time the embodiment of the white male dancer next to his co-performers – politely puts himself into the background and gives more space to the other two, who are not afraid to use the chance. Stalpaert charms with his clown-like attitude (his first passion being, as he mentions on stage, acting), but it is Merilus who really steals the show with her intricate, airy dancing.

It seems that a lot has happened in the democratisation of dance since Paxton's time, as it is now quite common to see dancers with different abilities and skin colours (and gender identities etc.) on stage; but as the videos in the background show us, society still faces many of the



same prejudices, and segregation is just as common as decades before. Vandevelde's choreography is remarkable, but his message remains unelaborate and didactic.

One of the many things made very hard by the pandemic was travelling, and discovering new talent in the performing arts scene. Luckily, ImPulsTanz was able to present its 2020 selection of ten performances for the [8:tension] Young Choreographers' Series almost in its entirety, except for one performance. The three that I saw showed very different artistic approaches, one of them also winning the festival Young Choreographers' Award – but let's get back to that later.

Ruth Childs is present in this selection as well, this time with her own solo. While contemporary dance, after some years of blissful ignorance, is getting more socially conscious again, *fantasia* joins a vast number of pieces (mostly solos) from the last few years that feed on personal stories and autobiographical details. In five sections, wearing five t-shirts of different colours with matching wigs, Childs steps into dialogue with the musical memories of her childhood. The classical pieces (mostly parts of Beethoven symphonies, but there's a bit of *Nutcracker* as well) evoke spontaneous and involuntary moves in her body. Sometimes she repeats the same sequence over and over again, sometimes she interprets the music, at another time she tries to fight and distort it. At these times the classical music is replaced with contemporary sound, and we see Childs moving childlike, almost surprised at her own body's actions.

It's an experiment in discovering her personal performing style, based on – and partly going against – the memories carried around in her body and soul since she was little. Interestingly, Childs' stage personality is much less convincing here than in her aunt's pieces. The wit is there again, but she lacks the charisma that kept our attention throughout the restaged works.

Postmodern ideas are no strangers to German choreographer **Emmilou Rößling** either, who, in her piece *FLUFF*, deliberately avoids the spectacular and creates a piece that withdraws from representation. As the title suggests, fabrics and materials, starting with the impressive white military net backdrop, are important in the performance, especially in creating a certain mood.

The show can be divided into three sections: in the first one, Rößling moves around in slow motion, gradually sitting up from a lying position and exploring the stage, mostly with her back to the audience – as if she needs a bit of time before she can face us and really start the show. In the second section, she creates an installation from tree branches covered with yarns – slowly, meditatively, like monks create a mandala. Except she doesn't destroy it in the end,

A vast number of pieces feed on personal stories and auto-biographical details

but lets it swing and mesmerise us. In the third section she dances and repeats longer sequences, made up of easy and common movements.

FLUFF was originally planned to be shown in a museum space but had to be shown in a theatre because of Covid regulations. Being able to walk around would indeed have suited the piece and its contemplative, immersive atmosphere much better. Rößling tries not to look like a performer at all: she greets friends in the audience at the beginning, and she maintains a civilian attitude throughout. Even her movements are a bit clumsy in the last part, as if she could be any of us, not a professional dancer. But her attempt at dismantling the wall between performer and spectator and creating an intimate ambience cannot be completely successful in a traditional theatre setting. Sitting in the auditorium, I was reminded of a feathery pillow, comforting and lulling. Whether these qualities are as beneficial for a performance as for a pillow, is probably up to personal taste.

At some points, *FIEBRE* has an installation-like quality as well, but in a very different way than *FLUFF*. With a concept by **Tamara Alegre**, choreography by Alegre, **Lydia Östberg Diakité** and **Marie Ursin** and performed by Diakité, Ursin and **Nunu Flashdem**, the piece is set in the MUMOK Hofstallung, the former imperial mews building in today's Museumsquartier. The torturing summer heat and the lack of air inside the building somehow fits all that

These women take back the control, and manage to do that among all the most blatant clichés of eroticism



we're about to see. We sit on two sides of the room, and the three performers take their place on a rectangular space on the floor that is richly smeared with purple slime. The dancers, who are representing different types of female bodies – white, black, thin, plus-size (Flashdem is a plus-size model too), glide, slide and crawl across the room in swimsuits that have more cut-outs than material. They drink the slime from long tubes and then place the tubes into each other's costumes. Each element of this performance – the half-naked bodies, the excessive lube-like material, the women climbing and gliding on each other – could be erotic, and none of it is. Flashdem moves around with a tormented look on her face, and the other two don't seem to have the time of their lives either. The slime-drinking, slurping and spitting is more disgusting than anything else.

And then, at some point they start climbing on each other and grab each other like sumo-fighters, and it just gets ridiculous as they constantly slip on the slime, and I find myself laughing out loud. It's all like a sexual fantasy gone really bad, and that's intentional. These women take back the control over whether they want to be perceived as sexy; they hold the male gaze up to ridicule, and they manage to do that among all the most blatant clichés of eroticism. How *FIEBRE* manages to talk about female solidarity, body positivity, sexualisation and many other burning issues in such a bizarre setting is quite a mystery: it doesn't want to impress, and you may be sceptical at first, but unnoticed it gets under your skin. At least that's how it worked for me. And it must have worked in one way or another for the jury of the Young Choreographers' Award as well, as this was the production that won the prize at the end of the festival.



FIEBRE, by Tamara Alegre, Lydia Östberg Diakité, Nunu Flashdem, Marie Ursin, Célia Lutangu. Winner of the [8:tension] Young Choreographers' Series. Photo © Nelly Rodriguez

Left: Ruth Childs' *fantasia* Photo © Marie Magnin

Former [8:tension] participant, now international contemporary dance star **Akram Khan** has been a regular guest at ImPulsTanz from the beginning of his career. This time he came with *Outwitting the Devil*, a piece inspired by a story from the ancient Sumerian epic, Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh makes friends with the wild man Enkidu, and together they travel to the Cedar Forest, which is home to many animals and spirits. Gilgamesh decides to destroy the forest and kill its guardian, Humbaba, in order to establish his own fame. But the destruction angers the gods, and they punish Gilgamesh by taking the life of Enkidu.

Outwitting the Devil wears some of Khan's trademarks – strong and charismatic performers and enthralling choreography – but it disappoints in many respects compared to his best works. The storytelling is languid and confusing, and since the dramaturgy and the role of the characters are unclear, it doesn't make sense why there's an Indian woman dancing – beautifully but pointlessly – a completely different style from everyone else. After Khan's *Giselle*, Vincenzo Lamagna's music once again feels like a Hollywood score in its scale, often replacing dramaturgy and choreography in expressing emotions – and very much overdoing it on the way. This time, Tom Scutt's set design – its most important element being a black tomb-like wooden box – doesn't find its right place in the piece either: it feels more like a visual nuisance on the underlit, oversmoked stage than something with actual meaning.

ImPulsTanz closed with a double bill by one of Austria's most important contemporary dance companies, Liquid Loft. Choreographer **Chris Haring**'s *Still* and *Stranger Than Paradise* are complementary pieces (the first a live performance, the second a film) that belong to the few creations at the festival that are already products of the pandemic period.

Although the movie came first (it premiered during lockdown, in January 2021), it is *Still* that kicks off this live event. The nine dancers constantly walk in and out of the stage, while they perform short choreographies or movement sequences often reminiscent of different animals. They change costumes all the time, at first offstage, later onstage as well, as the pool of clothes gradually starts growing there. Identities shift, they become interchangeable, just like costumes. The lines between animal and human, man and woman, human and machine blur. The creatures all act individually to the rhythm of the mechanical music, but with time they form a kind of group that moves together, as often happens with herds of animals.

A screen slowly comes down mid-action, and the live show gives space to the film *Stranger Than Paradise*. Cinema has long played an important role in Liquid Loft's work, and this time they reference Jim Jarmusch's movie of the same title. *Still*'s costumes and emblematic movements reappear, but the identities are further reinterpreted here with the help of concave mirrors that distort already familiar faces and bodies. Mirrors have been common metaphors in art history for centuries (Liquid Loft's programme notes mention Lewis Carroll's Alice and Jean Cocteau's death-yearning poet), and although Chris Haring's take on the subject doesn't offer any groundbreaking revelations, it is still an intimate, yet somewhat unsettling experience to watch the dancers face their distorted selves and reflect on them.

The whole double bill represents another kind of identity shift as well: the double life of dance performances on screen and live, brought forward by the pandemic. It's not just a simple case of turning an existing show into a film, as we have seen so often now: *Still* and *Stranger Than Paradise* have a lot in common, but they both use their respective medium's strengths to emphasise different aspects of the same topic.



No matter how much time you spend at ImPulsTanz, with its incredibly rich programme of workshops, performances, lectures, residencies, education projects and parties spreading across four weeks, you can only scratch the surface. As we know: every cloud has a silver lining, and that is true of this festival as well. Last year's official programme may have been cancelled, but as a sort of substitute, a new format was born: Public Moves offered free, open-air dance workshops for everyone at several locations around the city. And although Arsenal's wonderful workshop spaces filled up again this year with dancers from beginners to professionals, Public Moves stayed on the programme as well, reaching about 20,000 participants in almost 200 classes, and skyrocketing the total number of festival visitors above 100,000. The pretty cool community of dance lovers is growing. •



Chris Haring's film *Stranger than Paradise*. Photo © Liquid Loft

The Dan Daw Show



BDSM and dance share a lot. Both work with the body but demand an engaged mind; both seek, keep and transcend limits. Both, to outsiders, are charged with an alarming (perhaps incomprehensible) intensity. Both can be a lot of fun. In *The Dan Daw Show*, it is more than fun: it is joy.

Choreographer and performer Dan Daw takes every aspect one step further. As a disabled performer who self-describes as Crip, he reimagines the spectator/performer relationship by setting up the show as carefully as a kink scene. Before he begins, he offers us trigger warnings, safe words, hard limits, and the opportunity to leave, with no judgement.

The performance alternates between scripted acts of negotiation and after-care (all subtitled) between Daw and Christopher Owen, and raw, danger-seamed duets which evoke the energy of kink without feeling explicit or sordid. Owen handles Daw with tough, tender control; he hurls Daw's body against his own, rolls with him leg-over-leg across the stage, feverishly thrashes Daw's arm, or whirls him around like a pebble in a slingshot.

Most vivid and powerful are scenes which seamlessly bleed considerations of disability, voyeurism and kink. In one, Owen instructs Daw to get on his hands and knees on a padded table, then films his face, body and the inside of his mouth with a smartphone. In another, Daw crawls into a man-sized 'vac cube' with latex walls, from which the air can be suctioned and the body encased and displayed. 'It feels like a lovely, expensive, taxpayer-funded hug,' says Daw.

That's the other important thing. Daw is funny, and every scene of blistering emotional force is followed up by an often very humorous conversation – after-care for a nervous audience. We are in silent thrall to these visceral scenes, hearts hammering; we sit stunned and moved afterwards, and are tenderly soothed in each conversational interlude. Daw joyfully demonstrates that his body is beloved, audacious, sexual and disabled – not *but*, but *and*.

The bottom line: Thrill without prurience, shock without schlock: a love letter to loving.

Ka Bradley
06 October 2021

A Crip kink dance shows the linkage of liberation and constraint, the leashed and the unleashed – physically, erotically, socially, emotionally

London, UK

Christopher Owen and Dan Daw
Photo © Liz Counsell

Artistic director: Dan Daw / Performers: Dan Daw, Christopher Owen / Director: Mark Maughan / Assistant director: Thyrza Abrahams / Movement director: Sarah Blanc / Designer: Emma Bailey / Lighting: Nao Nagai / Composition & sound: Guy Connelly / Dramaturg: Brian Lobel / Artistic peer support: Dr Kate Marsh Production & stage manager: Froud / Executive producer: Phil Hargreaves / Producer: Liz Counsell / Touring access assistant: Zed Lightheart / Touring technician: Helen Mugridge



Czech Dance Platform 2021

Lena Megyeri
04 November 2021

Lena Megyeri at the bumper edition of Tanec Praha's Czech Dance Platform

Prague, Czech Republic

Johana Pocková and Sabina Bočková: *The Lions Den*
Photo © Vojtěch Brtnický

The Czech capital is full of theatres – at least that was my feeling while walking the streets of Prague and bumping into a *divadlo* (theatre) at every corner. But contemporary dance has always been attracted to more unusual spaces, so during the four days of Czech Dance Platform audiences saw performances in a former military site and a swimming pool-turned-club, among many other fabulous venues.

Tanec Praha have been supporting contemporary dance in the Czech Republic for more than 30 years. One of their most important events is the annual Czech Dance Platform, a selection of about ten of the most interesting local contemporary dance works from the previous year. The festival is visited mostly by an international professional audience, and the organisers are rightly proud of the accompanying programme that includes discussions, artist talks, an award ceremony, and this year a review-writing workshop as well, in partnership with Springback Academy. Due to the pandemic, the platform was postponed from spring to autumn 2021 and presented 14 shows during an intense four-day period at the end of September.

Thinking back, the first thing that comes to mind is how many shows tackled dark and serious topics, such as illness and grief. Still often considered taboo in western society, these can be risky material for artistic works too. The realisations are accordingly mixed. There's *Tumor: Carcinogenic Romance*, by the artistic group named T.I.T.S. and performed by Nela H. Konetová and Jaro Viňarský, which aims to rethink our relationship with cancer but trades focus and depth for eccentricity and a long burst of ideas. There's *Effugio Volume 2* by the young crew of Dočasná Company z.s., that deals with self-loathing and self-harm, and operates with easy-to-decipher symbols

After so many serious issues a little fun is a welcome change

and a lot of angry, urgent or even violent dancing while the performers lead us from room to room in one of Studio Alta's unique spaces. Although often banal, the piece still touched me with its naivety and youthfully idealistic ending. And then there's *Separated* by **Markéta Vacovská**, who won the professional jury's award for outstanding creation and performance of this piece.

Separated is Vacovská's reflection on the loss of two of her three sons to a rare genetic disease, and as she points out in her video interview with Springback writer Emily May, it was motivated less by the therapeutic effect of talking about trauma than by the need to share it with fellow sufferers. I can imagine that those who have been affected by similar losses can indeed easily connect with the piece. But the really tricky thing – both in life and on stage – is to engage the outsider. People often feel uncomfortable or embarrassed around someone who is grieving, as they don't know what is expected or needed from them, or how best to communicate.



This is reflected in a segment of *Separated*, where Vacovská recalls unwanted advice from friends and family on how to deal with her grief. We understand the problem but Vacovská's alternative is also ambiguous. With a theatrical gesture she writes the words 'touch my wounds' on her forearm and walks into the audience. It sounds and feels more like an order than a request, and indeed, rather than letting the audience decide whether to touch her, it is she who touches and hugs some of the spectators. Many people aren't comfortable with getting involved in a performance, especially in such a physical way, and the delicate nature of the show's topic makes this move even more dubious. I feel that Vacovská alienates at least as many people as she wins over.

Vacovská's performance award is also a nod to her participation in another piece: **Spitfire Company**'s *Constellations III. My Son Looking to the Sun*, choreographed and performed by Vacovská and Miřenka Čehová, with live music by Sára Vondrášková. Although there's no doubt that Vacovská is a memorable performer, *Constellations III* is no less alienating than *Separated*, even if in a very different way. It starts like a post-show talk about a performance we have not seen, and later turns into raging absurdity, posing as experimental and brave but offering not much more than overused clichés.

After so many serious issues a little fun is a welcome change, which is what



Above: Pavel Štourač's *Hic Sunt Dracones*
Photo © Vojtěch Brtnický

Left: Florent Golfier and robot in Ondřej Holba's *And Who Is Useless Now?*
Photo © Vojtěch Brtnický

choreographer **Ondřej Holba**'s *And Who Is Useless Now?* offers. Although on second thought, the question of whether we still need human artists in the age of artificial intelligence is no funny business: I'm writing this article a few days after Beethoven's 10th symphony was 'completed' by AI, so Holba's piece is more than timely. Performer Florent Golfier is partnered by four small toy-shaped robots, and an AI personified by a pleasant but cold female voice. At one point 'she' proudly introduces a musical piece that was composed by 'her' in the style of Bach, while one of the robots performs a choreography, also created by the AI. As the AI tries to prove 'herself' equal to humans, Golfier gets increasingly frustrated by the robots and doubts his own necessity on stage. Luckily, he's such an engaging and witty performer that while he cites risk and common energy among other things that he is able to evoke and robots are not, he leaves us with no doubts regarding the advantages of a human artist at all. But what would famously grumpy Beethoven say about the 10th symphony?

Contemporary dance has many faces and forms, and while it's often ground-breaking or rebellious, it comes with more traditional approaches as well – represented at CDP mostly by **Michal Záhora**'s two pieces, *Generation X* and *The End's Turnabout*. The former, a solo performed by Helena Arenbergerová, is a look into the last 40 years of Czech history; the latter, a group piece, is a contemplation on Europe's future. Both have a lot of expressive and pretty dancing (at times perhaps a little too expressive and too pretty) but lack truly challenging ideas and thoughts and could do with clearer dramaturgy as well.

