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South
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Dance
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SEEDS

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About SEEDS

SEEDS - South East European Dance Stations is a collaborative artistic project developed by The National Center for Dance Bucharest (CNDB), Brain Store Project Foundation (Sofia), and Station – Service for Contemporary Dance (Belgrade). Launched in 2022, SEEDS focuses on nurturing contemporary dance in Southeast Europe through three dimensions:

Empowering the next generation: SEEDS provides education and training for emerging dance artists and producers, equipping them with the skills and knowledge to thrive in the contemporary dance landscape. More specifically, The Academy for Dance and Performance, organised in Bucharest (2022-2023) enabled 11 performers and 7 emerging producers from Romania, Bulgaria, and Serbia, to develop their skills, knowledge, and experience in the contemporary dance field.

Fostering artistic collaboration: The project facilitates artistic co-production, enabling artists from all three partner countries to collaborate on innovative dance productions.

After the education and training program, each partner produced a new contemporary dance piece, in which graduates from the Academy for Dance and Performance worked together with local artists from each country. Thus, the performances "Unstable Comrades" (choreography by Igor Koruga, produced by Stanica - Service for Contemporary Dance), "Transformability: Forever [partly musical]" (choreography by Willy Prager, produced by Brain Store Project Foundation), and "Bodies on the Line" (choreography by Ioana Marchidan, produced by the National Centre for Dance in Bucharest), premiered in the season 2023-2024 and are presented in 2024 in three International dance festivals: Antistatic (Sofia), Kondenz (Belgrade), and Iridescent (Bucharest).

This led to the third dimension of the project: build a regional audience. The three new pieces are disseminated and promoted by touring them in order to make them visible and accessible to a wider audience in each country, therefore building and developing a regional audience for contemporary dance. The works created through the project will tour in other international dance festivals in Europe, enabling a wider appreciation for Southeast European dance.

SEEDS fosters collaboration and exchange across borders. Through education, production, dissemination, and artistic exchange, the project connects the contemporary dance scenes of Southeast Europe, enriching the conversation around this dynamic art form.

Foreword

from the partners

The National Centre for Dance Bucharest CNDB (RO)

As the only public institution for contemporary dance in Eastern Europe, CNDB prioritises both artistic production and research, and it is deeply committed to fostering the next generation of contemporary dance artists and performers, as well as building a wider/stronger audience and community for dance and contemporary creation.

Artistic education is a cornerstone of CNDB. Recognizing the need for a comprehensive approach encompassing not just the formation of artists, but also professional integration, CNDB initiated the SEEDS project - South East European Dance Stations. This program emphasises the entire artistic journey - education & training, research & performance, touring.

The SEEDS project stemmed from the success of our pilot program, the Academy for Dance and Performance. This program provided valuable insights and positive feedback from participants and the local community, fuelling our ambition to go further.

SEEDS arose from the need to create a regional platform for artists and cultural practitioners. Here, they can come together, learn, research, create, perform, and co-produce new works. The fragmented cultural infrastructure across Romania and neighbouring countries further underscores the importance of SEEDS. By fostering collaboration, we aim to bridge the gap not only between institutions and/or structures, but also between countries and their artistic communities, united by our shared artistic aspirations and challenges.

The project stems from a shared reality among the three partner countries: the situation of dance and performance artists. SEEDS has succeeded in providing opportunities for these artists to work intensively with professionals in the field, to have a professional environment that helps them focus (solely) on their work, and, ultimately, to have at their disposal tools for individual artistic development in broader contexts than their “home” ones.

The central point of the project’s vision for strengthening the field of contemporary dance not only in Romania has been, beyond the obvious benefits of international cooperation, the quality of the artistic act and the broadening of the professional horizon. Although difficult to quantify, the quality criterion is evident in the future productions of the artists in the program, in the level of creative responsibility that they will carry forward.

Vava Ștefănescu, CNDB Manager

Station – Service for Contemporary Dance (RS)

Station stands for community, sharing, care and mutual support. Contemporary dance is a practice capable of gathering people, showing what support for others is, and proving that art and culture or community building have no national borders. Station was created as a platform for contemporary dancers and choreographers, producers, curators and other colleagues to advocate for the dance field to be acknowledged by cultural policies in the countries in our region. We believe that only together we can achieve structural changes in our field. This is why SEEDS was made to add additional force to these common struggles, to intensify collaboration and exchange in the region, and to showcase the importance of coupling of dance education, dance production, and cultural policies for dance.

Marijana Cvetkovic, co-founder of Station

Station - Service for contemporary dance is a bottom-up initiative of the contemporary dance and performing arts community in Serbia, established in 2005. It has been working towards making this community strengthened, structured, and recognized as a dynamic, critical and inclusive player on a local, regional, and international cultural scenes. Station supports the development of the contemporary dance scene in Serbia through the education, production and promotion of emerging or established artists, dancers, and choreographers, the Kondenz Festival, as well as advocacy for better working conditions for artists, international cooperation and other programs that make contemporary dance a relevant player in the cultural and social context of Serbia and the Balkan Region. Station is one of the founders of Nomad Dance Academy network.

Brain Store Project (BG)

Contemporary dance is our religion and SEEDS is a chapter of our Holy Book, which strengthens our voice for more art educational practices and vibrant collaborations in South Eastern Europe.

Now and always, we will preach for the transformative power of contemporary art, as we as individuals, society, Europeans need it. Through SEEDS we bring change – of skills, mindsets, thoughts, imaginations, partnerships, lives. We cross boundaries, step beyond politics and stereotypes, and celebrate ethics, freedom, connections, understanding.

With dance and personal values, we will conquer!

Iva Sveshtarova & Willy Prager, Brain Store Project

The Brain Store Project was founded in 2005 by a group of artists working in the field of performing arts. The organisation develops two main activities: organising alternative educational programs and events in the field of contemporary dance and performance, and production of artistic works. Brain Store Project is the co-founder and organiser of the Antistatic - International Festival for Contemporary Dance and Performance (antistaticfestival.org) and editor producer of the annual print magazine “Magazine for dance”.

Academy for Dance and Performance

The Academy for Dance and Performance is an intensive education and training program in contemporary dance dedicated to emerging dancers and performers, initiated and coordinated by The National Centre for Dance Bucharest, in partnership with Brain Store Project Foundation (Sofia) and Station – Service for Contemporary Dance (Belgrade). The Academy's main goal is to integrate young artists and producers into the European professional circuit through intensive and lasting training. The 2022-2023 edition comprised two programs: one for dancers and performers and one for producers in the performing arts.

