

How to „Read“ a Dance Theatre Performance?

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Abstract: The following article treats the subject of a dance theatre performance, by giving an inside and an outside perspective of the creative process. It also attempts to define the concept of dance dramaturgy and to explain the dramaturg's function in the rehearsal room. On a level of perception, the audience's function is a very important one, because the spectator becomes a co-author of the performer's message. Therefore, the relationship between the stage and hall is a communication on different levels.

Keywords: Audience, cultural approach, dance theatre, devised process, dramaturg, dramaturgy, dramaturgical thinking, imagination, images, interpretation, space, theatre.

In his essay from 1917, *Art as a Technique*², the Russian critic Viktor Schlovsky starts with a statement: "Art is thinking in images". Every form of art is a result of a process that creates and (re)arranges images in such matter to create a meaning or a story. As performing arts practitioners, we can consider this as a starting point for us, to ask a series of questions about the ways in which these stories are delivered to an audience and about how they are perceived. In the context of a dance theatre performance, the body in space is the raw material of creating and transmitting these images in front of an audience. This matter can be interpreted as liberating and extremely encoded for uninformed spectators. The way in which we witness an artistic product is highly influenced by a group of identity factors, as: culture, history, sociology, personal history or even momentary disposition. Therefore, the image in the creative process, as Schlovsky puts it, is being distorted, we might

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2. Victor Shklovsky, "Art As Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism. Four Essays*, ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion Reis (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 3–57.

say, improved or complemented by the “outside eye” of the spectators. Thus, art is thinking in the performer’s images or in the spectators’ images: each of these two perspectives has, in this context, a creative function.

The way in which the story of a body in motion is represented on stage is closely related to the physical elements of the limited space of the performance. The French dancer and choreographer, Hubert Godard points out a very clear distinction between space and topos, as if follows:

Space is a word that we use constantly in our work as dancers and bodyworkers, but it is an ambiguous term. I will use the term *space* when I talk about the imaginary building of our relationship to the world, and I will use *topos* when I am talking about real, geographical, measurable space. When people meet or interact, it is a mix of the two. What I am calling space, the imaginary building of the phenomenon, is linked to our personal story.³

For Godard, performance is a meeting between dancer and spectator at a congruence between space and time.

A performance becomes a place of continuous negotiation and the dramaturg a kind of referee or a facilitator between two sides. Throughout the present article I will present the dramaturg’s function within the creative process of a dance theatre performance and also the function and the ideal way of perception that the spectators must have while attending a representation in a specific time and space.

What is dance dramaturgy?

Dance dramaturgy is considered to be a relatively new term in the performing arts sector. Belgian artist Myriam van Imschoot states the fact that the term was created out of a form of anxiety:

The general discourse on the new dramaturgy (be it theatre or dance related) is mostly structured around a couple of tropes, or to put it another way, anxieties: the generic anxiety (where does the dramaturg come from?), the definition of anxiety (what is a dramaturg?)⁴

3. Caryn McHose, “Phenomenological Space: ‘I’m in the Space and the Space Is in Me,’” *Contact Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2006): 33.

4. Synne K. Behrndt, “Dance, Dramaturgy and Dramaturgical Thinking,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 20, no. 2 (May 2010): 186, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801003682393>.

We must understand the clear distinction between “playwright” and “dramaturg”. The first is considered to be the author of a text created with the purpose to be staged; the second has different responsibilities during the rehearsals, such as researching a specific subject, being an advisor for the director of the performance, adapting a play/script or other texts to be staged. The *Oxford Encyclopedia to Theatre and the Performing Arts*⁵ explains the fact that a dramaturg is a very trained person with a special knowledge in theatre practice, history and theory who can help the director or other members of a theatre group with their intentions in a specific production. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was the first to use the term “dramaturg” in *Hamburgische Dramaturgie/Hamburg Dramaturgy* (1767). Since then, the dramaturg is an indispensable collaborator in a classical theatre production or in experimental and independent theatre companies.