Pavel Štourač's *Hic Sunt Dracones* is intentionally old-fashioned, and doesn't hide it: the costumes, props and sets look like they've been found in some old theatre basement. Combining methods of physical theatre, dance, puppetry and object animation, the piece plays with the limits of the human body. Through optical illusions, bodies are deformed: limbs leave torsos and multiply themselves, caftans run around headless.

The title – 'here be dragons' – refers to ancient cartographers' belief in monsters living in the then unknown territories of the Earth – but here the unknown territory is the female soul. The witchlike whirlwind of the four women on stage make it feel like there's much more than just four of them. This is an ancient-like tale of girlpower by a seasoned creator.

Red and white barrier tapes became a symbol of resistance in Hungary for a few weeks last year when students of the University of Theatre and Film Arts protested against a new law and the threat to the institution's autonomy from central government. Tapes also hung from many windows around Budapest as a sign of solidarity. Barrier tapes are important in **Eliška Brtnická**'s outdoor piece *Hang Out* as well. They have a symbolic meaning: the performer is first taped to the walls of DOX+ performance venue, but then she asks some of the spectators to cut the tapes so that we can enter an imaginary forbidden territory with her. But the remnants of the tapes that hang from her clothes have a practical function too: as Brtnická climbs up to several high parts of the building, the flashes of red and white help us follow her route. Being a trained contemporary circus artist, whose speciality is aerial trapeze, she mostly moves on ladders and railings while she guides us to different parts of the site. All the while we wear headphones and listen to circus performers' childhood memories of outdoor adventures, some of them hazardous. Brtnická confronts us with how safety takes the place of exploration in our lives as we grow older and as the world becomes more and more unsafe. And while we listen, she realises common dreams of entering forbidden places and defying gravity.

Another, but very different female solo is **Cécile Da Costa**'s *Roselyne*, a piece that was also selected for the Aerowaves Twenty21. Although according to Da Costa, Roselyne's character is based on a real-life person, she also reminds me of the many neurotic heroines of recent literature. Most of all, she reminds me of Gail Honeyman's Eleanor Oliphant, who is, by her own account, 'completely fine', but very obviously she's not. And neither is Roselyne. Firstly, she hides from us: by keeping a plant in front of her face, by seeking shelter behind her neat white couch, or by covering her eyes with her arm – like a child who thinks that if they can't see the world, the world can't see them either. Secondly, she repeats fragments of sentences that imply a lot but tell little. 'I feel guilty, but I can't remember why' is one that comes up frequently. Her speech is compulsive, but her actions are even more so: she constantly adjusts her outfit (decent dress and heels) and moves to the strange rhythm of her own voice. She is unable to face us or connect to the outside world. But just as for Eleanor Oliphant, with time a gradual opening up also takes place for Roselyne – the tension and obsession of her movement releases, and she's finally able to literally and figuratively open her eyes and face the outside world. It's a shame that this second part of the piece becomes a bit sentimental.

OCD behaviour is also present in **Jana Stárková**, **Lukas Blaha** and **Ondřej Menoušek**'s *Lavabo*, a show that turns everyday rituals of hygiene and cleaning into stunts. Performed by Blaha, the piece aims to eliminate showiness from contemporary circus and present its possibilities in the most everyday of settings. Every simple action becomes a game for Blaha, and at the same time everything feels to have a stake as well. After mopping the floor, he spills the dirty water into bowls that

> **Red and white barrier tapes became a symbol of resistance in Hungary**

Eliška Brtnická in *Hang Out*, at the DOX+ performance venue
Photo © Vojtěch Brtnický

he balances on his forehead; later he juggles with the bowls. At other times he plays with towels or climbs the tiled walls of the former swimming pool where the performance takes place. Although the circus stunts don't feel showy, the piece still falls into the trap of self-indulgence at times.

And if we're tired of solos, then there's *Duets* by **Tereza Ondrová**, **Petra Tejnorová** and their group, Temporary Collective. After Ondrová's short introduction, she invites someone on stage to complete a small task with her. At first we think it's now our turn to become performers, but soon it turns out that there are moles among us: pre-selected civilians who are waiting to perform – in pairs – the little tasks that await them. These include looking into each other's eyes 'until the moment is complete', exploring each other's faces with their hands, singing a favourite song into a chosen body part of the other person, and dancing together to a party song. Since the concept is not really new, I'm sure that *Duets* remind many people of many past experiences (team-building games, for example), whether as spectators or participants. In my role of spectator, I was mostly reminded of Jerôme Bel's many shows including civilians and disabled persons, and even more of Marina Abramović's legendary 2010 performance *The Artist Is Present*. But while in Abramović's case, each meeting and each connection was spontaneous, new, and therefore full of possibilities and uncertainties, Temporary Collective's performers are trained and their actions rehearsed, and this is where the magic gets lost for me. Here, our position as spectator is not challenged, the frame of the game doesn't contain any risks, and the concept becomes increasingly tiresome.





Johana Pocková, Sabina Bočková and Inga Zotova-Mikshin, *Treatment of Remembering*
Photo © Vojtěch Brtnický

Two of the most unambiguously liked pieces of the festival were created by the same pair of artists: **Johana Pocková** and **Sabina Bočková** of Pocketart. Their success proves to me that audiences are still not tired of clever, thoughtful and well-structured pieces – and it doesn't hurt if there's a bit of quality dance involved either. And while the appreciation is official in the case of *Treatment of Remembering* (it won both the jury award and the audience award), I can only cite the excitement of my fellow spectators in the case of *The Lion's Den* to prove its popularity. The show, also selected for Aerowaves Twenty21, draws on popular formats of the entertainment industry and mass media, such as commercials, TV shows and political speeches as a starting point for its movement material. Sporting masculine suits and hairstyles, standing at two sides of the stage and facing the audience, the dancers start with a choreography that is loaded with prompting movements. Every move is calculated and precise, even the facial expressions of the two performers are in perfect unison. Later they breathe and sing into megaphones and then perform a witty duet where they are tangled up to the point where they look like Siamese twins. They finish with a slow-motion scene full of pathos: no emotion, no gesture is sincere here, everything is meant for effect – just like on our various screens.

Treatment of Remembering (created by **Inga Zotova-Mikshina** alongside Pocková and Bočková) is sometimes performed outside in nature, but this time we experienced it in Tanec Praha's dance venue and CDP's festival centre, Ponec. According to the concept, the three performers undergo the 'treatment of remembering' procedure with the audience at a time when nature, consumed by humanity, no longer exists. The show starts with a peaceful picture of the three performers resting on a giant white sofa, and it continues in equally calming manner: they move around in a slow flow, to a meditative score that often recalls nature. The bright but pleasant colours of the lights strengthen the feeling that we are somewhere outside time and space. Later, spoken text gives us and the performers some instructions that resemble visualisation exercises or meditative practices, the most important being 'imagine yourself breathing'. Although it suggests a dystopic world, *Treatment of Remembering* is not unsettling; rather, it has a dreamlike, foggy quality – just like memories often do. As the closing piece of the festival, it was the perfect way to end this marathon-like Czech dance adventure. •

Silvia Gribaudi: Monjour

Oonagh Duckworth
17 November 2021

A troupe of men with hands for fig-leaves are 'just for you' in a performance that is both bittersweet and perplexing

Brussels, Belgium

Created & performed by: Silvia Gribaudi, Salvatore Cappello, Nicola Simone Cisternino, Riccardo Guratti, Fabio Magnani Timothée-Aïna Meiffren / Design & graphics: Francesca Ghermandi / Dramaturgical advice: Matteo Maffesanti / Lighting & technical direction: Leonardo Benetollo / Music: Nicola Ratti / Production: Zebra / Co-production: Torinodanza Festival/Teatro Stabile di Torino – Teatro Nazionale, Teatro Stabile del Veneto Carlo Goldoni, Les Halles de Schaerbeek (Brussels)

Monjour (My Day) reads the insignia on the back of the cyclorama as we enter the theatre. My day for what? is the unsettling question it begs. 'Breathe in, breath out', whispers a voice with a pronounced Italian accent. It is choreographer Silvia Gribaudi, in the front row of the auditorium with a microphone. Part MC, part benevolent rehearsal director, she's reassuring us: 'It's for you.'

Next arrives a tall, whippet-thin dancer, nude except for unsexy socks and trainers, cupping his hands over his crotch like a five-fingered fig leaf. He stands in front of the cyclo: a Saint Sebastian, the protector from the plague, about to targeted with arrows – or the opening act of a nude cabaret? One by one, four other equally unclad men join him. Of assorted body shapes, from compact to chubby, all are deft in the sleight-of-hand of never allowing their fleshy fig leaves to slip, despite their ever more energetic choreography. This jovial, bare-bottomed troupe is 'just for you', the soft voice reminds us.



Photo © Andrea Macchia
Courtesy Torinodanza Festival – Teatro Stabile di Torino,Teatro Nazionale

The men don boxer shorts or, in the case of the most balletic and bouncy dancer, a lurex short-suit, and vignettes of varying virtuosity ensue: acrobatics, break-dance, capoeira-like duos and, in one instance, a shower of red noses thrown at a performer who juggles them ineptly, allowing them to tumble around him over the stage. It's an image that at last resonates with the polka-dot graphics and outlandishly distorted circus figures, drawn by cartoonist Francesca Ghermandi, that have been sporadically spooling across the backdrop since the start of the show.

Towards the end, Gribaudi joins the men on stage and together they perform a protracted révérence, their bowed heads nudging the audience to continue clapping. Although endearing and jocular, the *faux fin* seems to point the responsibility for the stuttering nature of this neither fish nor fowl performance at us, the audience, and our reactions, or lack of them. We're all in it together, it seems to say. But it lost me somewhere along the way.

The bottom line: A bittersweet, tragicomic perfromance that leaves a perplexing sense that our own lack of engagement is the source of its fragility

Mette Ingvartsen: The Dancing Public

Yasen Vasilev
29 November 2021

Can a theatre event infect a public body with movement?

Kaaitheater, Brussels, Belgium

Photo © Hans Meijer



Concept & performance: Mette Ingvartsen / Lighting design: Minna Tiikkainen / Set design: Mette Ingvartsen & Minna Tiikkainen / Musical arrangements: Mette Ingvartsen & Anne van de Star / Costumes: Jennifer Defays / Dramaturgy: Bojana Cvejić / Technical direction: Hans Meijer / Sound technician: Anne van de Star / Company management: Ruth Collier / Production & administration: Joey Ng / Music: Affkt feat. Sutja Gutierrez, Scanner, Radio Boy, LCC, VII Circle, Kangding Ray, Paula Temple, Ron Morelli, Valanx, Anne van de Star

Mette Ingvartsen's new solo *The Dancing Public* is, as the title suggests, also a kind of collective party. It deals with our return to 'normality', and the way bodies gather together today. With Covid-safe tickets, ear plugs and mostly without masks, the audience at Brussels' Kaaitheater enters an empty space that looks like a nightclub rather than a theatre – seats removed, three platforms in the corners of the room, strobe lights and pumping electronic music with infectious beats. Ingvartsen and her tech team are on their feet at the door, slowly moving to the beat, watching us enter.

Form and content come from the 'dancing plagues' of medieval Europe – rare events of infectious movement excess where a person would inexplicably start dancing all of a sudden, continuing until exhaustion, or even death. Others would follow uncontrollably, thus posing a threat to public order. Ingvartsen uses rhythmic spoken word, pop-style singing and quasi-religious chants to guide us discursively through this history of excessive dance and contamination – and does it in a both fun and creepy way: 'Tonight we'll be dancing, my hair will be dancing, your hot blood will be dancing.'

She moves with and among the audience, and occasionally takes the stage on one of the three platforms with convulsive movements, exploring figures of madness or possession. She's laughing, sticking out her tongue, barking and running on all fours, but all with an ironic detachment that makes the performance constantly switch between horror and joke.

The pandemic being far from over, the anxiety of proximity can still be felt in the air. Ingvartsen, though, navigates consent and personal boundaries really well, never crossing a limit while remaining open for potential interactions. When the choreography ends, the dance is spilled into the spectators, freed from their obligation to perform 'the audience'.

For all that, this show about excess feels sleek, controlled and professional. Perhaps it is less transgressive than it looks.

The bottom line: A medieval dancing plague is the inspiration for a controlled contemporary experiment

Riikka Laakso
Anna Kozonina
Yasen Vasilev
Greta Pieropan
07 December 2021

CODA collection

Four dances from Norway

Four responses to four works at CODA Oslo International Dance Festival 2021

Each year, Springback Academy graduates have the opportunity to attend a live meeting at a dance festival. This year it was the first weekend of the CODA Oslo International Dance Festival, where we also participated in a workshop on collective writing by the Norwegian Performing Criticism Globally project.

It turns out that collective writing is… pretty complicated! Joint agreement on final words is slow, difficult, and often impractical. On the other hand, we found we could easily expand the idea of collective writing to include texts which have an editor as well as an author; have more than one author; are collections of writing rather than collectively written; or which cite, or even are influenced by, other people's words. (The bottom line: language itself is collective, not authored.)

Never mind how it's written, though, it's also important to ask: how is it read? After all, the unity of a text lies not in its origin – the writer – but in its destination. That is: in you, the reader.

With that in mind, overleaf you'll find a collection of four texts on four CODA performances, written separately by four authors (with one common editor: me). Together they form a necessarily partial view of the range of performances on offer, from a range of viewpoints. Such is dance writing; read them as you will.

Sanjoy Roy



Mia Habib: *How to Die, Inopiné*
Photo © Tale Hendnes/
Dansens Hus

Sensorial affects

Mia Habib: *How to Die, Inopiné*

As we enter the room – a shared space with a group of performers that includes the light and sound technicians – what first seems like random wandering quickly turns out to be the undoing of a construction. Made of half-dead branches, dirty ropes, abandoned pallets and coloured pieces of fabric, this installation of worthless materials is spread around the space just before a rave starts. Blue and red flashing lights frame the trembling and shaking bodies that celebrate this desperate party: flesh moving to a violent beat. They sweat, we watch them sweating, the room heats up.



Mia Habib's *How to Die, Inopiné* is based on distinct textures of action and energy, their sensorial affects accumulating in our bodies. After violent action, silence – when it comes – takes a long time to land. Finally, our cells calm down, and the space reveals a landscape where human bodies lie around next to wooden ones, an arm and a branch rest together. The protagonism shifts between human and non-human subjects when the eye translates a landscape of deforestation into a scene of massacre.

Then the movement continues: reassembling the ropes and wood, rediscovering the space with new constructions, simultaneously building and tearing down. The cyclical action that choreographer Mia Habib seems to suggest is a Sisyphean task, and the impossibility of its resolution becomes obvious.

The installation grows from the centre of the room into the audience, branches and fabrics becoming ties between audience members and between performer and spectator. For a moment of beauty, we are all part of the same construction, a shared constellation.

As the first part of the performance vanishes, we are then invited outside the theatre. Around bonfires, the performers recount personal stories of colonialism, rhizomatic organisms or genocide to propose paths connected to the excessive earlier action. Suddenly, over a cup of hot chocolate, still fragile after the energetic impact of the performance, a sense of injustice invades my body; one insignificant part of an all-encompassing organism.

Riikka Laakso

Left: Mia Habib's *How to Die, Inopiné*
Photo © Tale Hendnes/Dansens Hus

Right: Roza Moshtaghi, *Limbo*
Photo © Lars Opstad

Ornaments of the present

Roza Moshtaghi: *Limbo*

When the audience enters the 'Limbo' – a space filled with a lingering, disturbing electronic sound, hinting at today's ubiquitous rave aesthetics, a space framed by typographic light decorations composed of sentence fragments – four performers are already waiting for them. Dressed like saucy nightclub patrons, their slim, almost androgynous bodies wrapped in a second skin (thin mesh suits covered with tattoo drawings), they half-sit on the stage, indifferently looking around and displaying themselves, slowly changing poses. One dancer holds a melting ice cream of bright green in her hand, creating an image of cold, unnatural exposure.

This might be an iconic image of how contemporary dance settings and bodies look today on major western stages. So it's surprising to find out that the piece owes a lot to *Naghali*, an ancient Persian tradition of storytelling where a narrator performs in front of a large painted canvas telling epic stories, juggling with characters and plots, always making new narratives out of the same unchanging pictures. Thus in *Limbo*, Oslo-based choreographer with Iranian roots Roza Moshtaghi intricately plays with the intertwined codes of her ancestral culture and dominant western aesthetics.

Performances created in a similar style (here we can recall Anne Imhof, Young Boy Dancing Group, partially, and he work *How to Die* by Mia Habib also shown at the CODA festival) rarely work in detail with movement. As a rule, they focus on ritualism, the intensity of the presence of bodies, and the general atmosphere (smoke machine, strobe light – well, you know it!). It is all the more remarkable that *Limbo* is a surprisingly well-developed piece in terms of the movement language. It seems to be based on several simple and spectacular principles: the search for the intensity of expression in a very rigidly defined framework; repetition and the game of small deviations from the dominant movement patterns; momentum, flight, and animal softness inside a mechanised corset of externally imposed kinetic boundaries. The determined quality of movement or its trajectory is constantly suspended (which is reflected in the title): they hang between two opposites. That's probably why for some of the viewers this abstract work paints pictures of the posthumanist world – not really human, not really machine-like.