The program for dancers and performers combined workshops, courses, presentations, mentoring and artistic creation sessions, guided by international and local choreographers and teachers. The curriculum has been carefully designed starting from the profile of the contemporary dancer, in connection with the current practices and aesthetics in performing arts. In the training process, the experience of participating in the creation and presentation of a work was a fundamental dimension of the program. Thus, seven of the twelve Academy's alumni were cast in the three dance performances produced by the SEEDS partners. The program for producers aimed to professionalise artistic production by creating a theoretical and practical learning framework, updated with the current context of the performing arts, and it was addressed both to active producers and to those in training. The curriculum contained courses and workshops about the history and theory of contemporary dance and performance, cultural management, cultural policies, legislation and fiscal policies in the artistic field, resources and funding, contemporary dance production, cultural infrastructure, logic and dynamic of artistic projects, networks and international networking, audience & reception of the work of art / cultural mediation, and also the acknowledgement of the producer's role as a part of the cultural creative process, as well as a socio-political-cultural contexts generator.



Results of the Academy for Dance and Performance

2 training programs successfully completed:

Program for dancers and performers:

- 12 students from Romania and Bulgaria enrolled - 11 students graduated from the program;
- 20 workshops and courses guided by 20 teachers from Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, France, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Israel;
- mentorship sessions (one-to-one and group sessions);
- open lessons and public presentations;
- exercises in choreographic creation guided by a choreographer and a performance artist, leading to the 2 performances presented at the end of the training program;
- a total of 755 hours of training per student.

Program for dance producers

- 7 students from Romania, Serbia and Bulgaria - 7 students graduated from the program;
- for local (Romanian) students: 3 modules, 27 courses and workshops, 25 hours of practice in performing arts organisations;
- for students from partner countries: 1 module, 10 courses and workshops, 25 hours of practice in performing arts organisations.

TESTIMONIALS

Lucas Viallefond

choreographer, dancer and mentor at the Academy for Dance and Performance - Program for Dancers

The Academy is a chance for this group of dancers to train professionally for several months, meeting many dancers, choreographers and teachers from the international dance world.

I was the first guest at the 2022-2023 Academy of the National Dance Centre in Bucharest, and was delighted to meet a group of young dancers eager to learn. Indeed, most of the dancers didn't know each other, and there were even two dancers from another country. The level was heterogeneous, and it was extremely interesting to see them interact and help each other with the notions I brought along, both technically and theoretically.

I think that the creation of the Academy by the National Centre of Bucharest is a desire to train the dancers of tomorrow in Romania in the best possible way, and the fact that dancers can experiment with different approaches to dance allows them to develop as complete artists. Each of the guest teachers, choreographers and dancers has been able to contribute a stone to their artistic edifice, and it's an exquisite pleasure to see them evolve today.

The different levels of the dancers at the start of the adventure, as well as their respective backgrounds (dance, performance, theatre...), enable these young artists to confront different points of view on movement, and forge critical opinions that are important for their future careers.

Alexandra Schmidt

dance producer and mentor at the Academy for Dance and Performance - Program for Producers

Exchanging knowledge, creating a network and getting an overview of the international scene are crucial skills for anyone aspiring to work as a professional dance manager.

Compared to theatre, dance knows no boundaries – in language, between countries and also between different social classes. Dance is THE art when it comes to connecting people and to creating a project on a professional level accordingly, professional managers are needed. They need to learn how to understand the dance scene, their needs and conditions.

Setting up a dance project that is supposed to go on tour nationally or even internationally needs skills in planning, organisation, such as contracting, communication with the team, communication with stakeholders and fundraising of course.

The Academy for Dance and Performance organised by the National Centre for Dance in Bucharest was a very fruitful training camp for young, very ambitious dance managers and the curriculum greatly prepared these young people to take their first steps into the international dance world.

They can be part of a growing network of production and company managers for dance and the performing arts which meet in international networks and connect in the frame of several events.

I hope this Academy can become a regular training program in Romania.

Jan Burkhardt & Sigal Zouk

choreographers, dancers and mentors at the Academy for Dance and Performance - Program for Dancers

For us, any contribution to contemporary dance education is a contribution to fostering connectivity (to oneself, to one's own body, to others and other bodies, to the environment - including space, time, nature etc.), as well as empathy, ability to focus, and thus a contribution to make individual and collective life richer, more creative, more peaceful, create more choices, and more resilience.

The academy fills a gap in Romanian contemporary dance education as well as in the region, since a comparable program does not exist.

It can be an inroad into a professional career in or with contemporary dance. It fosters skills and network necessary to attain such a career, and helps to make the knowledge and resources provided by contemporary dance available for a broader public.

This year's edition integrated the realm of production, which is a very constructive feature, since conventionally the education of the artistic and the production sides of dance are separated - even though pretty much every dancer ends up doing production work at some point.

Hunor Varga

graduate of the Academy for Dance and Performance - Program for Dancers

You come out of college where you are prepared for an ideal future, a competitive environment where you want to be the best. After you graduate, you end up in the job market and have no idea what to do or how to do it. You're ashamed to ask for help and you flail around without a clear goal (a slightly misleading one): you want to be visible, to have as many projects as possible and to work continuously. Quickly, you get fed up, disappointments arise, waiting for that one project that makes you feel worthwhile. The Dance and Performance Academy, organised by the National Dance Centre Bucharest, is, in my opinion, the coolest programme at the moment. It's a program that helps you sort out your thoughts, organized by a state institution dedicated to training young artists. The academy has helped me not only through dance techniques and continuous training, but also to build a coherent discourse, to understand, to filter, to speak, to have courage, to receive and to give. It made me feel that I am not alone in this and that it is not as hard as it seems. It's a safe space where your opinion matters, where you matter as an artist and where you don't feel judged. It's the kind of program you'd want to start again as soon as it ends.

I had the opportunity to work in two shows in the SEEDS project: BODIES ON THE LINE by Ioana Marchidan and UNSTABLE COMRADES by Igor Koruga. Each of these projects was extremely exciting experience for me, because I didn't feel the pressure and weight of the production. In these shows, the creative process and the artistic research were much more important. As a performer, it's rare to have the opportunity – a luxury situation! - to delve into personal research with peers in a healthy environment without hierarchies and egos. In both projects, there was a constant dialogue among us as we worked with our own backgrounds and knowledge. Nothing was imposed on us; we were just given a framework in which to exist and work. For me, these projects are very relevant and I feel the importance, even the responsibility to perform them to convey a message that I want to be heard. In addition, both projects were extremely well organised and comprehensive, giving us the luxury of focusing exclusively on them without having to work on five other projects in parallel.