In the case of a dance theatre performance, the dramaturg’s role is also becoming a necessity and its function is extended on different levels. On one hand, the dramaturg is an interlocutor to the choreographer, helping him to elaborate the concept of the show. In this dialogue, the dramaturg offers a theoretical basis for the possible interpretative meanings of the performance. This approach is applicable for a devised performance – created strictly for that particular act. Also, the dramaturg is the one that creates correspondences and cultural, social, historical, psychological or other required references for the entire group. Another perspective concerning the dramaturg’s tasks is offered by artist Hildegard de Vuyst, during a discussion on this matter published by *Dance Theatre Journal* in 2000:

I consider myself the first audience, I ask myself – “what does the work do to me?” I do not go and get my information in the libraries, because it’s not going to be used. But it is as André (*Lepecki*) also says about the process – at first, it’s very open with a lot of improvisations and assignments, people are asked to make solos and after that the construction of the whole thing takes place, which we very much do together. I’ve worked with different choreographers and directors and I feel that it works best when I’m not really needed somehow, when

5. Dennis Kennedy, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780198601746.001.0001>.

I'm not the embodiment of something that is missing. Because it feels like if I'm not necessary in fact then I have a sort of freedom and a playground to stand on.⁶

Therefore, the dramaturg is also a consultant for the entire time spent in the rehearsal room.

On the other hand, he also has the function of a documentarist and acts like a living memory for the whole material produced by the team. There is a very important difference between dramaturg and dramaturgical thinking. Sometimes, the dramaturg is not needed in a production, but the choreographer along with other dancers must have a dramaturgical thinking, which concerns with taking distance and experiencing an objective perception of the process. This option is vital for the construction of a solid concept and represents a shared responsibility of the entire creative team.

Raimund Hoghe was the first dramaturg to work with a choreographer in the '80s. Him and Pina Bausch created the most meaningful performances at Tanztheater Wuppertal in that period of time. Pina Bausch proposed another approach to the creative process: she started by asking personal questions to her dancers as a ground for improvisation. This amount of material was revised and organized with Hoghe in original dance theatre productions. Since then, an increasing number of choreographers have chosen this formula. During the discussion I've already mentioned, Myriam van Imschoot offers an explanation for this option, as it follows:

I am thinking about this relationship between a choreographer and a dramaturge and about something we were discussing yesterday, about feeling lonely in the process of making. I can imagine that someone making a work, even though there are plenty of dancers or a set designer or whoever just feels the need to have someone to talk to, whatever this function may be. I would think of this as a social need. Another need might be on the level of skills, that apparently there is a need for some kind of skill, and I think of the traditional dramaturgy that is still linked with some kind of intellectual skill, or intellectual capacity. But this also suggests that there is a skill that exists outside of the body of the choreographer and a division of labor is taking place.⁷

6. Scott DeLahunta, "Dance Dramaturgy: Speculations and Reflections," *Dance Theatre Journal* 16, no. 1 (2000): 20–25.

7. DeLahunta.

This can be a very plausible explanation, due to the fact that the dramaturg doesn't necessarily need to have choreographic or dancing training. Thus, all he needs to have is the availability to react as a real safety net for the artists that are involved in creation and to bring an intellectual approach to the story.

By adding to dance some specific theatre elements, the performers must have another approach of their work. First and foremost, they must be aware that they are creating a new and undiscovered character entirely inspired from their own emotions and history. And this is a great responsibility they are receiving throughout the spectacle. Secondly, they need to master the multitude of layers for the relationships on stage. The performer's choreography is created on the following: (1) the relationship with his own body, (2) the relationship with his/her partner, (3) the relationship with the space, (4) the relationship with the object, (5) the relationship with the audience. All these five relationships have their own dramaturgy.

In conclusion, the tasks of the dramaturg involve: observing, recording, discussing, researching, organizing/ordering/structuring, writing. But, the most important of all these is his obligation to create the possible strategies for interpretation offered to the future audience.