Formally, *Limbo* is a series of alternating dance ornaments. Rhythm, mirroring, repeatability are developed within kinetic situations resembling a march (marching lying down and half-sitting is a great find!), the dance of a multi-armed Asian god, or the movement of an unknown beast. However, like any ornament, the choreography here strives to abstract concrete forms, immersing the viewers in their own interpretations.



> **Animal softness inside a mechanised corset of kinetic boundaries**

In this regard, *Limbo* is almost like a modernist work that, being inspired by an eastern cultural tradition, focuses on formal aspects of dancing and repetition, thus emancipating the audience's imagination.

On the other hand, it stands away from the 'neutrality' of western minimalist dance of the mid-twentieth century, filling the space with signs that actively associate it with the spirit of our time. This is done with the help of the visuals by Ronak Moshtaghi and the groovy, catchy sound by Josefin Jussi Andersson, whose merit in this work should not be understated. It is the visual style, the bodies' constitution, the costumes, the music, the atmosphere that turn *Limbo* so up-to-date and make us recall the anxieties of the current moment: gender issues, other-than-human worlds, affective economics, cold self-exposure in the media, infantilism, and, as the recurring song in the performance says, all today's regrets.

Anna Kozonina



Poetry of dystopia

Geir Hytten: *Grief Will Be Our Companion*

Grief Will Be Our Companion borrows its title from a chapter in Lesley Head's book *Hope and Grief in the Anthropocene*, which explores the loss of future, the sense of doom and the encompassing anxiety taking over the affluent west because of climate change. Its striking opening image – Geir Hytten and Jakob Ingram-Dodd, silently wandering around the black box stage with transparent nylon backpacks full of grass and soil – is both dystopian and poetic. The only noise is the sound of water in the rubber boots one of them wears; the only object, an oversized black pillow – a Chekhov's gun that will fire at the end of the



Geir Hytten and Jakob Ingram-Dodd in *Grief Will Be Our Companion*
Photo © Lars Opstad

piece. The performers face the audience, each other and the space in a series of minimal repetitive movements that seem fragile and powerless to stop the inevitable. The claustrophobic feeling is supported by a sound designer, hidden in the corner of the stage near the exit, whose presence slowly becomes audibly and visually prominent.

For me the backpacks suggest oxygen tanks running out. By the end of the piece we see looming shadows on the wall, wet footsteps slowly disappearing on the dance floor, smoke and fog coming towards the audience, a blackout as aggressive industrial noises and low frequencies take over the pitch-black theatre space, sounds of incoming water created with the black pillow and compulsive inhalations. All these have become parts of a choreography from the end of the world that slowly yet inexorably tightens its grip.

Yasen Vasilev

Circling traditions

Kartellet: *Danse staur, Danse staur*

Three women and a man enter the stage, hand in hand, in couples. They walk past the audience, who are sitting in a circle, carefully looking at everyone's faces before getting to their places: two women, who we guess are the musicians, behind the audience; the other two, the dancers, next to the audience inside the circle, facing each other.

Another male-female couple will soon inhabit the centre. Dressed in black, like the others, they are linked by one long sleeve of their jackets. They can't get away from each other, though they keep trying. They start moving in a circle – the shape that will accompany the whole performance: dancing around one another, spinning together, inviting the other dancers in a bigger circle or trying to form other couples.

There's a lot of struggling and heavy breathing, fighting and finding harmony in *Danse staur, Danse staur*, by the company Kartellet. It is inspired by a traditional practice called 'dancing stag' or 'to stag', where men dance with men, and women with women. It's the first time Kartellet have involved female performers, and they challenge themselves to not install either norm of opposite-gender couples or the tradition of same-gender couples, and instead choose to be playful with audience expectations. The leading role in the couple is often exchanged; the longing for the two women (or the two men) to dance with each other is often disrupted by the urge of an excluded dancer to bring them back to the original couples. Mastering a specific technique for turning, each dancer competes to be the fastest, to find new virtuosities, to catch the attention of another partner, to be noisy and bold, rewriting the rules of what seems to be a courtship in times of fluidity.

In the playfulness of breathtaking dance, the game of love is painful and relieving, freeing or imprisoning. Just as with couples dancing in jackets with a shared sleeve, it all depends on how one can embrace the struggle and transform it into a creative act.

Greta Pieropan

Lia Rodrigues, body and soul

Charles A. Catherine
28 December 2021

Based in a Rio favela and fêted in Paris, Lia Rodrigues brings different yet connected works to the Festival d'Automne

Paris, France

Nororoca
Choreography: Lia Rodrigues / Assistant; Amália Lima / With dancers from Carte Blanche: Adrian Bartczak, Aslak Aune Nygård, Caroline Eckly, Daniel Mariblanca, Dawid Lorenc, Guro Rimeslåtten, Irene Vesterhus Theisen, Karen Lynne Bjerknesli, Mathias Stoltenberg, Noam Eidelman Shatil, Ole Martin Meland, Sebastian Biong, Tilly Sordat, Timothy Bartlett / Lighting: Nicolas Boudier / Production: Carte Blanche / Support: Fondation d'entreprise Hermès / Partnership: France Culture

Encantado
Creation: Lia Rodrigues / Danced and devised in direct collaboration with: Leonardo Nunes, Carolina Repetto, Valentina Fittipaldi, Andrey Da Silva, Larissa Lima, Ricardo Xavier, Joana Lima, David Abreu, Matheus Macena, Tiago Oliveira, Raquel Alexandre / Creative assistant: Amalia Lima / Dramaturgy: Silvia Soter / Artistic collaboration and images: Sammi Landweer / Lighting design: Nicolas Boudier / Light production: Baptistine Méral, Magali Foubert / Sound editor & mix: Alexandre Seabra / Production and diffusion: Colette de Turville / Assisted by: Astrid Toledo / Administration: Jacques Segueilla / Production (Brazil): Gabi Gonçalves/Corpo Rastreado



Some would say she's the head of the Brazilian dance scene. In Paris, where she has been celebrated for almost thirty years – as she danced in Maguy Marin's *May B* (1981) – she has definitely earned her stripes. Born and raised in São Paulo, Lia Rodrigues lived and worked in Paris during the 1980s before returning to Brazil to create her company. In 2004, she moved it to the Favela da Maré, in Rio de Janeiro, where she developed a strong educational and artistic programme for the locals, culminating in the creation of the Escola Livre de Danças da Maré in 2011. In the meantime, Paris fell in love with her work and began to cover her with honours and offers, from making her Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres (2005) to producing her works and associating her with Chaillot, Théâtre National de la Danse and Le CENTQUATRE (from 2017).

This year, the renowned Festival d'Automne granted her a 'portrait': a focus on her whole career. For the audience, it was an occasion to (re)discover her artistic and educational works, as well as the Brazilian artists she had invited as a constellation of dance spirits around her. And she knows a lot about spirits.

Among the works presented during the portrait, *Nororoca* and her newest creation *Encantado* revealed the powerful and inspiring nature of Rodrigues' choreographic composition structure. No scenery, no sophisticated light games, no overwhelming music, just bodies of all kinds, stage props and the ancestral energy of dance.

Nororoca is an 'augmented' version of *Pororoca* (2009), reworked for the dancers of the Norwegian company Carte Blanche. The *pororoca* is the name given to the clash between Amazon freshwater and Atlantic seawater: when the tide rises, it pushes back the river in a gigantic never-ending wave with a deafening growl. Perfect metaphor for an elemental encounter between dancers; furthermore between the Brazil-rooted piece and the European company. At first, fourteen dancers noisily enter the stage, arms full of junk – tables and cables, rags and bags – that they drop all around. During an hour, the energy never stops, as the dancers express all the mess they have inside, leaving technique aside to focus on lines, waves, jumps, screams and intensity. Is it a riot, a carnival, a ritual, a game? Are they even human, or are they just moving atoms? The joyful and grinning figures gather and hug, run and flee, oppose

and compose. You have to spot a *pointé* or a mastered lift to remember you're watching dancers. Here is Rodrigues' signature: formal radicality and physical displays grasping your attention.

Made for her own company in Brazil, *Encantado* – literally 'enchanted' – alludes to Brazilian magical beings, energies running in nature to turn rocks, forests and rivers into sacred places. At first, in silence and in the dark, the eleven dancers slowly unroll a stage-wide carpet made of dozens of rectangles of fabric disposed the ones on the others. They leave, and as light rises, return one by one, naked, simply walking. As they reach the fabric, they seize it, crawl underneath, roll around in it... Here come the spirits. With all these flowered blankets, zebra sheets and deep red shawls, they cover themselves, creating icons, silhouettes, monsters and animals, like a child could draw them, like a genius could design them. We forget we're facing dancers in clothes: we're now in an enchanted meadow, watching an annual gathering of supernatural essences.

The piece sometimes plays with mainstream culture, portraying a fashion runway for example, or mocking the machinations of human power. Made of random fabrics, the carnivalesque performance also invokes the favela, its ability to do so much with so little, as well as the indigenous peoples of Brazil, their animism and intense ceremonies. The music is actually made of excerpts of songs of the Guarani people, played during the August 2021 protests in Brasília to recognise their endangered ancestral territories. Beautiful, inspired, significant, *Encantado* is the perfect example of Lia Rodrigues' talent to remind us of the pure beauty of natural connections, against artificiality.



Above: *Encantado* by Lia Rodrigues Companhia de Danças
Photo © Sammi Landweer

Opposite left: Norway's Carte Blanche company in Lia Rodrigues' Nororoca
Photo © Yaniv Cohen

Nororoca and *Encantado* are two sides of one political message: just as the collision of natural forces produce elemental phenomena, we have to care about our inner natural poetry. Furthermore, Rodrigues invites bodies of (almost) all kinds – of all ages, colours and shapes – on stage, as a celebration of everyone, all together, as marvellous individuals making a fantastic community. That's what we need after all we've been through.

The bottom line: Elemental forces, natural phenomena and the human form are charged with spirit in the work of Lia Rodrigues

Moving in November Helsinki
Pasts, pleasures, projections





Anna Kozonina
14 February 2022

A selection and a reflection from Helsinki's long-standing international festival

Helsinki, Finland

Mikko Niemistö's *Astral Projections*.
Photo © Anna Autio

As the latest lockdown in Helsinki pushed curators to cancel Zodiak's Side Step Festival and postpone the much-awaited Ice Hot Nordic Dance platform, Anna Kozonina recalls Moving in November 2021, Helsinki's long-established annual international dance festival which featured eight performances, two video works and a couple of audience-engagement events.

One more time: revisiting histories

Almost no festival today is complete without performances re-inscribing dance history. And since history is contested territory, historical narratives want to be heard and included in the dominant one. Moving in November presented two shows that critically addressed dance history. Surprisingly, the most successful, in my opinion, turned out to be a performance that is as traditional in form as possible and as far as possible from the aesthetic experiments of the new dance.

In *Figuring Age*, choreographer and performer **Boglárka Börcsök** embodied three elderly dancers who had been part of the early development of Hungarian modern dance: Irén Preisich, Éva E. Kovács, and Ágnes Roboz. Her solo performance, an extension of a documentary movie *The Art of Movement* made in collaboration with filmmaker Andreas Bolm, resembled a traditional dramatic show based on interviews and archival materials rather than a dance piece. Börcsök spoke throughout the whole performance 'on behalf' of the women who had passed away – or rather, invited three ghosts to enter her body.

The scenography played upon the idea of meeting in a 'close circle'. The performance took place in an intimate cylinder-shaped space which could fit around ten spectators, and a few pieces of furniture depicting three semi-imaginary rooms where the viewers came to visit Börcsök's heroines, who arrived, stayed in her body for a while, and left one by one. The space and the objects were dazzling white and brightly lit, resembling the design of 'limbo spaces' in Hollywood movies – spaces where the main character meets God or a past mentor to gain secret knowledge. Though there was almost no dance in the performance, except for rare movements of arms, sharp and sudden, it was a piece of great bodily work. The way Börcsök channelled the presence of her heroines' personalities apparently required a lot of attention, and her attempts to maintain two different bodily states – her own and one of the heroines' – were impressive: it was impossible to take eyes off her.

Though modern dance history is a commonplace topic in European experimental choreography nowadays, it usually touches upon very western and established names (like Martha Graham or Isadora Duncan), thus gaining benefit from their fame and symbolic value. So it was valuable to see a piece addressing modern dance in eastern Europe which had a much more politically intense story throughout the 20th century. As Börcsök explains in her interview to festival artistic director Kerstin Schroth, in Hungary for instance some modern dance schools were closed before the second world war because of their connections with the workers' movement, and then, after a short period of revival, ironically, the whole movement was banned by the socialist regime. At the same time, the more eastern, and especially post-Soviet dance scene is sometimes seen as lagging behind – still 'too modern', still 'not there' – thus symbolically



Boglárka Börcsök channels the spirit of elderly performers of the early modern era in *Figuring Age*. Photo © Barbara Antal

losing its right to critically reflect on its past (as it has not yet passed!). Börcsök's attempt to realise this right with seemingly old-fashioned artistic methods feels like treating the hidden narratives with attention and care they deserve.

Another revisionist performance, the 18-minute *Un Bolero* by **Dominique Brun** and **François Chaignaud** (performed by the latter), dealt with Maurice Ravel's famous music, first choreographed by Bronislava Nijinska, sister of Vaslav Nijinsky and the only female choreographer of the Ballets Russes. Wearing a lush multi-layered skirt, long nails and drag-like makeup, and smeared with white powder, Chaignaud tried to incorporate in his dance several historical figures whose connections are not at all obvious – and therefore intriguing.

Deriving their Bolero from the original piece signed by Nijinska, Ravel, and artist Alexandre Benois, and borrowing the Spanish dress from archival materials on Nijinska's art, the authors also incorporated other figures in the piece: La Argentina, a Spanish flamenco dancer who was part of the Paris art scene in the 1920s; and butoh pioneers Kazuo Ohno and Tatsumi Hijikata, who brought La Argentina back on stage in their choreographic tribute in the 60s. Though Ballets Russes, butoh, and flamenco seem to have little in common, the choreographers found impressive archival connections between them, bringing suppressed historical narratives into light and queering Bolero, as both in butoh and flamenco the dancers' gender is fluid.

Queering or challenging a historical canon has recently become a solid strategy in dance. Recall Trajal Harrell's idea of merging white Judson Dance Theater aesthetics with that of the queer scene of vogue balls; or Richard Move's famous attempts to 'drag Martha Graham back from the dead' by re-enacting her style and choreography in drag-like performances; or Frederique Gies' *Queen of the Fauns* that reimagines gender and power relations between Nijinsky's Faun and the flock of nymphs; and dozens of other examples.

But being based on interesting archival findings, *Un Bolero* doesn't fully correspond to the beauty of the conceptual idea. Intended to be intense, it tends to be heavy and sloppy, though still attractive in its vulnerability. A pleasant contrast to the dancing was made by two pianists from Sibelius Academy, playing Ravel's music while a young female assistant turned the score's pages – an old-fashioned, concert-like element which brought simple charm to a piece that was serious in its conceptual background but fell short of its ambitions in performance.

Occasional pleasures, familiar confusions

The variety of aesthetics, show types, and approaches to movement are some of the best things about Moving in November. Take *Occasions* by **Isabel Lewis**, an experience very different from that of a traditional black-box piece. 'Hosted occasions', a performance format elaborated by Lewis since 2014, refers at the same time to the 17th-century French salons, held to entertain guests and exchange knowledge through conversations; to Plato's 'symposium' (or, as Lewis calls it, ancient Greek 'party'); and to the heterotopic space of the gardens.

In other words, the viewers were invited to rest on couches in the foyer of Stoa Cultural Centre, decorated with pot plants and pink lights. While Lewis, together with a couple of performer-hosts, manoeuvred between us, dancing, telling stories, trying to make conversation with the visitors and offering to smell exotic perfumes prepared in the laboratory by star perfume maker Sissel Tolaas, their assistants served unusual treats and drinks. Though the experience left a trace of pleasure and relaxation in my memory, I realised I had a love-confusion (not love-hate though) relationship with it.

Lewis, a charming performer, has obviously reached mastery in creating a space of expanded sensuality, immersing the audience in the semi-erotic experience of 'aesthesis' (an ancient Greek concept which broadly describes the senses, and is today sometimes opposed to Kantian aesthetics, which appeared as a result of the 17th-century rationalisation and colonisation of aesthesis) in which music, smells, tastes, and visuals provide great engagement. However, there was something suspicious and slightly confusing in the storyline she took for her spoken performance. She told us three stories: the first retold ideas from Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* – a book on post-human philosophy which recently became a theoretical trend in visual arts and experimental dance; the third, ideas from Donna Haraway's famous writings on cyborgs and 'companion species' that became almost a special lingo, without which it's become nigh impossible to make art that is labelled 'socially and environmentally-aware' any more. Thank god, between them were Socrates and Alcibiades, two guys from Plato's Symposium!

Why does it sometimes feel improper to stuff performances decorated with pink lights and plants with references to post-humanism, friendship with objects, and interspecies connections? Because though they may look politically correct, such performances depoliticise highly critical and political writings. Here, the somewhat didactic and theoretical tone looked like an excuse for the hedonism and privilege of a bourgeois 21st-century salon, dominated by humans. Yes, coupling theory with embodied experiences and performative acts is by no means straightforward, but sometimes companion species and vibrant matter are more tokens of political-theoretical intentions that active agents in the work of art.