Mihaela Michailov

theatre critic, dramaturge and mentor at the Academy for Dance and Performance - Program for Producers

For us, any contribution to contemporary dance education is a contribution to foster. The Academy of Dance and Performance is a unique training format and layered approach to performance education in Romania. It is the laboratory of minds and bodies diversifying their means of expression and frameworks of reflection and applied observation on local and international performing arts. It is a space for the convergence of concepts and practices that overlap possibilities of multi-directed expressive research.

I have had the privilege of teaching a series of theoretical courses on international performance and local contemporary dance at the Academy, and have met practitioners and analysts with an extreme willingness to learn and a need to connect to different sources of experience, which have contaminated me and given me that rare energy of shared ideas vibrating.

Anca Stoica

graduate of the Academy for Dance and Performance - Program for Dancers

For me the program was one of the most defining experiences in life. I had the chance to get in touch with many teachers and their artistic perspectives and thus define my own conception. The most important thing for me was that I was able to develop in a collective, to have a space where I felt supported. To learn from and with others.

Teona Milićević

graduate of the Academy for Dance and Performance - Program for producers

Being a part of the SEEDS program as a young producer has been one of the most valuable experiences that I had in the professional field of theatre and dance production. I could write an essay about everything that it meant to me; the education, the experience and connections that I had made during this project helped me to better understand my chosen profession, and also exchange all of the things above with people from countries that have had similar circumstances as mine.

Laura Aris

dancer, choreographer and mentor at the Academy for Dance and Performance - Program for Dancers

Having had the opportunity to participate as a guest teacher in the Academy for Dance and Performance at the National Dance Centre (CNDB), the program serves as a catalyst for the professional development of young artists. Although most of the students are from Romania, the inclusion of young participants from other nearby countries together with the international guest teachers enriches the learning environment and fosters the creation of broader professional networks. The methodological principles of the program offer an educational experience that is open, pluralistic, and adaptable. This comprehensive approach allows participants to acquire knowledge and skills that are relevant at an international level, preparing them for a thriving career in the world of contemporary dance. I firmly believe that pedagogical and artistic encounters in the realm of contemporary dance, such as those fostered by the CNDB, are not just about mastering technical skills. They are about personal and social development, promoting a higher quality of life, a critical perspective on reality, and discovering the sensitive and spiritual values of art. The program also contributes to the diversification and enrichment of the national artistic ecosystem by including students from diverse backgrounds. This impact extends beyond professional training, creating a healthier, more empathetic, motivated, and inclusive society. Therefore, I fully support the third edition of the Dance and Performance Academy at CNDB, confident that it will continue to be a positive and transformative force in the lives of young artists and producers, as well as in strengthening the artistic landscape in Romania.

SEEDS PERFORMANCES



Transformability: Forever [partly musical] (Bulgaria)

Transformability is an original performance by Willy Prager, provoked and inspired by the article of the same name by the philosopher Boyan Manchev, published in 2006 in the prestigious German performing arts magazine “Theater der Zeit”. The performance was created in partnership and with the participation of the choreographers and performers Sonja Pregrad (Croatia) and Tian Rotteveel (Netherlands), and later on the team was joined by Iva Sveshtarova (Bulgaria). The premiere of the original work took place in 2012 at the iconic dance festival “Tanztag” in Berlin, followed by numerous invitations from other festivals in Europe, and rave reviews in the media.

Twelve years later, this cult performance returns to the Bulgarian stage with the title Transformability: Forever [partly musical] as part of the international educational project SEEDS. It started in 2023 as a kind of “academy” for dancers and producers who are at the beginning of their career and aims to integrate them into the European professional exchange through long-term intensive training. Therefore, the choreographer Willy Prager recreates his work with students from the Romanian Dance Centre and with young Bulgarian performers.

The full title of Boyan Manchev’s influential publication, which is the basis of the performance, is: Transformability. Performing Society and Contemporary Conditions of Dance. In his text, he discusses the relationship between contemporary consumer society, with its increasingly heightened “performativeness” and dance, in the context of capitalism and the global market economy. From this starting point, in his performance Willy Prager not only tells the key philosophical theses of the text in stage language, but manages to comment on them on a meta-level, viewing them from the position of practice and performing arts. For this purpose, the philosophical text has been turned into a script following the structure and rules of the musical. The performers are placed in the conceptual framework of this popular genre, which symbolizes the progressive society, but also aesthetically often moves on the edge of fake happiness, leading to a state of impossible pleasure and complete exhaustion. Through its subtle play with the nuances of stage genres, philosophical concepts and contemporary sociopolitical reality, Transformability: Forever [partly musical] encourages us to think together about whether it is possible for a philosophical text to become an essential element in the creation of one of the most market-oriented stage forms such as musicals; how a theoretical text can be danced; how a bridge can be created between dance and theory using the rules of popular culture.

Idea, direction and choreography:
Willy Prager

Performers:
Eva-Maria Danciu,
Mariana Gavriciuc,
Nelly Georgieva,
Sergiu Diță,
Alexander Gochev

Music:
Tian Rotteveel

Costume:
Pola Popova

Lighting design:
Ralitsa Rangelova

Graphic design and photos:
Teodora Simova
(Studio Lunohod)

Communication:
Ina Doublekova, Kremena
Hristova (A25 Cultural Foundation)

Producer:
Brain Store Project



Willy Prager is a performer and choreographer, who graduated from the experimental Theatre-Studio 4XC and “Synthetic Stage Arts” program of the University of Plovdiv. He holds a Master’s degree in “Solo, Dance, Authorship” from the Universität der Künste in Berlin. He has worked with directors and choreographers such as Nikolay Georgiev, Galina Borissova, David Zambrano, Ivo Dimchev, deufert & plischke, Thomas Lehmen, Dalija Acin, Matej Kejzar, and Maren Strack among others.

He is author of the performances: Prager Strasse, Game-a porter, Transformability, Egyptian spring, The victory day, Sequel for the future, Less might be more, but sometimes less is just nothing – the last four performances were created and premiered in Berlin and Bucharest. Together with Iva Sveshtarova he established a stage tandem and have worked together on Watch your back, Cliché, Dona Clara, Pre-migration fever, +/- 359 Topology, Museum of hygiene, Our last pas de deux, Balkan Dance Reality Show, shamebox, Made for happiness, A better life, Before the end of ... (the world), Euphoria of Sickness.