The audience's function

In his book, *Engaging Audiences*, professor Bruce McConachie describe the audience by its biological function:

We are social animals. Because evolution has equipped our species with more sensitivity to the needs and emotions of others than is evident in other mammals, we carry these cognitive capabilities with us into theatrical viewing. (...) This mode of engagement, also known as empathy, extends to our understanding of actors' use of props and even their gestures and spoken language. Empathy is not an emotion, but it readily leads viewers to emotional engagement.⁸

8. Bruce McConachie, *Engaging Audiences. A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 65.

Therefore, the main instrument for the spectators is their nature of human beings and their way of perception by mirroring their experiences with the actions they see onstage. It is a well-known fact that we tend to be interested only by the information and the material we can relate in one way or another. When we encounter something new or maybe original our human nature will push us to create correspondences with our own experiences in the past. A choreography was always an abstract domain and the audience will receive a multitude of images and situations that they will have the freedom to organize as they prefer.

Interpreting a performance is almost like a neuroscience experiment: it engages all our senses and our subconscious mind. We might not classify what we see as the real world, but a possible universe in the convention we are about to accept. Even so, our brain will continue to search for connections and to create a logic for what is happening in front of our eyes. Even the perception of time is a subjective fact, which depends on the milliseconds needed for the brain to create a content from the auditive and visual information received from the outside world. I believe that a dance theatre performance is highly experiential both for dancers and performers.

At the present moment, I do not consider that the Romanian audience is properly educated concerning the perception of a dance theatre performance. Dancing, like performance art, doesn't have to be analyzed by using the same rules as we use for theatre. Most of all, watching a dance theatre performance is an organic experience, and everything starts from the audience's expectation. In the previously cited interview, Godard names this „the dance of my expectation”. Thus, the space is never empty, because since the beginning it is filled with the audience's personal needs. The spectators become co-authors of the message. Professor Royd Climenhaga gives an example of this matter in his book about Pina Bausch:

When I saw *Bandoneon* (1984), I saw the aura of dislocation (...) Having just moved and being in a transitional time in my life, I felt the piece as a desire for connection (...) to those I care about. While milling about at intermission, I overheard a woman remark to her friend: *I just started chemotherapy last week; that's how it feels.*⁹

9. Royd Climenhaga, *Pina Bausch* (London: Routledge, 2009), 63–64.

This (let's call it) "studied ambiguity" is the most important element of a dance theatre performance. The precarity of the moment is its strength and the meaning becomes a perceptual challenge, as Einav Katan-Schmid puts it: "The philosophical challenge of understanding dance is to elaborate implicit embodied knowledge within explicit argumentation. Thus, before dealing with the logic of linguistic argumentation, philosophy becomes a perceptual challenge."¹⁰ Hence, the spectator absorbs the meaning of a dance theatre performance in „two acts“: instinctual and intellectual. At a conference during International Theatre Festival of Sibiu (FITS), choreographer and director of Batsheva Dance Company from Tel Aviv, Ohad Naharin stated that, as a choreographer he has the privilege of not having to explain his creative options. Imagination, he said, is much bigger than our vocabulary and it means the freedom to fantasize about every human value or feeling we are experiencing in this lifetime. In this matter, our option as spectators should be very opened to receive every stimulus from the performers without framing them into known patterns. As co-authors we can filter the images through our personal experiences and create a new piece that is solely addressed to us. There are as many performances as people in the audience in one night and every story it tells is perfectly valid.

Another argument for not having to explain your options as an artist in front of an audience comes from Walter Benjamin who has the belief that art was never created for a public – and this is its power. The audience's attraction for the artistic act can come from a feeling of voyeurism. Having a glimpse of something that was not initially created specifically for one individual, but in the same time, being addressed to each of the individuals gathered at a specific time and space is the paradox of the performance.

In conclusion, we "read" a dance theatre performance by using our way of thinking in images, which is neither more nor less than other possible perceptions to the respective act.

10. Einav Katan-Schmid, *Embodied Philosophy in Dance: Gaga and Ohad Naharin's Movement Research* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 7.

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