Though they may look politically correct, such performances depoliticise highly critical and political writings



Above: 'Work with facial expressions' in Ofelia Jalr Orgeta, *StM*
Photo © Elie Iziamo

Right: *Odd Meters* by Mikko Niemistö
Photo © Katrina Ukkarinen

Weird dances before another apocalypse

In her brilliant solo *StM*, Swedish choreographer **Ofelia Jarl Ortega** continues her long-standing research on the choreography of the gaze and relationships between the audience and the performer in the situation of on-stage exposure. Definitely seductive and vulnerably exhibitionist, this piece partly embodies Ortega's approach to self-objectification which she manifested in her essay for the *Post-Dance* book[1] as a queer-feminist strategy of resistance to real capitalist objectification. But if previously she has used more sexually explicit body language, *StM* brings to the series a hilarious and uncanny element: work with facial expressions. The voyeuristic gaze of the viewer, probably skimming over Ortega's skintight festive attire or lingering on protruding nipples, will inevitably stumble upon weird, ridiculous, even creepy grimaces. Is it pain mixed with surprise or thoughtfulness interrupted by sudden discomfort, or some sort of restless excitement? And how does this pantomime match with ostentatious, circus-like jumps and strolls in circles across the arena which Ortega performs in loops, persistently demonstrating her dance as an explicit spectacle for public pleasure?

It's funny how these awkward facial expressions, broken, exaggerated, turned inside out, not only interrupt the viewers' desiring vision but also infect their bodies with the same uncanny tension. If kinaesthetic empathy can still be thematised in contemporary dance, let it be muscular empathy to weird facial expressions! It's almost impossible not to imitate them, catching yourself performing them back, and eventually wondering what kind of emotions it builds inside, purely physically. It seems, in Ortega's performance, emotions are revealed not as the events of the inner life and not as cultural artifacts, but more as muscular phenomena or loops of pure affects (understood in Spinoza-Deleuze manner as something which targets the body and its ability to act). It makes them disenchanted, empty and meaningless, exposing the purely mechanical, almost inhuman grounds of affects, desires, and other seemingly very human issues.

Two other infectious pieces of high bodily intensity which dealt with anxiety and

1 *Post-Dance*, ed. Danjel Andersson, Mette Edvardsen, Mårten Spångberg, MDT 2017.

restless excitement were *Odd Meters*, a solo by **Mikko Niemistö**, and *Astral Projections* by Niemistö in collaboration with **Sanna Blenow**, **Teo Lanerva**, **Olli Lautiola**, and **Justus Kantakoski**. Both performances somehow dealt with dreams understood as subconsciousness, as extensions or as effects of highly technologised western culture, permeated with electricity, entertainment, and pop-up notifications that do not respect any natural cycles.

Odd Meters, inspired by Jonathan Crary's book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, is based on buzzing repetitions of anxious jumps, fast restless shiftings from one foot to the other, moving in circles, and exhaustion. It seems to happen in a bad dream where the person is never left alone, and accompanied with soft underskin technologies even in bed, where the body becomes a tuning fork of endless individual exploitation. Unlike the body's usual passivity which our connection with technology implies nowadays (as all the actions from money-making to sexting now work through typing and scrolling), here, it becomes a site of affective expression.

By contrast, the two-hour performance-installation *Astral Projections*, which borrowed movement material from video games and other fictitious worlds, allowed for daydreaming and a slow, gradual immersion into the show's monotony and duration. Though it too dealt with capitalist anxieties through movement loops and repetitions, its space organisation – allowing visitors to sit and lie on the floor – was welcoming, and enabled bodily engagement through slowness



and sleepiness rather than shock and exhaustion like in *Odd Meters*.

It's ironic that the first version of *Astral Projections* premiered in March 2020, just before the first lockdown in Helsinki. Recalling those performances, Niemistö calls that experience absurd and at the same time comforting and therapeutic, 'as if it was the last dance before the apocalypse'. Then as now, the most awaited dance festivals in the Finnish capital were either cancelled or postponed, so Moving in November was lucky to catch the moment and meet its audience. It seems that *Astral Projections* anticipated another phase of the ongoing apocalypse which now already feels habitual but nevertheless leaves its traces on our imprisoned bodies. •

The body becomes a tuning fork of endless individual exploitation



London International Mime Festival 2022

LIVE AND LAYERED

Ka Bradley
Sanjoy Roy
21 February 2022

LIMF 2022 reopens its many-faced, multi-sensory playground of living communication

London, UK

Theatre Re's *Bluebelle*
Photo © Chris Nash

It has been a weird couple of years. Masked and isolated, we've learned to rely on a gestural language of raised brows and smiling eyes. In Zoom meetings, we've become used to companionably lamenting the strangeness of video interaction. It is clearer than ever that communication is a layered and multi-faceted endeavour.

The long-running London International Mime Festival is a celebration of storytelling at its most experimental and determined, but this year there's also a revelatory pleasure in the medium. There are no emails or lockdown soft-launch Twitter leaks here, no communication by miscommunication. Whether juggling the vagaries of political and personal identity, sketching aliens, baking bread or embodying gods, LIMF 2022 is an uplifting reminder that we can dare to say more than anxious commentary on the pandemic. Sometimes deliriously successful, sometimes falling just short, the performances this year nevertheless speak of a thrilling ambition to close the gap between display and comprehension, celebrating the power of live communication.

Ka Bradley

Theatre Re: Bluebelle

Am I just too, you know, *dancey*? By rights, Theatre Re's *Bluebelle* should have tickled my pleasure points. It's a satisfyingly twisted, Brothers Grimmish tale of a barren queen and king who long for a child, and make a fateful pact with a fairy who grants their wish. (Newsflash: they don't then live happily ever after.) It's also big on atmosphere, with much moody sidelighting, and splendid folk-goth music played live on stage – a meandering montage of hurdy-gurdy rhythms, shiversome melodies and mysterious dissonances. The stagecraft is a delight: there are rope-pulley systems that hoik around props and scenery, cardboard crowns in the shape of antlers, an outsize coat that fits two villains at once, and much changing of costume and makeup so that the cast of six (including the two musicians) get to play a whole range of different characters. And the physical theatre – grotesque witchery, swirling magicians, questing gallops, lonely wanderings – is the stuff of good storytelling.

Perhaps that's where my problem is: storytelling. There's so much of it. It's quite hard to follow, what with the tangled plot and multiple characters, each scene following fast on the heels of the last. There's not much time for the pleasures or the depths of lingering longer – to feel the ambivalent beauties of Bluebelle's solitude when she's trapped in a translucent ball, the physical pain and personal elation of the queen as she gives birth, the enticingly orientalist undulations of the magicians as they cast their spell. I wonder if a choreographer rather than a theatre director might have been less tethered to plot, and given more leeway to savour and sensation. Or am I being too dancey?

Sanjoy Roy



Jean-Daniel Broussé, *(le) PAIN*
Photo © Chris Nash

Jean-Daniel Broussé, (le) PAIN

Jean-Daniel Broussé, the son and grandson of a baker, is ending a family tradition. With the whimsical delivery of a stand-up comedian and the luscious, easy physicality of a street dancer, he grapples with the difficulty of stepping back from the legacy of the French family-run baker.

Watching *(le) PAIN* is like watching the performance equivalent of a patchwork quilt being sewn in real time. Disparate elements of memoir, demonstration and pure dance are stitched together to create the multi-hued whole. Broussé cheerfully demonstrates the work of breadmaking live on stage, with as much flourish and drama as he manipulates his body. He plays traditional French bagpipes, tells us a story in Occitan, offers us video interviews with his parents, and ends by feeding us freshly baked bread.

Broussé brings levity and wit to his physical storytelling. In one memorable segment, he folds himself into a full-body lycra sack and performs – with acrobatic sarcasm – the chemical process of bread rising. His mime of attempting to pass a stool is hilarious and stomach-piercingly evocative.

If this all sounds like a crazed cornucopia of disparate delicacies and skills, that's exactly the audience experience. This short, small-scale piece couldn't be longer or larger, or play to any but the most curious audience. But this might be *(le) PAIN*'s strength: in its very intimacy and specificity, it feels like a gift – to us, to Broussé family, to his own history.

Ka Bradley

Cie 111 – Aurélien Bory/ Shantala Shivalingappa: aSH

Aurélien Bory is a French – what, exactly? Single words (director, scenographer) seem misleading, so perhaps a sentence will do: Aurélien Bory makes multidimensional performances which treat the human presence not as primary, but as one of the many elements of theatre, including sound, set, costume and light. Shantala Shivalingappa is a French-Indian kuchipudi dancer, a classical Indian form which really does place a focus on the human body – face, feet, fingers and all. Their encounter is the third of a trilogy of collaborations between Bory and some distinctive, border-crossing female performers (French flamenco artist Stéphanie Fuster, French-Japanese dancer Kaori Ito).

The piece, then, is the meeting place of two sensibilities. In *aSH*, Shivalingappa channels the presence of her namesake Shiva – god of the dance, and destroyer of worlds – while Bory provides her cosmic setting – a sheet of faintly metallic paper, as inscrutable as a Rothko painting – and live percussionist Loïc Schild her sonic space, his electronic instruments miked to the wall behind the backdrop, causing tremors in the paper as if the sound itself were footsteps.

Shivalingappa is a supremely assured presence, traversing the geometries of the foreground with placed footwork, inclined torso and angled arms. She sifts white powder onto the floor, her patterned steps gradually forming a circular design as exquisite as a Hindu mandala or the tracks of a figure-skater. Later, the powder puffs into clouds as she beats the backdrop, and the paper itself falls to reveal the implacable sonic wall behind it.



Shantala Shivalingappa in a*SH* (Cie 111 / Aurelien Bory)
Photo © Aglae Bory

It's a divine dance, a poetic spectacle, a mechanical curiosity – and strangely lacking in warmth. The cosmos is indeed cold.

Sanjoy Roy



The Pappy Show
Photo © Helen Murray

Thick & Tight, Short and Sweet

Eleanor Perry, one half of Thick & Tight, is sadly only able to perform via video link thanks to Covid. Despite this Age of Pandemic inconvenience, Perry's charismatic co-creator Daniel Hay-Gordon and their anarchic band of Pierrots keep the candles burning at both ends.

Short and Sweet deserves a cabaret audience – one that isn't shy of whooping and slamming the tables. This is most obvious in 'Vicious', a solo featuring Connor Scott as punk rocker Sid Vicious. Scott's spasming and gangling, his snarls and his head-bangs, are eerily redolent of the real Vicious – yet the punk energy dissipates in the respectable auditorium. Some scenes work more seamlessly: Harry Alexander strutting as the eponymous model in 'Twiggy' commands breathless attention; Azara Meghie in 'Finding Grace', a celebration of Grace Jones, combines breakdancing with spoken word, and is so warm, so conspiratorial, that it's impossible not to cheer.

'Cage & Paige: We Could Go On', pairing avant-garde composer John Cage (Hay-Gordon) with prima donna of West End musicals Elaine Paige (Perry, on-screen), is Thick & Tight at their hilarious, evocative and moving best. Even appearing remotely, Perry summons the astounding magnetism that made her Princess Diana, in *A Night with Thick & Tight*, one of the highlights of the 2019 London International Mime Festival.

The piece which leaves the deepest impact is 'Ode to Edith', inspired by poet and iconoclast Edith Sitwell, once memorably accused as being 'as ugly as modern poetry'. Performed with voluminous charm by members of the Corali Dance Company, it feels as if it harkens back further than cabaret, to a symbolically laden medieval mystery play or a subversive Saturnalia. Using simple, almost ritualistic movement – gestural, signalling, private yet communicative – to a soundtrack of an interview with the dignified and witty Sitwell, 'Ode to Edith' feels like a work of true and pure pleasure in creation.

Ka Bradley

The PappyShow: What Do You See When You Look at Me?

There's a scene in The PappyShow's *What Do You See When You Look at Me?* which projects a video of a professional synchronised swimming team – highly skilled, identikit young white women, every one of them trained to within an inch of each other – while the live cast on stage, a disparate bunch of ages, races, genders, body shapes and abilities, perform some Busby Berkeleyish canon-choreography in an assortment of swimwear. In comparison with the team, they are a very scrappy bunch. Also: a lot more human.

The performance is in some sense about diversity – of race, gender, ability, sexuality and age – but rather than a tickbox, checklist approach, it dives with some gusto into the gap between seeing and looking, perceiving and conceiving; between us and them, and you and me.

The cast introduce themselves with affectionate clichés that are rudimentary stereotypes nonetheless: a sing-song Italian accent, kung-fu kicks, bhangra dancing. Later, a fashion parade exaggerates and furthermore mismatches the stereotypes: a black woman in a wheelchair rolls up in Breton sailor drag, complete with boating hat, striped jersey and baguette; an east Asian man sports a Rastacap and dreadlock wig; a white woman with a crutch walks on in a black facemask.

Later still, they apologise for the cultural appropriation – but characteristically, this becomes less a position statement than an opportunity to riff on the gaps between the making, meaning and believing of apologies: they poke fun at each other's duplicitous expressions of regret ('I'm sorry I portrayed violence to give the show more drama'), and quote topically from the UK prime minister.

The devised format and workshoppy feel make for patchy evening, and the cultural diversity theme could have made for a stilted one; but the ambience is very convivial – we're all in this together, somehow – and no one, whether on stage or in the audience, is reduced from a person to a position. We are all more than we seem.

Sanjoy Roy



Stereoptik, Stellaire

Remember being taken to a Planetarium as a child, or seeing your first magic lantern show? *Stellaire* takes you back to that visionary awe. Stereoptik – Romain Bermond and Jean-Baptiste Maillet – return to LIMF with their first show since 2016's *Dark Circus*, and it's galactically splendid.

Stellaire is a journey through all of Creation. This isn't as bold a claim as it might seem: it explores the formation of the universe, the shape of our galaxy and the life cycle of our sun. Simultaneously, however, it is a love story between a man and a woman, recast in their romance as explorers of outer space, both literally (they fly to distant planets), and metaphorically, because what is love but an exploration of the stupendous internal stardust of emotion?

Stellaire is also a peek into creation with a small c. Though the core narrative is shown on a screen, Bermond and Maillet are visible on either side of the stage, using projection, chalk, ink, silhouettes and sketches to create the story in real time. Part of the thrill of Stereoptik's work is being able to see the scaffolding: hands sketching with charcoal or scattering sand; storytellers at the sidelines squirting teal and tangerine ink into empty aquariums; covering lightboxes with black card cut-outs; or even just playing the instruments. This is mime at its most literal: bodies employed to tell a story without words.

The tone is exquisitely managed. Each time *Stellaire* appears to veer into sentimental profundity (about love, or the size of the universe), something playful and invigorating undercuts the self-serious mood. Our star-striding couple land on an alien planet and appear to watch a reflection of their relationship in the bodies of two alien creatures – except the alien creatures merge to become the face of Albert Einstein. We gaze in awe at the marbled, layered, drifting landscape of a dream world, only for it to morph into a cool alien synth gig. Falling somewhere between art-house sci-fi, commedia dell'arte and children's television, *Stellaire* is a highlight of the festival.

Ka Bradley



Stellaire by Stereoptik
Photo © Christophe Raynaud de Lage



Swiss Dance Days 2022 →

Charles A. Catherine
02 March 2022

The Swiss dance platform is a cocktail of art, culture and dance… but which mixes hit the spot?

Basel, Switzerland

Previous page:
Romane Peytavin and Pierre Piton (La PP) in *Farewell Body*
Photo © Gregory Batardon

Created in 1996 and co-organised by RESO – Dance Network Switzerland since 2006, Swiss Dance Days promotes Swiss artists both inside and outside their mountainous country. The event takes place every two years in a different city – the Covid-delayed 11th edition happened in Basel, world famous for its contemporary art fairs. Some 150 professionals from all over Europe attended the meetings and performances, among thousands of locals, attracted by the promised vibrant cultural scene on stage. This year's selection focused on creations dealing with identity and gender – proving that the Swiss deal with the same issues as everyone else. Among the twelve performances of the programme, you could find famous heads such as Marco Berrettini and Foofwa d'Immobilité as well as fresh blood such as Clara Delorme and Marc Oosterhoff.



In the festival lounge at the Kaserne, dance professionals of all kinds could trumpet their achievements and give their opinions on the works they had just seen or were about to see. Sipping a glass of local wine, you could consider all the works presented and start feeling the energy. Two creations especially left their mark on me. The first was **Jeremy Nedd** and **Impilo Mapantsula**'s *The Ecstatic*. For sure, there is a trend for 'ethnic' dances and/or ghetto subcultures reshaped by contemporary composition, but by mixing the fascinating footwork of the South African pantsula dance and the praise break of African-American gospel in a non-narrative street ceremony, *The Ecstatic* revitalised the audience – and blew our minds. Pure dance with six intense performers, no overthinking to reach some poetical dimension, a cool attitude: we were definitely thrilled.