Their most recent creations – shamebox (2018) and Made for Happiness (2019) were awarded the national ICARUS Award in the category Contemporary Dance and Performance, and Euphoria of Sickness (2023) was nominated for the award in the same category. Additionally, Prager won the European Choreographic Award Jardin d’Europe from ImPulsTanz, Vienna with the performance The victory day (2013). Willy Prager is co-founder of Nomad Dance Academy and the Antistatic Festival for Contemporary Dance and Performance, as well as co-producer of Dance Magazine.

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Willy Prager: Contemporary dance makes room for resistance?

Willy Prager's new choreographic piece *Transformability: Forever* [partly musical] is a peculiar example of a dance performance, based on a philosophical text – Boyan Manchev's *Transformability. Performing Society and Contemporary Conditions of Dance*. The performance is also a relevant example of how complex theoretical concepts can be translated into the language of movement. Manchev's article explores the performative aspect of the contemporary consumerist society and the position of dance within the capitalist framework. Prager's performance does the same but through performative procedures and stage signs that are associativity linked to the topics of the article. However, this is not the first time that Prager wrestled with the challenges of bringing a philosophical text to stage life. In 2012, he co-authored the dance performance *Transformability* that had its premiere at the *Tanztage* festival in Berlin. The 2012 piece is based on the same text of Boyan Manchev and is aesthetically similar to the performance Prager created in Sofia in 2024. The re-interpretation of the article and the first performance not only gave the chance to Prager to revisit the issues he was working on 12 years ago, but also created the opportunity to work on the issues with a new generation of young dancers from Bulgaria and Romania who were shaped, at least in part, by the SEEDS project.

Borisav Matić: Your performance *Transformability: Forever* [partly musical] is based on Boyan Manchev's theoretical article *Transformability. Performing Society and Contemporary Conditions of Dance* which was published in *Theater der Zeit*. Which philosophical ideas did you aim to bring from this article to the stage?

Willy Prager: I have to start from a little bit earlier. I did this performance 10 years ago with Sonja Pregrad and Tian Rotteveel in Berlin. I was doing my MA in dance authorship in Berlin. I was in the same class with Igor Kuruga. We received a lot of theoretical and philosophical input. [I thought] Okay, it's great, but how can we be more practical, how can this go on the stage? At this time, Boyan Manchev was our teacher. Suddenly, we were working and speaking about this text *Transformability*. I'm not sure that I still understand 100 percent of the text but I found my way to communicate with the text because it was philosophical and very political. Being from the Eastern part of Europe, we cannot live without politics. Even if we don't want it, it's part of our life. It is impossible to be non-political. This buying and selling in the text, this performative society, performative capitalism and all these kinds of terms in the text, I find them very interesting and provocative. On the other side, contemporary dance is the opposite of capitalism, it's more inclusive. It's different, actually. I was thinking that the musical could be the genre that is much closer to this capitalistic performative society. There's a nonstop presentation and everyone is happy because of everything. The musical is the genre that is much more representative actually. I cannot do a real musical, that is clear. But I can use and combine some very important things from the musical that work with the text. The text is more of a provocation – this is absolutely upstaging the text.

Borisav Matić: It's not a very common situation that someone bases a dance performance on a theoretical text. How difficult was it to bring those philosophical ideas to the stage and which choreographic techniques did you rely on in the process of the "dramatization"?

Willy Prager: It was absolutely difficult. I started to make a script for a musical from this text, with characters and everything else from the musical. I reformulated the text through these characters and situations with my colleagues. This was a lot of writing. We made like 20 pages of the script for a musical. This was the beginning. I wanted them to believe that they were going to do a real musical, just to be able to follow the rules for a musical. That was the trick. After, [there was the question of] what to do with these 20 pages of text. And I just want to say that the original [philosophical] text has two pages, so we created much more. We started to mix the philosophical text with some situations from the musicals. Suddenly through trying different things, we arrived at nonstop jumping. This jumping became the main technique. This is not a technique of contemporary dance, not at all, it's jumping. Sometimes even the people who forget the name of the piece say "the jumping piece". We decided to do different situations with our bodies through this jumping. We decided on the main rules of the show – smiling, laughing and jumping. Then we tried to do different things by having these rules and then everything became a little bit limited. We could not do a lot of things, but we spoke the main language of the show.

Borisav Matić: Why did you choose to focus on those jumping dance practices and those forced smiles? Can it be said that those practices represent the false image of a happy consumerist society?

Willy Prager: Absolutely, you can say that. I was always interested in not doing many things on the stage. I was always interested in focusing on something. By having everything through the language of jumping and smiling, even if you do a little bit more things, you have the same form. Formalism was always interesting to me, the formality of being on the stage. And this is absolutely not easy. I cannot perform the piece anymore – because I was performing it 10, 12 years ago – it's such a tiredness to smile and continue to be happy. And the audience absolutely sees that people are not happy. Because you see the tiredness somehow on the face – he is kind of forcing himself to jump and continue. This became somehow the main way of creating the performance.

Borisav Matić: You mentioned before the role of dance in a contemporary consumerist society. But let's dig a little bit deeper there. Capitalism co-opted many parts of our personal and professional lives, sometimes it even incorporates dance, although not always. What role does dance play, and in particular this performance *Transformability*, in reflecting those capitalist conditions, or maybe even resisting them?

Willy Prager: The piece is very critical about this because even in contemporary dance work, there is again the buying and selling of pieces, teachers, dancers, choreographers, aesthetics... This is absolutely a fact. I have the feeling that in contemporary dance, this is present even more than in theatre. Because of the internationalisation of contemporary dance, the market is much bigger. On the local level, no, it's not a big market for choreographers to travel between Belgrade, Niš and Novi Sad. But in Europe, it's much bigger, the market is much more international and the theatre pieces are travelling much less abroad than the dance pieces. It's absolutely a capitalistic way of buying and selling.

I also wanted to have humour in everything. I'm not a leftist, that is also very important to know. I don't believe in communism, socialism – not at all. For me, [the piece] is not like going with the flag on the square. For me, it's also self-ironic. Because just to criticise something and be part of it is not very cor-

rect. Because all of us want to show our performance at more festivals, meet more audiences – and then to criticise that as bad, I don't know how fair this is. But you can speak about this. We can look at this with some irony. When we had the premiere here in Sofia, with Romanian and Bulgarian dancers, different audiences were watching the piece and they were getting different things from the piece. They're not thinking so much about selling and capitalism, but they saw this kind of over-presentation: watch me, watch me, watch me! This is the biggest problem in art anyway, they nonstop want to be watched.

Borisav Matić: I also have a sense in your performance of the tension between the collectivity and the individuality, with the performers dancing in sync, but from time to time an individual disrupts the harmony and breaks away. What did you aim to achieve with this dynamic between the collective and the individual level?

Willy Prager: Somehow, it's clear that the collective wisdom and the collective are much stronger than individuals. Nowadays, working in the collective means being horizontal, not vertical, which is fantastic, I'm working also like this. But sometimes these individual statements and characters disappear, because somehow, it's also not easy to say "I don't agree with you, I want to be different", or "I want to be your boss". This is not okay in contemporary society to say "I know more than you, so I will be your boss". That's right in the performance. It's like the collective, collective, collective... From time to time, some individuals are going out, but then they're going back again to collective happiness.

Borisav Matić: Can we say that an individual breaking away in this performance is a form of resistance or something more negative?

Willy Prager: This is how it's written in the text of Boyan Manchev: contemporary dance makes room for resistance. As a statement is sexy, but is it really like this? I'm also critical of the philosophical text because sometimes it's easy to write some statements. But then, does contemporary dance make room for resistance? On the one hand, I can say yes, because it makes room or places. But how much can you resist with contemporary dance? This is not so clear because contemporary dance is not so popular as an art form to be so strong to resist. Contemporary dance is still something experimental, more avant-garde or not super popular. It's much better than 10 or 20 years ago, but especially in East Europe, it's not so strong. It's not a movie, it's not the music.

Borisav Matić: We spoke a lot about dance but let me ask you something about the few words that are spoken on stage. Those few words bring to mind the language of TV shows with some references to old stars, and they create an atmosphere of a campy society or even a society of spectacle. Did you have the intention of creating an atmosphere of the society of spectacle?

Willy Prager: Absolutely. I had this intention. This is also because of this writing and reformulation of real musicals, some of which were TV products. Not every musical is the same. There are also contemporary musicals, a lot of which are for TV. We were rewriting and reformulating these texts but for sure the taste of these TV productions stayed in the piece because it's really working a lot with representation.

Borisav Matić: And what role do the costumes and the music play in creating this campy metaphor of contemporary consumerist society?

Willy Prager: The costumes were very much important. In the first piece 10 years ago or so, we were dressed very normally – let's say H&M or Zara. This time we wanted to have much stronger lipstick, clothes and everything, to be more pop and sexier. We went more with this to represent that "buy me, buy me" moment.

We used the original music of Tian Rotteveel. There is a lot of music in the piece, especially for a dance piece. There is also the music which is created from the jumping on the floor, which is nonstop for one hour. This is stronger than any music that appears from the speakers. I also try for the music to have its own life. That's why there is one scene when the people are transforming the speaker and it is being like a separate character in the piece. Tian Rotteveel is a classical composer with a kind of classical education in music. He is now working with electronic and different things, but he was using [for the piece] very much the process of how the music for a musical is made. He was using the instruments, the tension, the rhythm, the jazzy rhythm in music for the piece.

Borisav Matić: The performance was created as part of the SEEDS project thanks to which not only performers from Bulgaria but also from Romania participated. The production team was also made up of people from different countries. How much did this inclusion of producers and performers from the region influence the show? Did it bring any new perspective?

Willy Prager: For sure. This is very important because this is the second phase of the SEEDS project with Ioana Marchidan, Igor Koruga and me creating these three performances with the ex-students. They [students] spent one year together at the National Centre of Dance in Bucharest. They received different inputs and workshops. For me, it was a question of how to enter this group because they knew each other very well. I said, we will jump and smile but let's start from the beginning knowing that we're gonna jump and smile with the ability to influence the performance in a different way. Because it's also not very interesting just to repeat the same things as 10 years ago. It was also a pity for me not to use different characters and different ages – they're quite young performers. And actually, they can jump longer. They come from different backgrounds in contemporary dance and have different knowledge. We started also to write and, in the end, we ended up almost at the same place where we did years ago [with the previous piece]. I absolutely worked with what they were bringing every day to the studio. Because they were bringing different ways of moving, different history, sometimes different aesthetics. In the beginning, it was like to agree or not to agree with the proposition but after like 10 days, we were somehow on the same ground and we started to work more like one collective organism.

Borisav Matić: Would you add something that you think is important for the performance or your process?

Willy Prager: At the National Centre of Dance in Bucharest, I am doing for a second time a piece with students or the people who finished this program – because before it was not an international project, it was just with Romanians. Last time I was asked – this time I was freer – but last time I was asked to work with some of my old pieces. They were asking Romanian choreographers and German and different choreographers to work with old performances. At that time, I didn't want to work with something old. Why working with something old? And now I decided to do it because this is a way of live documentation of the performing arts, which I find very interesting. This was the one thing why I decided to do it like this. The second thing is that the new generation doesn't actually know what happened 15 or 20 years ago. They don't because we don't have libraries to even watch this on video. I think this is a very interesting way of documentation and archiving of performing arts in general. This is very important in the work.

Unstable Comrades (Serbia)

The performance explores and reflects on new ways of combating capitalism through the ideas of fluid identities. It interrogates the legacy of queer emancipation through a constant process of constitution and warping of resistance influenced by Western “liberal” societies and socialist values for a fairer society. As a theoretical approach addressing intersections of capitalism, class struggle, and queer culture, queer Marxism challenges traditional Marxist analyses by critically examining categories of gender, sex, and sexuality, emphasising the fluidity and complexity of identity and sexual desire. From such a theoretical perspective, the performance scrutinises various mechanisms of normalisation, oppression, control, and exploitation through which capitalism, patriarchy, and other systems of repression intersect and interact.

Through a comparative analysis of historical intersections of queer culture, art, and Marxist ideology within international socialist/communist and capitalist societies (Yugoslavia, Romania, Russia, USA, UK), the methodology of the performance sought examples of artistic practices directed against social and state dogmatism, hegemony, authoritarianism, and depoliticization, including instances such as critical realism and partisan dance in interwar Yugoslavia, punk outer-culture in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Yugoslav new conceptual art, queer-artistic opposition in communist Romania, queer-core practices of the American new left, Stonewall protests, etc.