The second was **Tabea Martin**'s *Forever*. Three young men and two young women talk and dance about death – because they can't die, condemned to eternal life. The stage is covered with white material, huge white balloons in the back, and, suspended, smaller white balls everywhere, a can of tears, a can of blood and a stuffed fox. One by one, they describe what death they'd like, and the more it goes, the more out of control it becomes. Dance slowly prevails over words, and cathartic solos move to powerful unisons. Joyfully trying to die, hilariously unable to succeed, the five dancers use all the props for their purpose. At the end, the

Right: Tabea Martin, *Forever*
Photo © Heta Multanen

Below left: Jeremy Nedd and Impilo Mapantsula, *The Ecstatic*
Photo © Philip Frowein



stage is devastated, covered with tears and blood, but also with life and death.

So far so good. Connections to gender and identity may not be very obvious, but a few works really reached their point.

In *Lovers, Dogs and Rainbows*, at Neues Theater am Bahnhof, **Rudi van der Merwe** brings his inner personality face to face with the context he grew up in. On one hand, the glimmering queer side of a boy empowering his difference. On the other, the dry land of South Africa, its farming traditions, dog worship and male dominance. On stage right, a giant screen on which is shown a documentary mixing poetical wanderings of a man and his dog in the harsh countryside, and interviews with van der Merwe's family and neighbours telling of the ebb and flow of life. On stage left, the performer and his assistant creating short scenes of drag shows in plain view, to baroque, electro or pop music. The sketches – a queen with nails taped to the floor, a duet of singing divas, a 70s-style glittery singer – symbolically reveal all the glamorous languor the tough environment set off in the young man.

The concept is clever. Slowly, a story appears, the atmosphere getting thicker and thicker. Narratives superimpose, an emotional landscape emerges, like a bittersweet secret. The whole story is very personal, though distorted, but in it you can recognise the roots and scars of every frustrated destiny. Slowly driving from innocent childhood to gangs in prison, the performance tries to avoid the purely autobiographical. The characters van der Merwe creates stand aloof and intense, shimmering and devastated. You can feel their authentic need to express themselves,

but the movie behind them and the always returning darkness keep it unsaid. Even the numerous dog stories sound like transpositions of candid lives. The whole performance is a powerful book of stories, even if you spend a lot of time reading subtitles (as you surely don't understand Afrikaans either). You miss the presence of dance – but in the end, the embodiment is complete.

In complete contrast, *Farewell Body*, the first creation by the young Lausanne-based duet **Romane Peytavin** and **Pierre Piton** (La PP) makes dance the centre of their purpose, pushing the meaning away. They talk of the uncanny valley effect: 'The more a bionic body seems similar to ours, the more its imperfections appear monstrous.' While engineers in our cyber era work to make robots look as human as possible, Peytavin and Piton try the opposite: to get rid of their humanity and reach a robotic movement and appearance – though they're still dancing. When the audience enters the auditorium of the ROXY Birsfelden, the two performers are static, eyes wide open, staring at you like androids. Their pale green outfits glow in the full light. A neon sign says WELCOME. As a strong electronic beat arises, they start to move – not the robot dance, but light, powerful and determined moves, crossing the stage, jumping in rhythm, in separate solos next to one another. They never touch, they never blink, they almost never stop.

Is it aerobics, clubbing, dancing? The technique is discreet but visible. The hands and necks are frozen, the directions are precise, the moves look programmed. At first, you'd say Peytavin and Piton



> **He reminds us what dance serves: a vision, a moment, a feeling**

are dancing randomly but the ridiculous moments, the strange feeling that something's wrong and that incredibly catchy electronic music slowly make you acknowledge that they're not fully human any more. So you accept their uncanny behaviour and their moments of wandering when they (apparently) don't know what they're supposed to do. The dance is vivid, just here to be and to be seen. Are robots just an entertainment? Oh wait. Here they are. As the hour-long show goes on, you realise they're super-advanced dancing robots.

Among all these dancing ideas and self-revealing metaphors, we all needed a little analysis. Swiss-Iranian **Kiyan Khoshoie** brought it with *Grand Écart*, a 75-minute one-man show mixing French text, English subtitles, and dance displays. He talks about a dancer's life, playing different roles – a mad choreographer, a rough teacher, an overthinking dancer. It all starts with a back curtain: should it be open or closed? It may appear a detail, but it's the beginning of a fierce critique. 'We are architects of space. We accept the penetration of things around us.' 'The body takes me to places I don't know.' The actual questions that arise in a dancer's life suddenly sound a little absurd. The audience, mainly dance professionals, begins to laugh. With a great ability to catch your attention, Khoshoie never brags – though he could, given his career – but digs into his topics with acuteness. In a few moves, he reminds us what dance serves: a vision, a moment, a feeling.

What is his point? Dance is a wonderful discipline asking for total commitment and a touch of fantasy. The mixture is like a cocktail served at the Swiss Dance Days lounge: if there's too much of one ingredient, it gets out of hand. The coach's crazy talk in Franglais baffles his dancers; the intrusive perfection of the performer inhibits creation; the body and mind-centred practice drives the artist to feel 'past it' by the age of 30. You laugh – but you recognise it. As the maelstrom of characters becomes invasive, Khoshoie stops talking and re-enacts all the dance sketches all together, in a delightful concluding sequence. As in standup, he quotes from his own material. You can see he wrote it with an actress (Charlotte Dumartheray): it's hilarious and witty – if maybe a little long. Enough to question what it is to be in the audience, after having questioned what it is to be on stage.

During these Swiss Dance Days, many artists stared at you to share their thoughts from the stage. **Clara Delorme**'s shifty gaze in *Albâtre* brought a breath. The 15-minute piece presents her naked white body in the corner of a square white stage. Nothing more, but that's already a lot. Her body is a blank page on which you read what you want. She seems fragile but concentrated, offered but unreachable. From the moment you begin to find 'content', it isn't blank any more, so it can stop. Efficient and delightful.

In a few days, the Swiss platform proved that local artists have a great vitality in and an elegant approach to their art. And if the gender and identity questions were not that much answered – or even posed – the shows themselves made an impression on the audiences, already seduced by the city, between legacy and modernity. •

Lovers, Dogs and Rainbows, by Rudi van der Merwe
Photo © John Hogg

Lost Dog Dance: A Tale of Two Cities



Image: Valentina Formenti and Hannes Langolf (on screen), with Nina Morgane-Madelaine in *A Tale of Two Cities*
Photo © Camilla Greenwell

Nina-Morgane Madelaine introduces herself as Lucie Manette and explains she's making a documentary about her family – who are, as it happens, the main characters of Charles Dickens's historical thriller *A Tale of Two Cities*. They are sat at a table in a small, half-open wooden house; her camera projects a live image onto the exposed ceiling. They introduce themselves with the mannered cadence of naturalness, committing to an observational comedy of awkwardness.

The choreography is, initially, an exaggerated, even microscopic study of bodies under stress (slow-motion fighting through a crowd; roiling and staggering through drunkenness or storm-tossed ships). But this witty simplicity, ironically undercut by performers breaking the fourth wall or interrupting one another, emphasises that we are watching a *story being told* – that we are, as we will learn, watching Lucie Manette being *lied to by her parents*.

Director Ben Duke has boiled Dickens's 400-page novel to its internecine bones. His most radical and praiseworthy departure is the figure of Thérèse Defarge (Temitope Ajose-Cutting), a ghoulish antagonist who becomes a sympathetic, honourable presence. He glosses over international political intrigue and the French Revolution, but he can condense the repetitious, compulsive nature of trauma into a three-minute mosh.

As the truth about Lucie's family is revealed, there is a series of gorgeous duets – between Defarge and Mama Manette, Lucie and her mother, father and son. Mama Manette and Defarge whip across in a brisk tango, with the stamping energy of anger but locked in an embrace of equals. Lucie's father Charles Darnay and his son retell, in dance, the story of Darnay's escape from death, in rolling, tender drops and switching, intertwined limbs, their exchange of weight literalising an exchange which saved Darnay's life.

It doesn't, perhaps, have the straightforward pitch and emotional trajectory that made Duke's *Juliet and Romeo* such a blazing success, nor is it quite as magically discursive as his stupendous Goat, but *A Tale of Two Cities* is a moving, radical and irreverent piece of not-really-adaptation.

Bottom line: Funny/sad, understated/melodramatic, a thoughtful adaptation/a radical break – it's Ben Duke being Ben Duke.

Ka Bradley
03 March 2022

Charles Dickens' bulky, tangled tale boiled down to a soup of familial deception...

London, United Kingdom

Devised by Ben Duke and the Company / Cast: Valentina Formenti, Nina-Morgane Madelaine, Temitope Ajose-Cutting, Hannes Langolf, John Kendall / Director: Ben Duke / Creative advisor, associate director: Pip Duke / Designer: Amber Vandenhoeck / Lighting designer: Katy Morison / Projection designer: Will Duke / Projection design associate: Hayley Egan / Sound designer: Hjorvar Rognvaldsson / Costume designer: Ryan Laight / Videographer: Idris Ellis / Dramaturg: Raquel Meseguer / Production manager: Dave Sherman / Technical stage manager: Seth Rock-Williams / Stage manager: Laura Haynes / Tour technician: Mason Pretorious

Tanztage Berlin 2022

HARD TIMES REQUIRE HARD DANCING



Evgeny Borisenko
07 March 2022

Tomorrow is the question. How does dance move with and through the end of times?

Sophiensaele, Berlin, Germany

Right: *(bb)* by tiran and Nkisi
Photo ©: Mayra Wallraff

Right inset: Britney Spears performs 'Till the World Ends' in Ukraine, during her 2011 Femme Fatale Tour
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Previous page: *DOOM*, by Layton Lachman and Samuel Hertz
Photo © Mayra Wallraff



Founded in 1989 in the wake of German reunification, Tanztage Berlin is an annual dance and performance festival showcasing works by emerging dance artists working in Berlin. As the 2021 edition was pushed online by Covid restrictions, this year's jam-packed lineup featured a selection of shows produced over two seasons of blind navigation across the pandemic waves. A dozen live performances hosted by Sophiensaele, film screenings, talks, live streamings and online discussions – all epitomised the Berlin independent dance scene as it is: engaged, dauntless and fierce.

Hard times require hard dancing. This bold yet lucid title of the online discussion that closed off the festival encapsulates its general concept. In times when climate crisis, global pandemic, dramatic increase of inequalities coupled with political warmongering make the world look more doomed than ever, Berlin dance artists do not, or rather, cannot sit on the fence pretending that nothing is happening.

Mateusz Szymanówka, the festival's curator, confirms: 'When I began working on the festival in spring 2020, I was quite obsessively asking myself why one would like to dance in front of the audience when the world around us is collapsing?' This interrogation is fittingly illustrated in the text introducing the festival by Britney Spears's 2011 music video 'Till The World Ends', in which the singer throws a dance party amid apocalyptical landscapes, skilfully dodges meteors and debris while convincing the viewers to 'keep on dancing till the world ends'. Unlike Britney Spears though, festival artists conceive the end of times not as a cosmic bang, but rather as an everlasting sense of impending doom. Living in a state of chronic menace, they reconfigure past narratives, offer new strategies of survival and collective care, and navigate utopian futures.

> The end of times not as a cosmic bang, but rather as an everlasting sense of impending doom

In *DOOM*, a melancholic hybrid of a drone metal gig and an eerie dance celebration, **Layton Lachman** and **Samuel Hertz** escape eschatological narratives and their cynical artifices. Instead they devise 'doom' as a liminal space, or a mental playground, where all feelings and passions are welcome: grief, joy, melancholy and rage. The show dexterously veers from teetering solo dances and melodramatic guitar poses to calmer scenes during which the four performers form a circle to sing mournful chants, or just ride a bike in circles. *DOOM*'s finale, led by deafening guitar riffs, sets the dancers, chained to each other, in a sophisticated and furious duet. Although it seemed to me that the piece was shown in its shorter version (it has all the common attributes of a durational performance), it left a long-lasting impression. By stripping 'state of doom' from its usual apocalyptic imagery and anxiogenic connotations, Lachman and Heitz prove that there is hope even in the darkest of hours, and that the end time is liveable and can be filled with joy and warmth as long as we keep our sense of togetherness intact.

(bb), a collaboration between dance artist **tiran** and musician **Nkisi**, who performs live on stage, also draws on concert aesthetics and explores the dialogue between experimental electronic music and the body. But its enthralling effect is largely due to one evocative



Photo



Judith Förster, *Showdown*
Photo © Mayra Wallraff

image. The grandstand seating, rid of chairs and flickering in the strobe lights that are placed underneath, looks strangely alive. It reminded me strongly of a breathing and fog-spitting carcass of an abandoned theatre – a particularly powerful metaphor after months of closed theatres. Tiran's presence is at first cautious. He slips under the grandstand and explores its metallic ribcage with a torchlight, then delivers a long impassioned monologue, listing virtually all the wounds of our times: 'alienation, infection, depression, centuries of torture…'

But once tiran appears in front, he dives into a frenzied solo, his torso swaying and warping under tension, his arms cutting the air with sweeping rhythmical thumps. While his body bows and bends as if seized by fury, his howls and shrieks sink in hammering beats, flooding the space. Tiran's gritty performance, and a rare synergy between his dance and the music score, produce an overwhelmingly powerful mood and an almost physiological sensation of pulsating rage that throbbed and itched with me long after the show was over.

In contrast, other artists aim to defy the prevailing grimness and come up with survival strategies that would offer us solace, allay fears and help navigate the troubled times without losing sanity. As potent alternatives to doomscrolling, the concepts of softness and slowing down are clearly gaining momentum, and dance stages are no exception. **Djibril Sall** describes their piece *evening.haiku* as an invitation 'to slow down, be in nature, situate yourself and your situation within the grand scheme of things.' Joined on stage by Sointu Pere, both clad in loose-fitting white clothes, they start swaying in rhythm, cheerfully smiling at each other. As their swaying routine changes rhythm and incorporates shoulder spins, rapid quivering and brief walking patterns, they even exchange short encouragements: 'deep breathe in and out, relax your jaw, let your voice come out.'

The show steadily flows through metronomically regular shakings and hip sways to bracing club dance patterns and a final looped sequence reminiscent of modern dance – all warmed by Thais Nepomuceno's smart light and lulled by a slightly haunting music score. Both performers exude chilled elegance and regal chic, and their show is as soothing and laid back as only a dance show can be – a perfect act to put your ruffled spirits at ease.

Judith Förster's *Showdown* runs after bolder conceptual ambitions, and builds on a pile of references: neo-western movies, survivalist theories, and feminist writings by Monique Wittig and Octavia Butler. Together with Nanna Stigsdatter Mathiassen, Förster explores blurry boundaries between a duet and a duel, a fight and a hug, an encounter and a farewell. Surrounded by transparent reservoirs of coloured water, countless plastic tubes and cables, they unfold their slightly confusing dance script into a series of frantic solos and duos. Their *Showdown* eventually feels like a heavy transparent lid on a pot of boiling water: you can see and hear the boiling liquid under the lid – and it even cracks open for a split-second here and there from the force of turbulent water beneath – but for the most part, the lid stays teasingly shut.

This sensation of promising yet withholding something has been chasing me throughout my dance-watching career. Dancemakers often set themselves theoretically complex agendas and rely on knotty concepts as dramaturgical triggers, but the dance material, however mesmerising and well thought out it might be, is sometimes too thin to clearly articulate them on stage.

At worst, this can lead to a hermetic and self-indulgent result. At best though, such fortuitous imbalance can produce an unexpectedly intriguing and multi-faceted work. **Julia Plawgo**'s solo show *Non-Playable Character* looks into 'the experiential limits and cognitive dissonances of life in digital space' and investigates the experience of disembodied life in cyberspace. Half-human, half-AI, Plawgo's character probes the universe around it and adapts to it in incessant self-optimisation. Her slow and stomping steps reverberating through her entire body, constantly swivelling torso and sweeping arm gestures indeed bring to mind the awkward and slightly robotic gait of early

As potent alternatives to doomscrolling, concepts of softness and slowing down are gaining momentum

> The piece oozes radioactive strangeness

video games characters. The rhythm of her steps is broken as she falls into a more energetic flow, bouncing up and down in angled and twisted positions. While the intentions of her character remain only obliquely suggested and the dramaturgical frame hard to grasp, Plawgo's piece oozes radioactive strangeness. It is exactly this slight gap between the signifier and the signified that makes *Non-Playable Character* so uncannily magnetising.

One of the recurring themes of any recent dance festival remains theatrical representation and exploration, if not subversion, of its own codes and cues. In *La Cosa Piel*, **Juan Pablo Cámara** delves into the world of Latin-American telenovelas to unpack the codes and gestures of 'drama queens'. In his witty and smart endeavour, he deploys a full range of tactics from tongue-in-cheek acting and melodramatic postures, to compelling visual allusions, spoken word, and even crooner-like singing. Cámara's work is, however, far from being just a string of comic clichés. Bouncing back and forth between hiding and unveiling, grotesqueness and gravity, he lays bare not only the innate frailty of the 'drama queen' but also its toxic brutality. As he maintains intentional ambiguity about his character's agency and motives, Cámara creates an eerie feeling of estrangement, that lends depth to the piece and leaves a bittersweet aftertaste.