Igor Koruga is a freelance artist, working within the field of contemporary dance and choreography. His educational background in anthropology (University of Belgrade) and dance authorship (UdK/HZT Berlin, DAS Third Amsterdam), set his artistic practice in applying choreography as an artistic tool for interpreting socio-anthropological phenomena within apparatuses of theatre, museum, and multimedia. He works continuously as a stage movement choreographer within institutional theatre and film. As a member of a regional team for archiving and historicizing contemporary dance in the (post)Yugoslav context through the regional network Nomad dance academy, Koruga contributed to the prominent regional magazines for dance and performing arts (Maska Ljubljana, Walking Theory Belgrade, Movements Zagreb). Engaged as a freelance pedagogue, Koruga worked within various educational platforms by Station Service for contemporary dance Belgrade; Goethe Institute; Yugoslav Drama Theatre Belgrade; Belgrade Dance Institute; Petnica Science centre Serbia etc. He was a recipient of several international dance fellowships and locally relevant accolades.

Thanks to: Magacin Cultural Centre, Belgrade; theatre Atelje 212, Belgrade

The SEEDS (South East European Dance Stations) project is co-financed by the European Union through the Creative Europe program. The views and opinions expressed belong only to the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Education, Audiovisual, and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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Foto: ????????



Igor Koruga: Queer is a space of struggle, questioning and empathy

The performance *Unstable Comrades* questions the relationship of queer culture with the wider society. What role did queer culture play in former socialist countries and how did that role differ in Western, capitalist countries? Can queer be an effective resistance to capitalist exploitation and normalisation today, especially in post-socialist Eastern Europe? Can queer culture, on the other hand, be a safe space for expression, community and empathy among its members?

The performance *Unstable Comrades* deals with all the mentioned questions, never programmatically or discursively, but often only associatively. This dance production is queer in its appearance, thanks to the choreographic concept of Igor Koruga and the dance of the performers, as well as the relationship that the performers build among themselves and with the audience. In this performance, aspirations towards a fairer society and the building of more humane social relations, especially between those who are marginalised, are manifested through the movement and experiences of the body.

In this interview, the choreographer and the concept author *Unstable Comrades* Igor Koruga talks about the socio-political issues that the performance raises, about the research and archival work that preceded the creative process, as well as about the work on the performance itself and its final form.

Borisav Matić: It can be said that the dance performance *Unstable Comrades* is queer in its form and expression, rather than representing the queer movement and its history in a classic way. What do you mean by queer? That is, what characteristics of queerness did you want to highlight in the performance?

Igor Koruga: For me, queer is a space of struggle, empathy, vulnerability, questioning, searching and, of course, expression. Queer challenges norms and conventions (not only in the field of sexuality and gender), searching for different forms, frameworks... It was precisely those characteristics of queer that were interesting to me for the artistic research in this performance through the fields of the personal: body, affects, eroticism, perception, intimacy, etc. In addition, I was also interested in the class aspect of queerness, i.e. conditioning of queer emancipation by class. In the context of this performance, for me that manifested itself through two levels: by questioning the limitations of post-communist societies in the manifestation and development of their socio-political capacities due to economic underprivileged in relation to the West; and the fact that the queer is performed in front of the audience by the players - members of the precarious class characterised by life and professional circumstances of long-term insecurity, instability and unpredictability, thus endangering the mental and physical well-being of people.

Borisav Matić: *Unstable Comrades* touch on the role of the queer movement in different socio-economic circumstances, from socialist and Western societies during the Cold War to post-socialist Eastern Europe. What did the queer movement in these different contexts have in common, and what distinguished the queer movement in socialist and capitalist societies?

Igor Koruga: The common characteristic is the fight for rights, freedom of expression, acceptance of differences in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation. The queer movement everywhere fought against discrimination, repression and stereotypes. While in the context of Western societies (USA, Great Britain) the aspiration was to reexamine middle-class, white, Christian, heteronormative conceptions of family, sexuality, gender, masculinity, freedom of expression, rights, etc., in socialist and communist societies (Eastern Europe, SFR Yugoslavia, etc. .) the queer movement was often faced with official state repression and homogenization of society, as well as with the dogmatization of socialist and/or communist values - which was mostly a consequence of patriarchal organization and leadership (of socialism or communism). But at the same time, there were attempts to create a progressive society that promotes equality and solidarity among all citizens - through democratic pluralism. Coping with the legacy of state repression, social prejudices, but also basic socialist values, the queer movement and culture of Eastern European and other (post)socialist societies were built in new political and economic circumstances through new patterns of activism, a rich and complex culture of resistance, expression and togetherness. Through art, activism, and various forms of social engagement, queer people and the communities of these societies found ways to fight for their own and other people's rights, express their identities and create a space for acceptance and understanding within their communities. On the other hand, in capitalist societies, the queer movement faces different challenges, including the commercialization and politicization of LGBTQ+ identity, as well as economic inequalities that have often been the cause of the marginalization of members of the LGBTQ+ community. Today, these processes are transferred to second and third world societies. All this shows us that when we talk about the (queer) identity of a community, we must equally take into account the internal processes of building a network, creating culture and raising awareness, recognizing members, as well as the external processes of social control, state regulation, international political circumstances, etc. It is important, during the research of the process of identity creation, to direct the focus on whose material and political interests are represented and implemented at both of these levels. Eastern European countries and other (post)socialist states have their own specific historical, cultural and political contexts that shape queer identities and movements within them. That is why we can say that queer culture is not only a creation of Western, more liberal societies, but also of other, class-disprivileged societies.

Borisav Matić: The queer character of the performance *Unstable Comrades* is first of all expressed through the dance and the appearance of five performers on stage. What choreographic and dance procedures did you use to give the performance this character?

Igor Koruga: After the selection of performers, it was clear to me that I had formed a group of five authentic, talented and outstanding artists of the younger generation. Each of them has a specific way of expression, a unique system of performance techniques and means by which they market their dance language of expression and, of course, a unique charisma. Already such a given, based on pluralism, reciprocity and creative charge - for me is queer in itself. Everything that came from my side, through the method-

ological and choreographic work with the five of them, served to direct and implement all that potential into a shaped form of public presentation. The choreographic procedures I used came from a multi-layered methodological framework, categorized through the erotic body, the affective body, the manifest body and the critical body. Each of these four categories was based on sets of different choreographic and somatic approaches, exercises, performance tasks, artistic procedures that were implemented on an individual and collective level with the dancers. While the erotic body dealt with the expression of the sensual, tactile quality of physical movement (through the concepts of polyamory, submissiveness, boundaries of gender behavior and somatic practice, contact improvisation, body-mind centering), the affective body explored how feelings are embodied (e.g. anger, depression, freedom). The manifest body searched for ways of physical manifestation of political attitudes, statements, points of view – mostly during the creative process through an archival approach of trying out existing artistic procedures and methods from the field of conceptual art, queer-feminist art, drag art, etc. The critical body questioned how certain challenges that queers face today (hetero/homonormativity, gender comfort, queer commodification and class privilege) are expressed on stage through formats of queering perception and attention (of both spectators and performers), playing with spatial organization (stage performance plans), principles of individual movement within collective action in time and space, etc. It's all queer to me. Complex, exciting, sometimes confusing. Queer cannot and should not be fully understood.

Borisav Matić: The play is based on your research work on queer practices in various socialist and capitalist countries. Are there references to certain practices in the performance?

Igor Koruga: Through a comparative analysis of historical intersections of queer culture, art and Marxist ideology, within socialist/communist and capitalist societies (Yugoslavia, Romania, Russia, USA, UK) during the preparation and research process, I searched for examples of artistic practices directed against social and state dogmatization, hegemony, authoritarianism and depoliticization in examples of: critical realism and partisan dance of interwar Yugoslavia, punk counterculture of SFR Yugoslavia, Yugoslav new conceptual art, Belgrade pop art, queer-art opposition of communist Romania, queer-core practices of the American new left, Stonewall protests, etc. During the creative process, we focused most of our attention on proposals that, during the 1970s and 1980s, questioned the repressiveness of the state apparatus of socialist Yugoslavia through queer and feminist sexuality, physicality, desire, authentic individuality and expressiveness, dressing up, questioning art, the role of the viewer, etc. Examples of works of art include: Marina Gržinić, Aina Šmid, Alda Ivančić, Kosta Bunuševac, Katalin Ladik, Marina Abramović and Ulay, Raša Todosijević, Sanja Iveković, Vlasta Delimar and others. We reviewed a lot of archival material from the Student Cultural Center in Ljubljana, the legendary club Disko FV, photographs by Mladen Dolenc, numerous fanzines and student magazines. Not all of these works were declaratively queer or feminist, but even so, some traces or proto-forms of queer and feminism can be found. On the other hand, some of the artistic procedures that were not directly related to queer, we “queered” into something new, into a completely different physical or creative material. Therefore, there is no referentiality in the performance in the form of a direct re-enact or documentary historical material that is used. There is referentiality, in terms of inspiration, while the play relies more on the authentic performativity of the players themselves.

Borisav Matić: In addition to movement, an important role in the portrayal of queer relationships, tenderness and empathy is played by the gaze – both the gaze between the dancers and between the audience and the performers. How did you use the gaze in constructing the aesthetics and politics of the play?

Igor Koruga: The gaze procedure is one of the basic procedures that we relied on in this performance. I got inspiration for researching this procedure from the artistic video works of Marina Gržinić, Aina Šmid, Zemira Alajbegović, Aldo Ivančić and the music band Borghesia. This is a group of queer-feminist, activist artists, protagonists of the Slovenian punk counterculture in the SFRY in the 1980s, who through their individual and collective works critically questioned the social and state organization of socialist Yugoslavia, primarily through the conceptualization of free public expression: explicit (queer) sexuality, pleasure, cyberfeminism, transfeminism, SM, anti-authoritarian and anti-hegemonic struggle against patriarchal, chauvinistic, heterosexist normalization of everyday life, against powerful propaganda and general homogenous depoliticization. The basis of this queer-punk, activist-artistic activity was found in the socialist postulates of art and culture for the masses, based on (Bolshevik) Russian avant-garde art. In their video works, Gržinić and Šmid often look at the camera during explicit sexual scenes and transparently declarative political positions against the government and stereotypes about the imposed role of women in society. With such a procedure, they say that they know that they are (over)watched, followed, publicly condemned, called names, rejected - as women, lesbians, feminists. However, at the same time, they remind their observers/voyeurs (society) that they are responsible for their views towards (their own) diversity, queer sexuality, freedom, desire, resistance, feminist subjectivity; that as women they are not the object of a male illustrator and gaze, but that they embody their own subjectivity in opposition to (hetero)normative gender roles and associated limited sexual desires.

In the performance *Unstable Comrades*, the issue of gaze was explored from two angles. On the part of the performers, who, with their glances at the audience or at each other, opened up the question of the voyeuristic attitude towards queer identity and practice as a space of diversity, questioning, and struggle: who is actually the ‘Other’ at the present moment, the heteronormative audience or the queer performance/performer, etc.? What does it mean when a subject exposed to the gaze, observation, study, condemnation, objectification – looks back? With their gaze and physical movement, how does the performer navigate the viewer’s attention and perception (and queer it)? Also, there are views towards the space outside the field of the auditorium or the performance itself, referring to the current encroachment of our lives by various invisible entities (internet, authoritarian regime, non-human beings around us, etc.), and to the self-criticism of the author’s position. On the other hand, I was interested in how the viewer’s attention, perception, experience and affects are provoked, negotiated, redirected through parallel, simultaneous performance events in multiple stage plans, or through the multiplication of viewing angles (where not all viewers see the same material from the same angle). In addition to the works and practices of Slovenian punk artists, I also found inspiration for this methodological approach in contemporary artistic and theoretical practices of feminist and landscape dramaturgy (artists Ana Dubljević, Ana Vujanović). Also, the theoretical works of Slavčo Dimitrov, Jasmine Založnik, Jasmine Tumbas, Milica Ivić, Saša Kesić, Vida Knežević, Jelisaveta Blagojević, Olga Dimitrijević, Franko Dota, Dušan Maljković, Bojan Bilić and many others meant a lot to me.

Borisav Matić: The gender appearance of dancers is often fluid, non-binary, androgynous. How did you achieve this quality in performance?

Igor Koruga: Essentially, we just used it as a given that we work with as dancers and choreographers. It is challenging to artistically explore queer culture and the problems it faces today in a neoliberal-capitalist society, while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls of stage illustration and various stereotypes about queer people. Contemporary dance practices today tend to cross the boundaries of the representation of the theme in their formats towards the experiential experience of the theme itself. That's why, in creating the performance, I put a choreographic focus on the ways of showing, observing, understanding and experiencing body movements on stage, through the domains of intimacy, tenderness, eroticism, rebellion and emotions as characteristics of queerness. I was less interested in making the performance as an account of the historical development of queer culture or the struggle for rights of the queer movement. In addition to dance, the costume had a special function in the search for identity fluidity. Through procedures of constant dressing, we investigated the costume as a cultural phenomenon that expresses identities, social structures, communicates certain messages, social functions, political implications, economic dimensions, shapes social interactions. Nudism also had a special function in this - if viewed through the prism of freedom of expression, liberation from social norms and conventions, including norms related to sexuality and identity, and acceptance of the body as it is, which are all values of the queer movement.