While *La Cosa Piel* revolved around codes of drama rather than choreographic forms, virtually all other works presented during Tanztage Berlin heavily relied on dance in all its manifestations. This tendency is, however, recent. Szymanówka recalls that when he moved to Berlin in 2010, the local dance scene 'was quite hardcore conceptual: artists with PhDs doing lecture-performances, choreographers and dancers working with stillness and darkness, and quoting Deleuze every other word.' This period undeniably opened Berlin's dance scene to different methodologies, but according to Szymanówka, the trend has shifted: 'There has definitely been a revival of interest in dancing, especially among younger folks. There are still some people claiming that "dancers in Berlin don't dance", but it is far from the truth.'

Dancers in Berlin certainly do dance, and not only on stage. Traditionally tightly intertwined with the city's bustling and politically engaged club scene, local choreographers and performers actively appropriate its distinct movement language, but also borrow its imagery: light effects, music style and even outfits. Ironically, Tanztage Berlin 2022 took place amid the dancing ban: a ludicrous Covid measure letting the city's nightclubs remain open but banning its patrons from dancing. In this context the extreme infiltration of thumping beats, strobe lights and rave dance moves on stage might even seem fitting. But it is not an exaggeration to say that what was once perceived as a refreshing and defiant drift away from choreographic rigidity has recently become a routine gimmick.



Against the background of festival shows that made massive use of pulsating lights, sometimes disturbingly loud music and monumental soundscapes, a silent and poetic work stood out. In *Dandelion II*, her debut solo piece, queer deaf artist **Rita Mazza** engineers a startling fusion between sign language, dance which is at times reminiscent of Laban's technique, and visual vernacular – a storytelling theatre practice popular in Deaf performance communities. *Dandelion II* is however greater than the sum of its parts. This unscripted encounter between different somatic practices brings out a staggeringly beautiful and evocative dance language. Mazza works with a remarkable economy of means (even Raquel Rosildete's light design is crisp and refined), as any additional scenic element would have indeed been superfluous and distracting. Her unostentatious and generous piece celebrates the dance at its core – and proves that choreographic language, when

Above: The melodrama queenery of Latin-American telenovelas: *La Cosa Piel*, with Juan Pablo Cámara

Far left: A life in cyberspace... Julia Plawgo in *Non-Playable Character*

Photos © Mayra Wallraff



Rita Mazza in *Dandelion II*
Photo © Mayra Wallraff

stripped from scenic artifices, can be more poignant and expressive than words.

After the festival one question kept buzzing in my head. If hard times indeed require hard dancing, can dancing repair the hardship? In other words, does contemporary dance have necessary political potential and tools to impact our society? Szymanówka believes that there is a lot of important knowledge developed in the contemporary dance field that could potentially help us re-appropriate what we have lost to capitalism: our bodies, our attention, and a sense of community. But he is also aware of the limits of such impact: 'As the queer-feminist rave collective Lecken wrote in their zine published in 2020: "If we are going to fight together, we must do more than dance together."

We can claim that what we do on stage is political, but we also need to engage with politics outside of the theatre.'

Contemporary dance as an art form can hardly ignite social and political change, yet it can tune in the present, and provide us with a vantage point from which we can critically question the future. Tanztage Berlin artists have emphatically proved that they rise to this challenge. 'Morgen ist die Frage' (Tomorrow is the Question) read, grinningly, a huge banner hoisted by the artist Rikrit Tiravanija on the façade of Berghain, arguably the most well-known Berlin dance institution. If tomorrow comes with a question mark, and if we are bound to stay with the trouble, then why not conjure better futures and, as Britney Spears urged us, dance 'till the world ends'? •

> If hard times require hard dancing, can dancing repair the hardship?

Moving Colors Youth Dance Festival

Stella Mastorosteriou
18 March 2022

A youngster helps out our grownup at a Greek festival that asks how young audiences might respond to contemporary dance that's not specifically made for them

Athens, Greece

Moving Colors is an international contemporary dance festival for children and young people, aiming to introduce young audiences to the world of contemporary dance and movement. Its second edition took place in Roes Theatre in Athens on 4–5 December 2021. Under the artistic direction of Frosso Trousa, the festival programmes performances from the Greek and European contemporary scene that, although not made specially for kids, have the potential to touch and intrigue a younger generation of dance viewers.



Nontas Damopoulos in Sofia Mavragani's *The Hero*. Photo © Despina Spirou



Rosaria Di Maro and Giorgia Longo in Adriano Bolognina's *Gli Amanti*. Photo © Monia Pavoni

On the first day of the festival, a mixed audience of kids with their parents and other adult viewers gather at Roes Theatre. The cheerful voices and curious eyes of the youngsters definitely bring some refreshing energy into the space. As I take my seat, 13-year-old Yiannis, who is sitting behind me, politely asks if I could change seats so that he can watch the stage more comfortably. I take the opportunity to chat with him – and he agrees to become my co-reviewer for the day!

After the first piece he says: 'I think they were in love.' Indeed, **Adriano Bolognino**'s *Gli Amanti* is inspired by the Lovers of Pompeii, remnants of two bodies in an embrace found in the volcanic wreckage of Pompeii. As the piece starts, two women face each other, standing diagonally in space. Dressed in patterned full-body tights, hair in sleek buns, they look like synchronised swimmers as they begin mirroring each other in precise gestures, creating flowing symmetrical patterns, interrupted by sudden rhythmical changes. Their gaze, locked on each other, creates an intense magnetic field between them, as they move from perfect symmetry to parallel paths to merging into one multifaceted body, a peculiar embrace.

Bolognino's movement language, gestural and highly physical at times, is accentuated by the elastic and articulate bodies of dancers and their synchronised breathwork and grimace. The pixelated pattern of the costume adds to the kaleidoscopic sense of the composition. The final image creates a direct reference to the Lovers of Pompeii, as the two end up in an embrace, intimate but tense, facing away from the audience, gazing into the inevitable.

Yiannis seems quite confused, trying to figure out what it all meant. 'It reminded me of the sea?' He also remarks on the flexibility of the bodies and how they could remember all of the complex sequences. 'I couldn't understand the music, so how were they so synchronised?'. In a brief post-show chat, Bolognino talks to me about how he perceived presenting the piece with children in the audience: 'It is an intimate piece, that demands concentration.' There was definitely an atmosphere of quiet concentration throughout the performance: 'one could maybe see it in their eyes,' he says.

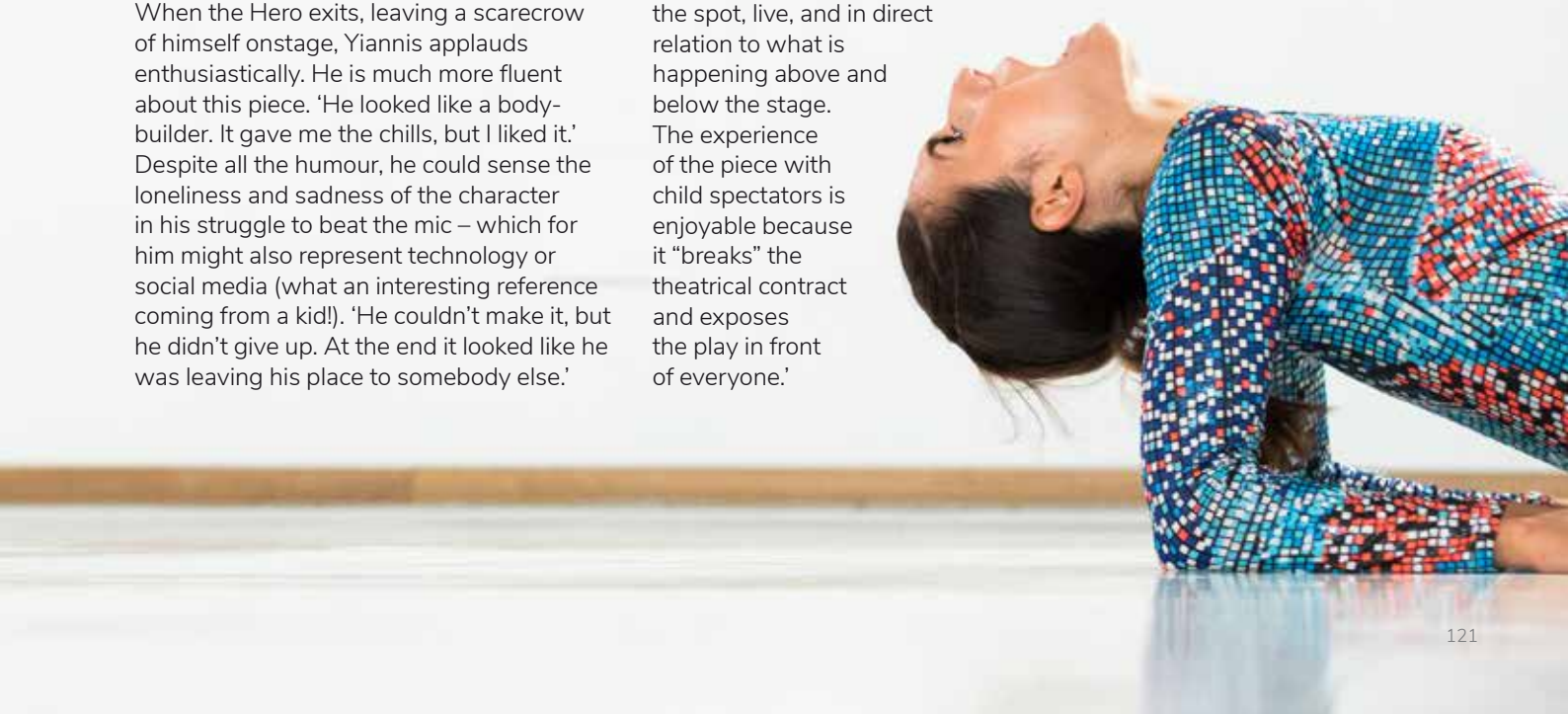
In **Sofia Mavragani**'s *The Hero*, dancer Nontas Damopoulos reincarnates the archetype of the superhero, complete with golden lycra tights over his muscular legs,

red shoes, a rubber cap and his six-pack peeking from his blazer. As the cartoonish character makes his grand entrance with a 'superman slide', a little girl from the front rows greets him: 'Oh, hello sir!' He wrestles theatrically with himself and with a microphone prop, reeling around the space from invisible punches, gasping and panting, trying and failing to find his voice to speak. When he finally finds it, it is the low voice of a witless villain. Damopoulos' comical muscularity, performed in the manner of a body-building competitor, causes chuckles in the audience. The little girl repeatedly addresses him throughout the performance: 'You looked prettier with the cap' (which leaves him smirking), and later: 'Is the performance over?' – to which he answers in his villain voice: 'Do not hurry...'

When the Hero exits, leaving a scarecrow of himself onstage, Yiannis applauds enthusiastically. He is much more fluent about this piece. 'He looked like a body-builder. It gave me the chills, but I liked it.' Despite all the humour, he could sense the loneliness and sadness of the character in his struggle to beat the mic – which for him might also represent technology or social media (what an interesting reference coming from a kid!). 'He couldn't make it, but he didn't give up. At the end it looked like he was leaving his place to somebody else.'

Mavragani considers *The Hero* relatable to audiences of all ages without the need for any adjustments. 'The theme is popular with children. We grow up with (super) heroes and heroines. In the piece there is a character on stage who we can recognise despite not always knowing what he is doing. The play has humour and Nontas is spectacular and skilled both kinetically and interpretively. These facts certainly help to reach various ages.'

For her, the piece invites interaction with the audience. Any reaction, positive or negative, is a source of feedback, and may create interesting challenges and surprises onstage. 'A mixed audience of adults and children viewing *The Hero* is of great interest to me. The adults may need to redefine conventional ways of watching, while the kids create them on the spot, live, and in direct relation to what is happening above and below the stage. The experience of the piece with child spectators is enjoyable because it "breaks" the theatrical contract and exposes the play in front of everyone.'





On the second day there are hardly any kids in the small audience, which consisted mostly of Athenian dancers (I guess Sunday is a school night after all). Jenna Jalonen's *Beat* is unfortunately cancelled due to Covid, so we get to watch *Gli Amanti* one more time and **Mellina Boubetra**'s *Intro*, a wordless conversation between three female bodies which escalates into an accumulative rave. Starting off in the dark, metallic beat sounds are gradually translated into rhythmical foot movement and facial expressions, as the dim lights reveal parts of the three bodies, dressed in casual attire. The dancers gaze directly at the audience, their posture implying a sense of waiting. Soon, the movement builds up into intricate rhythms of gesture, facial expressions and bodily states, all in total synch, but each one sustaining and revealing her own identity. As the trio expands in the space, they enter a highly physical rave state, in accord with the electronic music. Despite the abstract qualities of the piece, the sense of freedom and self-expression delivered through the intense dancing might find a good connection with restless teens. Just before the end the lights turn on the audience, and the dancers connect once more to us with their gaze, inviting our applause.

Currently the only contemporary dance festival in Greece aimed at young audiences, Moving Colors belongs to a category of initiatives attempting to reach broader audiences for contemporary dance. This is still an open field, exploring both how to attract broader audiences through suitable programming and communication, and how to create contemporary dance pieces that are relevant and engaging for different groups. As a dance viewer, it was definitely uplifting to be part of an audience of a wider range of ages than usual, sharing performances that equally address all of us. My coincidental exchange with Yiannis made my own experience of the festival unique and precious. I was touched by his eagerness to discuss and express opinions and questions, with frankness and curiosity. Another field full of potential for the dance world: encouraging more exchange and conversations amongst audience members of all backgrounds. •

With warm thanks to Yiannis Tzortzakis for contributing to this text



Left: Mellina Boubetra *Intro*
Photo © Charlotte Audureau

Below: Post-show fun club!
Photo © Sofia Mavragani

Zsófia Tamara Vadas, Csaba Molnár, Imre Vass: Game Changer

Lena Megyeri
29 March 2022

Changing the rules of performance – while staying on the same pitch?

Contemporary art is always at its best when it poses vital questions about the world we live in. Lately though, it seems that contemporary dance in Hungary has more questions about itself than anything else. The creators of *game changer* – Zsófia Tamara Vadas, Csaba Molnár and Imre Vass – have already examined issues of dance performance, its spaces, and the role of performer and audience in several different formations, notably in Hodworks' boundary-breaking shows.

'Sorry – we tried, but we failed. We tried to get back to normality, the dark theatre and make a dance show, do what we do best, but we couldn't,' says their post-pandemic confession on the flyer. So they set out to change the game instead. Well, we've known since Marcel Duchamp that if you put an object in a museum, it becomes a piece of art. Similarly, if you put an action on stage, it can be a performance. In an attempt to turn the rules upside down and tear down the fourth wall, *game changer* starts with a fake post-show talk, and on this night the audience proves very collaborative in asking questions about and giving their opinions of a performance that never was. (This beginning is reminiscent of 'Block game', an idea by Dutch theatre director Jan Ritsema, and of Spitfire Company's *Constellations III*, seen at Czech Dance Platform 2021, that starts in a similar way).

Later, the trio acts out a rehearsal: they chat, warm up, experiment with ideas and solos. It almost looks natural and improvised – except we all know it's just as staged as those fragments of 'actual' performance that the rehearsal sometimes blends into. Yes, theatre is full of contradictions. And if we hadn't understood earlier that the audience are expected to be partners here, then we surely will when the dancers imitate various ball games without balls, in a scene that's choreographically virtuoso but symbolically banal, where the dancers start passing the imaginary balls to us.

The lines between experiment and exhibition blur – but does this really challenge the perception of the seasoned art lover, 100 years after Duchamp? The creators consider *game changer* as a first stop on a journey of radical research, but at the moment it also feels like another symptom of contemporary dance's years of identity crisis. But here's hope: *game changer 2.0* arrives in May – and is full of promises.

The bottom line: A venture to find new ways to collaborate and connect in the theatre space uncovers obvious truths

Photo © Gergő Nagy

Concept: Molnár Csaba, Vadas Zsófia Tamara, Vass Imre / Production: Kárpáti Lili Melánia / Production partner: Katlan Csoport / Co-production partner: Trafó Kortárs Művészetek Háza / Supported by: Budapest Főváros Önkormányzata, Staféta, Füge Produkció, EMMI, NKA, Art Quarter Budapest

SCENE ON SCREEN



Another Round

Lena Megyeri
Stella Mastorosteriou
14 September 2021

A dance, not a drink, comes to fill a lack in our lives at the end of Vinterberg's Another Round. Here are two takes on the scene.

youtu.be/A9PrN4aqI60

The greatest cinematic dance scenes encapsulate the essence of an entire movie. The first thing I saw from Thomas Vinterberg's *Another Round* was Mads Mikkelsen's epic dance, the climax of the film which could easily compete with any grand musical finale in terms of celebratory atmosphere and joie de vivre. But it's also more complex than that: even without knowing the whole plot, one can sense a lot of what the character's been through and what a turning point in his life he's arrived at.

In this Danish picture, which won the 2021 Academy Award for Best International Feature Film, four high school teacher-friends – all suffering



Photo © Henrik Ohsten

from various manifestations of midlife crisis – decide to test a theory by Norwegian psychiatrist Finn Skårderud in real life. According to his premise, we are born with a 0.05% alcohol deficit in our blood, so sustaining a moderate level of drunkenness throughout the day would actually help us reach peak performance in several aspects of life. (Disappointingly, Skårderud has since denied that he ever came up with this theory.)

At first the experiment goes quite well, and all of the four men experience positive changes in their everyday lives. Mikkelsen's character, Martin, almost instantly becomes again the inspired teacher he once was, and is also able to face the numbness that his family life turned into many years ago. But as always with alcohol, not everyone knows when and how to stop, and at some point things start to get out of hand.

Dance is first mentioned when the group celebrates one of their birthdays, and someone reveals that Martin used to take jazz ballet classes when he was young. They ask him to show them some moves,





but he refuses. He still needs to go a long way until that final scene – and so his dancing at the end becomes an allegory of his progress, of opening up and finding his will to live again.

At the movie's close, Martin and his friends – drinks in hand – join their celebrating graduate students at Copenhagen's scenic harbourside, and he is once again teased by his friend to bring out the old moves. This time he agrees, at first reluctantly, pausing, looking at the sea and contemplating a while before deciding to really dive in – both to the dance and finally quite literally into the water as well. Suddenly, he is the coolest guy in the middle of the young crowd, turning, jumping, cartwheeling and twisting one leg around the other ('very much my move' – said Mikkelsen in an interview). The constantly moving, slightly wobbly camera drags us right into the middle of the cheering crowd and makes the impulsiveness of Martin's dancing physically tangible. 'Don't know where I'm in five but I'm young and alive / Fuck what they are saying, what a life' – sing the band Scarlet Pleasure, and Martin's mood couldn't reflect the momentary euphoria of the lyrics any better. He puts all his mixed emotions from dealing with the shock and trauma of the recent weeks, of grabbing the hopes for the future, into this dance.

Just like his character, Mikkelsen hadn't danced for thirty years before this movie, and according to choreographer Olivia Anselmo, he was similarly reluctant at first. But later, the actor confessed, he got a little ambitious. After all, as is quite evident from his moves, he used to be a professional dancer in his youth, starting out as a gymnast before turning to contemporary dance – even learning at the Martha Graham school in New York – and working with various Danish companies and in several musicals along the way. And why did he trade dancing for acting in the end? 'I was also always more in love with the drama of dancing than the aesthetics of dancing.' The perfect attitude for the final dance of *Another Round*.

Lena Megyeri

In *Another Round* (2020) director Thomas Vinterberg deals with the strains of men's mid-life crisis, highlighting both the dark and the ludicrous circumstances it can entail. The movie finale features a glorious dance scene, soulfully performed Mads Mikkelsen as Martin, a history teacher and family man who has become lost and unmotivated.

Following a theory that the human body has an inbuilt alcohol deficiency

of 0.05%, Martin and three colleagues and friends embark on a risky experiment to try to regain their joie de vivre, drinking throughout the day to keep themselves 'topped up'. Inevitably, their plan spirals out of control, leaving both tragic loss and valuable revelation.

On graduation day, teachers and students gather by the port to celebrate. The atmosphere is exhilarating: cheerful teenagers fill up the space with their youthful energy, dancing and drinking, full of hope and dreams for the future. Martin, who the same day had both attended the funeral of his dear friend and received messages of potential reconciliation from his wife, finds himself on the brink between sadness and joy. And then, he bursts into dancing.

At this point, actor and character meet Mikkelsen's former training as a gymnast and a dancer, intensifying the sense of realness of his dancing. The song 'What a Life' by the Danish band Scarlet Pleasure, upbeat and melancholic at the same time, is the perfect soundtrack.

Mikkelsen delivers a loose and raw dance. He starts off reluctantly, joining his friend in a short routine of cross steps and turns, set to the song's beat. He jokes and laughs about it, pausing now and again, sipping from cans of beer. Still detached from the dance, he retreats to sit on a bench, facing the open sea view. The camera focuses on his face, but his gestures suggest checking his phone again. There is a slight, ambiguous change of expression in his face – and then, as the song chorus peaks, he literally throws himself into the dance, jumping off the bench, landing as a popstar.

He is now fully immersed into a dance that is grand and introspective at the same time. Wide unbalanced steps and swaying arms, soon turn into jumps and air-kicks, cartwheels and acrobatic rolls on the ground, and Mikkelsen takes over the space, passing through dancing teenagers and fountains of champagne. Although he becomes the centre of attention of the party, he is clearly only dancing for himself. There is a bittersweet juxtaposition between the light-hearted dance of the youngsters and the passionate dance of fifty-year-old Martin, and the way he thrusts himself into it with his body and soul. As the song lyric goes, he just wants five more minutes of being young and alive.

The hand-held camera follows him around with long takes, constantly changing between levels and angles, adding to the sense of looseness of the movement and the internal release of the character. As the camera dances along with Martin, we are also carried away into his dance, following him along his internal journey, from heaviness towards lightness, from feeling lost to finding himself again. The scene – and the film – end with Martin mid-air, leaping towards the water. The image is ambiguous: is he flying or is he falling? Maybe, it is both.

The dance scene is undeniably the highlight of the film, allowing a cathartic effect for both the characters and the audience. It is a 'coming back to the body' moment, a reminder that that is where everything resides and springs from: the heaviness and the lightness, the despair and the hope, the sadness and the joy.

Stella Mastorosteriou

As the song lyric goes, he just wants five more minutes of being young and alive

Material Bodies

Jelena Mihelčić
14 October 2021

Accessories, prosthetics, props, extensions, constructions... Dorothy Allen-Pickard's short film blurs materials and bodies

vimeo.com/384022134



Every now and then I try to imagine what other 'four-eyed' people like me might be like, based on their spectacle frames. Although primarily a medical device, eyewear is also an accessory, used as a conscious expression of our identity to a lesser or greater extent. For this reason, but also because they are omnipresent and inconspicuous, nobody pays much heed to eyeglasses. On the flip side, this is not the case with a prosthetic arm or leg. A person who wears them is often first identified by that object, not by their personality. Yet a prosthetic is another medical device similar to spectacles that helps to enable a disabled part of the body.

A short UK film, *Material Bodies* directed by Dorothy Allen-Pickard, strives to raise our awareness of such discrepancy. In so doing, it makes use of the relationship between the body and architecture and objects of different textures and sizes as a visual support for the verbal aspect of the film, where the protagonists talk about their own relationship – and that of society – with their aids.

The film features Mickaella Dantas, from the Candoco Dance Company of disabled and non-disabled dancers, as both a dancer and an interlocutor. The props playing the main supporting roles are the work of Caitlin McMullan, another co-locutor in the film, a jewellery designer and a below-knee amputee, who explores how the sensory and aesthetic properties of materials offered for prosthetic limbs can affect experiences of them. The film also features Daniel Bermingham, assistant curator of Young People's Programmes at Tate, whose practice concerns queer, disabled bodies in public spaces, and Kat Hawkins, a journalist and a double amputee, who is also one of Candoco's members.

In this film, people and their prosthetic legs are constantly juxtaposed with the stability and hardness of concrete structures, verticals and horizontals of the surrounding architecture and its sharp outlines, as well as with the softness of sponges, rubber elasticity and a variety of fabrics. The outlines of the human body viewed through a glass prism or multiple layers of fabric reveal some quirky bodily forms. The protagonists touch coarse concrete surfaces, move around sharp edges, and squeeze ethereal fabrics.



Everything is a body really, no matter its physical properties – no matter the matter

The film is brimming with almost tangible colours and shapes. Everything is seen through the body, the body as matter that may have different physical properties.

Dorothy Allen-Pickard manages to raise our awareness that a human body is not the only body; everything is a body really, no matter its physical properties – no matter the matter. Furthermore, this body, through its relationship with the environment, constitutes a footprint beyond itself. Why wouldn't, then, a prosthetic leg, like the one of Frida Kahlo, become a means of self-expression? Or, in the words of Kat Hawkins from the film: 'I would love to be able to shift to viewing my prosthetics as an accessory. I want to be able to make them look badass.'

Blow-Up

Anastasio Koukoutas
23 November 2021

Blowing up the final scene of Antonioni's notorious film to reveal the games of reality and representation

youtu.be/fu-dHt1Uf88

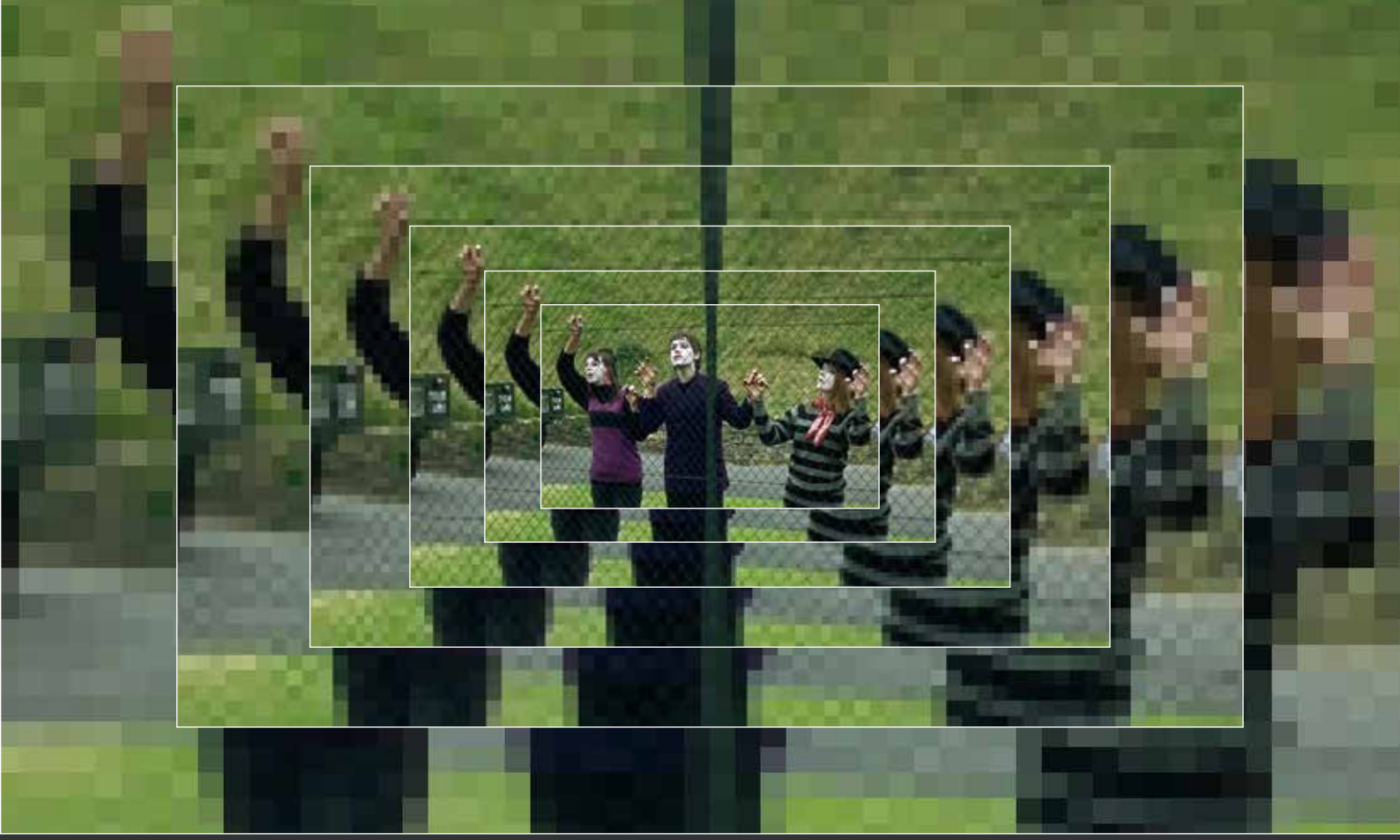
Recently I happened to watch Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* again, a 1966 film which sparked a lot of controversy but nonetheless gained institutional recognition by winning the Palme d'Or at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival. Rewatching the film made me realise that – without being strictly about music or dance – both elements are distinctively imbued within its narration. Dance, historically speaking, was at a moment of opening up to new forms of expression, incorporating the 'ordinary', changing our perception of the dancing body, its gestural nuances and the theatricality of the everyday life.

From this perspective, *Blow-Up* appears as a studious, filmic essay about moving images and movement, the conditioning of the gaze and the multiple perceptional levels of reality. While the film's progression is based on an incidental close-up, I am opting here for a more intentional close-up on the final scene. Unlike that of the hero Thomas (David Hemmings), my scrutiny reveals no hidden truth or deception; just a frivolous interest for moving bodies in moving pictures.

Blow-Up is about a young fashion photographer with a superstar aura, who dedicates his spare time to photographing a far less glamorous aspect of London's metropolitan life. The film goes into overdrive when Thomas, after meticulously examining a photo of a couple in a park, discovers that the idyll between the lovers is only a delusion. He has accidentally documented – according to his interpretation of these 'still-life' events – a murder case. He quickly becomes morbidly obsessed with connecting the 'dots', in his case, the highly magnified details of that shooting in the park. But the coarse-grained image is hardly a document for a murder case. The more his obsession grows, the more elusive the details appear. Just like in pointillism, the more you focus on the dots the less you understand what the image is about. Deception lies within reality, or to put it in Slavoj Žižek's words, desire is a wound of reality.

The final scene takes place in the park. Drifting aimlessly, somehow defeated by the lack of evidence to support his murder case, Thomas is turned into an accomplice of another, much more playful scene. A troupe of mimes in white facepaint stop by in their car and a young couple emerge spontaneously to enter a tennis court. The rest of the group gathers around the court fence as if a tennis match is about to take place, but without rackets or even a ball. Instead, the couple/players use their swaying arms to pretend to hit the ball, backstepping and jumping to deliver the physicality of a 'real' game to the silent crowd, who watch their *pas de deux* attentively. This type of realness is very convincing, becoming once again a go-between between reality and representation.

The couple doesn't negotiate the falsity of the game; nor does the crowd, who abide by the rules of this bizarre spectacle.



The players fake their intensity, running to return a shot, taking the correct striking posture, crouching to suggest the change in their playing stance. They even gesticulate furiously when they miss hitting the ball, raising their hands in despair when the opponent takes a lead; the drama is on.

Thomas, unconvinced by the credulity of the crowd, now faces the challenge of crossing a line, and so seeing things differently. When the ball exits the tennis court, one of the mimes points to it, inviting Thomas to retrieve it. Reluctantly, he jogs towards the ball, weighs it in his hand and throws it back. This is the moment that Antonioni's brilliance prevails: he doesn't now turn the camera back to the court, but rather dramaturgically cements the impression of the game by focusing on Thomas's face. Through his gaze, we enter the whole theatre apparatus.

Ultimately, the ball becomes a synonym for the 'missing dots' and invites us to think how dance-theatre is not just a replicate but a magnifier of life, giving us a perceptual frame to play with and thus investigate the fluid boundaries between spectacle and reality. It also reminds us that art, being elliptical in its interpretations, makes things real once we decide to enter the game. •

> **The more you focus on the dots, the less you understand the image**

The splatter dance of Smac McCreanor

Anastasio Koukoutas
08 February 2022

Splay, squash, splash, shatter… Smac McCreanor's twisted replications of objects breaking under pressure are comic, relatable – and addictive

youtu.be/HWqB6UxERAk

I was introduced to Smac McCreanor's videos randomly, as I was scrolling aimlessly while on hold for a telephone appointment. It was an instant, pleasant distraction, a genuinely funny if not awkward study on the human form and its disfigurement. McCreanor is an Australian performer, comedian, actress and content creator – the last, I believe, exemplifies her unique signature style on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Her Hydraulic Press videodance series is inspired by the sort of weird video-fix one finds online, a mise-en-abyme that swallows you into the abyss of digital paraphernalia. The videos are presented in split-screen, one side showing a hydraulic press crushing various objects (there's even a YouTube channel for freaks of this kind), the other with McCreanor performing a parallel outburst of sudden, irrational and uncontrolled movements, or what I call 'splatter dance'.

But how does the breaking point become material for dance movement? Applying it, metaphorically, to the human body means trying to replicate the distorted forms of the crushed objects, creating an embodied 'equivalent' to the image and plasticity of materials. This revisioning of human physicality and bodily creativity isn't a fetishist celebration of a body imploding under the pressure of the machine – a tangible fear so often connected with modernity and industrialisation. Instead of a battle between man and machine, this is rather a queer study on human shape and unity, how it can be estranged and reconfigured, playfully manipulated and comically re-examined. Whether introducing a toilet brush, a pile of cream-stuffed chocolates, a grinder or a lemon, a unicorn ornament, a frame, a handful of crisps, a bicycle wheel or other *objets trouvés* placed and crushed under the hydraulic press,





her movement material becomes a study of ‘pataphysics’ – the term Alfred Jarry invented to play with conventional concepts and the megalomaniac ambition of science to interpret reality.

McCreanor creates a paradox: her out-of-joint positions and splayed limbs, her intelligible fluid corporeality in this type of ‘splatter dance’, is visually amusing because it is devoid of any psychological depth. It is rather this ‘shallowness’ that allows humour to expel, the visual analogy to the object that makes the body matter in a different way. The simultaneous projection of object/body, reframing the materiality of the body according to the materials of the object, is further explored through a theatrical element to highlight the object’s ‘personality’. Sometimes McCreanor wears a hat, her clothes matching the objects’ colour; more rarely, a scarf is thrown in air as if she were spilling out her guts (the closest she gets to expressing something ‘deeper’). The juxtaposition is evident and the effect is more than satisfying: just as her limbs release the kind of motoric energy as if caused by the hydraulic pressure, we release an uncontrolled burst of laughter, if not an uncontrolled desire to watch the video over and over again.

Also, given the historical frame in which most of her videos are made, I couldn’t resist noticing that her approach to the stultifying effect of the pandemic and its restrictions – her own embodied experience and dealing with something that still registers variously in our bodies – could also be seen like a daily comic strip. Her outward physicality often ‘describes’ and recalls some of the



emotional states in which I found myself during the pandemic: bend like metal, crack like glass, break like plastic, splash like liquid, melt like chocolate – and though hers is a funnier approach than my dramatic reading, I realise that I can also relate emotionally to her kinetic impulsivity, to the polymorphic perversity with which she exposes her own body. McCreanor’s is a work of ‘extimacy’ – a combination of exteriority and intimacy – articulated in a delicate sense of humour that registers sensorially and deeply, almost effortlessly, in our bodies. Read the viewers’ comments, and you’ll agree that it is the work of a true comedian who masterfully combines pleasure with artistic creativity. •

Lena Megyeri
11 March 2022

The dreamspaces of dance and narrative cinema coincide in the unreal romance Kaufman's film

youtu.be/4V_HGkVbnng



Photo: Mary Cybulski/Netflix

At first, it looks like just another sweet, romantic ballet duet, but do not believe your eyes: in this movie nothing is quite what it seems. For at first, the plot of *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* (2020) seems simple enough too: a fresh couple (Jesse Plemons and Jessie Buckley) drive to visit his parents for the first time, while she already considers leaving him – or 'ending things' with him. But then it all starts to get more and more bizarre: he responds to thoughts she never said out loud; his parents' age continuously changes during their visit; she keeps getting mysterious phone calls; and even her name alters occasionally. By the time we get to that 'dream ballet' scene near the end, most viewers will have more questions than answers as to what is really going on in this film.

True to style, writer-director Charlie Kaufman leaves much room for interpretation (and internet speculation), but there's general agreement on one thing: it is a movie of fantasies and missed chances. According to the most frequent explanation (supported by Iain Reid's book that the film is based on), the school janitor who appears several times throughout the plot is in fact the older version of Jake, the couple's male partner, who, while 'thinking of ending things', imagines a life that could have been his own.

The movie is full of cultural references (Jake likes to show off his knowledge of art), but it owes most to Jake's favourite musical, *Oklahoma!*, and especially to its psychologically loaded dream ballet – a format common in American film musicals, here choreographed by Agnes de Mille for the 1955 cinema version. From concrete moves to iconic moments (like the bridal veil dropping from the sky), choreographer Peter Walker takes a lot from the classic forebear for this key scene in the movie, danced charmingly by New York City Ballet's Unity Phelan and Broadway star Ryan Steele.

Following up on the chain of art references, Jay Wadley composed a score that sounds like he put the best of Stravinsky's and Debussy's ballet music into a mixer. To the gentle opening tunes of harp and flute, the two dancers set out not only to embody the more flawless and adorable versions of Jake and his girlfriend, but also to present an allegory of perfect romance: the kind that only exists as an ideal. It's almost comically exaggerated, like a grand ballet pas de deux: right at the beginning they run towards each other, then he lifts her up and dramatically catches her; then there's an arabesque lift and an elegant bend, standing in a glamorous ray of light that shines on them through the windows. And yet their dance has nothing of the self-conscious presentation of a ballet duet. Every playful jump, head-spinning turn and criss-cross of the arms is in perfect harmony, their partnering is intimate with frequent soft touches. This is a couple that is in accord, in unison.

But there's still a faint feeling of irony as trivial things distract from the dreaminess of the choreography. After all, this dance takes place in a narrow school corridor where locker doors sometimes get in the way, and instead of a proper fountain there's only a water tap to provide some rather unspectacular background. Compensating for the restrictedness of the space, there's the camera that gives a flow to the scene by smoothly moving along with the dancers. After they mime their wedding on the spot, suddenly the music turns uncanny and violent (à la *Rite of Spring*) as a middle-aged man (probably another incarnation of the school janitor) attacks the newly wed dance couple, and tries to grab



I'm Thinking of Ending Things

away the woman. Dancer Jake struggles with him in the school gym amidst a fake snowstorm and, after being stabbed with a knife, bleeds red scarves while the original Jake and girlfriend watch over him. They don't seem astounded, and who could blame them? It was only a fantasy. Too bad it means the romance wasn't real either.

La Grande Bellezza

Anastasio Koukoutas
24 March 2022

The bump of lust and the grind of vacuity form 'the great beauty' that prefigures our times

vimeo.com/141044158



Photo © Janus Films 2013

La Grande Bellezza by Paolo Sorrentino, Best Foreign Language Film Oscar at the 86th Academy Awards, could be seen as a filmic diptych: at once a stunning portrait of the 'Eternal City' – referencing also the work of auteurs like Fellini and Antonioni – and an intricate portrait of the ambiguous cynical writer Jep Gambardella (Toni Servillo, delivering a masterclass of acting methods). It is a diptych because Rome serves not just as a backdrop, but as a city with an enigmatic personality to explore through the biographical routes of the main character. Hence the life of the city speaks about the life of the character, at times desolate and enchanting, at others populated and vaguely bitter. But given the magnitude of the city's grandeur, human action within it seems comparably trivial, even nonsensical.

Sorrentino captures this existential perspective by allowing characters to pass by or orbit around Jep, who is the centre of this peculiar universe. *La Grande Bellezza* is orchestrated narratively like a web, allowing a parade of faces, lovers, acquaintances, friends, potential enemies or bigger crowds to encircle the protagonist, to punctuate the narratives differently, to articulate the dramatic semitones within the late middle-age crisis



of the disillusioned but not yet defeated aesthete, Jep. Indeed, Jep recognises and treasures the beauty around him: in his personal moments he is contemplative and compassionate, almost a fictional alter ego to the snobbish and wry personality found amidst the decaying glamour of the bourgeoisie or the decrepit façade of politics.

Jep is a postmodern flâneur, a distanced observer of life around him. Whether he attends a funeral, an 'art' performance or a party, there's always a sense of inconsolable grief, a bitterness for life's contradictions. This is his drama: he seems to know what others refuse to see and acknowledge. The discordant feeling is vividly realised in the film's party scene, which opens with a woman screaming, before the camera dives into a writhing, feral mass of dancing bodies. We are now in a techno blizzard, probably in some Roman terrace where posh Italians celebrate their idea of 'good' life, allowing themselves to lose control in this carnival of the senses. A female go-go dancer – a stereotype of Italy's young female TV personalities, called *le veline* – frolics on a bar above the cheering crowd, whose arms are outstretched in ecstasy, as if conducting the heavenly vibrations of the music.

The camera skips and bumps along the wild mass, momentarily capturing the pulsating rhythm and heedless mood of the people dancing. Smiling faces, raised Martini cocktails, bodies loose and sexually available, eyes wild with chemical fervour. This is the glittering surface of the 2000s' 'dolce vita': a frenzy of 'far l'amore' and 'mueve la colita' that ended with a storm of economic scandals and the abusive narcissism of the ruling charlatans – and Sorrentino, true to his main character's insightfulness, gives a disarming and poetic premonition of this turning point. It's no coincidence, then, that Jep is found in the heart of party – if not him being the heart, since it's his birthday. The world is already upside down, but Jep will allow himself to be momentarily distracted, to kiss a girl or two, before he withdraws from this madness.

Meanwhile, the crowd splits into two groups, male and female, as the rhythm changes into a Latin 'anthem' of the era, one of those that everyone seems to be able to dance to. Dancing isn't the main issue here: it's the uplifting vibe, the synchronised clapping, the role-playing the song implies. The choreography is all about wiggling shoulders, swaying hips and the sort of 'humping mechanics' that underline the sexual tension already established in the party. Women boost their breasts while men gesticulate as if squeezing lemons, grimacing so ridiculously that even Rabelais would envy their facial expressions. In this chain of action-reaction, the hands are lifted up, then extended as if to halt the partner who is standing opposite, then up again, a kind of tug-of-war that never ends. But just as the scene seems to culminate, the movements become heavier, the tempo slows down – a wayward descent into Jep's inner state. In the middle of this hedonistic parade, he switches off his party mood and looks directly into the camera.

Jep's gaze is penetrating, as if trying to look beyond the screen, to exit the reality he is trapped in. Or maybe he just looks with astonishment at the great resemblance of his reality to ours, a rare example of 'great beauty' in cinema. •

ABOUT



Contributors

Direction

Sanjoy Roy London, UK
Editing / page layout
Formerly a publication editor and designer at Dance Books, Sanjoy has written on dance for the *Guardian* since 2002, and contributed to many other publications including the *New York Times*, *New Statesman*, *Dance Gazette* and *Dancing Times*. He keeps an archive of writing at sanjoyroy.net.

Clàudia Brufau Barcelona, ES
Communications
Clàudia writes for *Revista Musical Catalana*, *Núvol*, and coordinates the dance section of the Performing Arts Critics in Catalonia (*Recomana*). She collaborates with private and public institutions in Catalonia, and is communications manager at Aerowaves.

Oonagh Duckworth Brussels, BE
Springback Academy
Oonagh is director of Springback Academy. She also manages different cultural initiatives – artistic, sociocultural, participatory, performance, writing and dance orientated – from her own organisation, The Tinderbox, based in Brussels.

Contributors

Evgeny Borisenko Berlin, DE
Evgeny is a Russian / French arts and dance writer and dramaturg currently based in Berlin. He was a freelance reporter for the Russian «Театр.» theatre magazine and numerous French online resources. In 2018 he participated in Springback Academy and started reporting to Springback Magazine from Berlin. In 2021 he also wrote about the Berlin dance scene for Tanzschreiber Berlin.

Ka Bradley London, UK
Ka is a commissioning editor at Penguin Classics. Her dance and theatre criticism has appeared in *Exeunt*, *Time Out*, *The Stage* and *The Observer*. Her fiction has appeared in *The Willowherb Review*, *Catapult*, *Somesuch Stories* and *Electric Literature*, among others.

Charles A. Catherine Paris, FR
Charles studied dance in Paris alongside history, sociology and cultural policy. He began to choreograph in 2004 for university groups, and dance journalism was a natural development. He directed the French dance magazine *Ballroom*, and now writes for various publications.

Gaia Clotilde Chernetich Rome, IT
Gaia is a dance dramaturg working internationally in dance and theatre. As a researcher, she focuses on transdisciplinary approaches to performing arts, including memory studies and research methodology. She writes for several art publications and magazines. She curates the Spring choreographic residencies at Festival Oriente Occidente, and collaborates with choreographer Adriana Borriello for the Da.Re. research programme (2022–24).

Beatrix Joyce Berlin, DE
Beatrix is a performance artist and dance writer. She works across dance, writing and installation and creates site-specific, intermedia and interactive performances. She was selected for Tanzschreiber at Tanzbüro in 2019 and is engaged in experimental writing projects.

Anastasio Koukoutas Athens, GR
Anastasio is a dance theorist and writer, working occasionally as a dramaturg. He has been a contributor and publishing editor for art institutions and organisations in Greece, and a frequent collaborator with the websites und-athens.com and artivist.gr.

Anna Kozonina Helsinki, FI
Originally from St Petersburg and currently based in Helsinki, Anna is a dance critic, researcher and curator, and has written a book on the Russian contemporary dance scene, focusing on emerging dance artists and multidisciplinary projects. She lectures on dance and performance theory, curates educational programmes and writes about dance for several art magazines.

Riikka Laakso Barcelona, ES
Riikka is a dance researcher, writer, dramaturg and choreographer working between Helsinki and Barcelona. She holds a PhD from Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona and lectures in dance analysis at Institute del Teatre. She regularly collaborates with choreographer Marina Mascarell, recently editing the book *Corporeizar el pensamiento* on her work.

Claire Lefèvre Vienna, AT
Claire is a French choreographer performer and writer. Whether with dances or with words, she likes to create kitsch landscapes gently interweaving politics and poetics. She has developed several text-based practices, from teaching concept-writing to movers and makers, to organising love letter exchanges as feedback formats for art festivals.

Stella Mastorosteriou
Thessaloniki, GR
Stella is a dance artist and dance educator, with a background in architecture. In 2012 she co-created KINOYME dance studio in Thessaloniki, where she teaches and choreographs for children and adults.

Emily May Berlin, DE
Emily is a British arts writer currently based in Berlin. She began reviewing while studying contemporary dance at Laban in London and is now a regular contributor to international publications including *ArtReview*, *The Stage*, *Dance Magazine*, *Flash Art*, and *Frieze*. She is also an editor at the music discovery channel COLORSxSTUDIOS, where she launched and manages a new editorial platform.

Lena Megyeri Budapest, HU
Lena manages and facilitates independent theatre projects in Hungary, and is currently artistic manager of the Mozsár Műhely theatre space in Budapest. She has contributed to several publications including *Ellenfény*, *Tanckritika*, *Színház* and dancefeed.org.

Jelena Mihelčić Zagreb, HR
Jelena is a journalist, dance writer and a public relations specialist. She has been writing about dance since 2002 and made several documentary films on dance. While working in an advertising agency, she was also the Head of Marketing and Communications for Croatian Dance Network.

Róisín O'Brien Edinburgh, UK
Róisín is an independent dance journalist, choreographer and producer. She writes for UK and international publications and has produced DanceLive festivals with Citymoves Dance Agency and the visual theatre festival MANIPULATE with Puppet Animation Scotland. She is currently an associate L20 artist with the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh.

Greta Pieropan Bassano, IT
Greta has a background in Modern Philology and Literature Studies, with a focus on journalism and performing arts. She works with festivals and companies to communicate dance to professional and non-professional audiences. Her research includes dance dramaturgy as a tool for creative processes, exchanges between artists and audiences, and new narratives for contemporary dance.

Marie Pons Lille, FR
Marie writes for *Mouvement*, *Ma Culture*, *LM Magazine* and is editor-in-chief of *Les Démêlées*, a paper publication focused on dance criticism. She is producer for *All we can do is dance*, a web project combining film and dance, and is in charge of documenting European projects such as Dancing Museums (2016–22) and Migrant Bodies (2018–19).

Jordi Ribot Thunnissen
Amsterdam, NL
Born in the Netherlands but raised in Catalonia, Jordi studied journalism, choreography and theatre. He teaches dance history in Arnhem and Amsterdam. As a freelance writer and lecturer, he collaborates with cultural agents across Europe including Mercat de les Flors, Festival TNT Terrassa, Julidans Festival, and Choreolab.eu. As a dance critic, he also contributes to Theaterkant.nl and Movement Exposed Critical Space.

Jonas Schildermans Taipei, TW
Jonas is a Belgian dance writer, curator and producer, with an education in art history. He is working with Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui on a retrospective publication, and is development officer at his company Eastman. Simultaneously, he is international representative at CHOU Tung-Yen's Very Theatre in Taipei, where he moved in 2021.

Yasen Vasilev Sofia, BG
Yasen is a writer and performance-maker. His work received awards, residencies, publications, readings, workshops and productions internationally. Since 2015 he has been working on the physical score *NUTRICULA*. Since 2018 he has been working with Radar Sofia, an artist-run residency for playwrights and artists at risk.

Lydia Wharf London, UK
Lydia has a long relationship with dance, initially as a performer with Michael Clark Company, then as a writer, advocate and, currently, freelance producer. She works with a wide range of independent artists, particularly those facing intersectional barriers to access, supporting the development and distribution of new dance theatre work inter/nationally.

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- Springback Annual, either as a PDF (monthly members) or as a luxury printed edition by post (annual members)
- On-site Google translations into your language
- Quarterly Editorial email
- Notifications of site updates
- Free downloadable **quickstart guide to writing dance reviews** by Springback editor Sanjoy Roy

Every Membership goes towards commissioning new content for Springback Magazine to maintain editorial independence.

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Springback Magazine
advancing european dance

‘The question is not only about art and artists, it is also about us. We prioritise art in one context, artists in another, and deprioritise both in a third. These are choices we make and steps we take, depending on circumstance. That is politics.’

springbackmagazine.com

What is Springback?

Springback is an octopus. A European contemporary dance octopus.

Seriously. You know that octopuses have one central brain and another one in each tentacle? That they have several hearts? That their blood is blue? Springback is just the same. (Maybe not the blood part.) It hatched in 2015 at Springback **Academy**, a practical, mentored programme for dance writers resident in Europe. Its niche is not making or presenting dance, but communicating it.

That little creature has now grown several arms, including an online **Magazine** with a specially printed **Annual**, a yearly **Assembly** that hosts live encounters between writers and a local scene, a **Ringside** project presenting VR versions of live works to new audiences, and miscellaneous partnerships to present talks and workshops.

At heart, Springback has several principles. That it is worth cultivating new critical and journalistic dance writing as old media die out. That dance communication can be lively, open, accessible and yes, enjoyable (octopuses are smart as well as cute). That criticism, contemplation and creativity work better together than apart.

Springback reaches and responds to contemporary dance in Europe – with **brains**, with **arms**, with **hearts**.