Borisav Matić: In addition to being an almost constant background to the dance, the music of the performance also refers to various elements of queer culture. How significant was your collaboration with the composer Vladimir Pejković?

Igor Koruga: This collaboration was one of the dearest and most fulfilling artistic collaborations that I have had during my career so far. Music plays an extremely important role for me in this performance. First of all, because, in its structure, it carries entire landscapes of affects that musically represent the characteristics of queerness - from punk hermetics and experiments to retro synth-electro pop. Through this, conditionally speaking, dualism, our intention was to establish the spheres of critical and vulnerable. That's why it was interesting for me to follow how the dialogue between the physical and musical material unfolds in the performance. When they like each other, when they don't and how we use that on stage to show what we want to show. What kind of relationship do the music and the text of the performance build? In that whole spectrum of relationships and structures, Vlada's choices of musical instruments/means were very valuable to me - because it is important in which moments of the performance we hear an electric guitar and why, and in which a gentle voice that sings in an incomprehensible language. At the beginning of the process, I spent hours telling Vlada what I was interested in, sending him pages and pages of notes, playlists to convey at least an approximation of what I was interested in. I was afraid that I had drowned him and demotivated him. However, Vlada not only included every detail we talked about, but also created a powerful soundtrack for me that I still listen to/use as emotional support in moments I dedicate only to myself.

Borisav Matić: Younger dancers from Romania and Serbia take part in the performance. Did the different origins of the performers and the fact that they belong to the younger generation contribute to the performance?

Igor Koruga: There is no better form of progress in life than through mutual exchange and cooperation with new generations. That was the purpose of

this project and co-production. The inclusion of young dancers from Romania and Serbia brought me different perspectives, experiences and aesthetics, new ideas, creative approaches and innovative ways of expression in the creative process. In addition to the intergenerational exchange during the process, the mutual generational exchange of the five of them was especially important to me. They had the opportunity to learn from each other, develop new approaches in performance, creativity and to build mutual collegiality and friendship. Regarding the theme of the play, it was certainly important to exchange views West, what is the ideal image of a "man" today, etc. Also, the young performers brought energy, enthusiasm and freshness to the performance, which contributed to the dynamism and authenticity of the performance. In addition, their openness and willingness to experiment enriched this process. I am grateful to Mariana, George, Hunor, Tamara and Jakša, because their authenticity and extraordinary talent pushed me to be better and to keep believing. I believe that this region will recognize their exceptionality, embrace it and care for them with pride and bliss. Only when we no longer want to run away from hugs, but want to change the world with hugs, only then will we be able to live and work.

Bodies on the Line (Romania)

BODIES ON THE LINE explores fragile territories between confessions and statements, placing bodies in spaces of both safety and uncertainty, from which they can articulate their anxieties, hopes and the need to belong to a collectivity that makes the daily struggle for survival a little more bearable.

BODIES ON THE LINE compresses the time of personal stories and dilates the pressure of the times in which we live, dominated by the alienating flight after overlapping projects, exhaustion, burn-out and the feeling that if you are not seen, you do not exist?

Born in 1982 in Romania, Ioana Marchidan is one of the most famous performers in the country, collaborating for over 15 years with consecrated choreographers and theater directors. As a choreographer, Ioana addresses themes such as contemporary feminism and the influence of education on the way women are perceived in Southeast Europe.

Ioana began her career as a dancer at the National Opera and the Romanian Opera Ballet. Later, she became one of the first members of the Gigi Caciuleanu Dance Company, collaborating with similar names as subTANZ / Massimo.

She has danced in shows created by Ioana Macarie, Chris Simion and Dragoș Galgoțiu, presented at The Place (UK), Keochang International Festival of Theater (KR), Cairo Experimental Theater Festival (EG), Aichi Worldwide Exhibition (JP), The Francophone Festival (AU, JO, IT, PT), Festivalul de la Avignon (FR).

In 2013 she was one of the performers of the work *An Immaterial Retrospective* of the Venice Biennale, created by Alexandra Pirici and Manuel Pelmuş.

Recently, Ioana has begun to choreograph her own works, based on a feminist perspective on the world, in which she challenges herself with delicate subjects that represent political and social opinions on the world.

Her first show, *2 Contemporary Women*, is a feminist contemporary dance show, inspired by the condition of women in contemporary society.

Reverse discourse (part of the E-MOTIONAL residency at Forum Dança Lisbon) is a body policy in memory of the impact of dictatorial power on the bodies of generations of people.

Stabat Mater, in collaboration with director Amalia Olaru, addresses in contemporary dance the story proposed by Pergolesi's concert.

Ioana is the president of the Dance Spot association and artistic director at Linotip Independent Choreographic Center, since 2016.

Performance produced within the SEEDS - South-East European Dance Stations project, co-financed by the Administration of the National Cultural Fund.

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Team

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Varga Hunor-Jozsef,
Eva Danciu,
Alexandra Zavelea**

Text and dramaturgy
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Mihaela Michailov

Original music:
Alexandru Suci

Light design:
Alexandros Raptis



Foto: ????????

Ioana Marchidan: Artists have the “luxury” of expressing their worries publicly

In her new dance performance *Bodies on the Line*, the Romanian choreographer Ioana Marchidan worked with four graduates of the Dance and Performance Academy at the National Centre for Dance Bucharest. Although Marchidan is the author of the concept, *Bodies on the Line* are not an artwork where dancers blindly follow the directions of the choreographer. The creative process was a chance for the dancers to express their hopes, expectations and desires on the onset of their careers, but also their anxieties, insecurities and challenges they face in their artistic field. Their experiences were the base for the performance that not only explores the conditions young dancers work in, but also the problems independent artists in general face.

Bodies on the Line rests on the delicate balance of exploring the challenges of the independent artistic scene and creating a safe performing space of collectivity and support. In conditions of precariousness the majority of independent artists work in, *Bodies on the Line* both examine those circumstances and create a refuge from them, if only briefly for the duration of the performance.

In the following interview, Ioana Marchidan discusses working with young dancers on *Bodies on the Line* and examining the precarious working conditions on the independent dance scene.

Borisav Matić: Your performance *Bodies on the Line* starts and ends with an image of young dancers sitting around a dining table and chatting. How important is the dining table metaphor for the exploration of community in this performance?

Ioana Marchidan: The idea to bring a table on the stage and to use it realistically as we do at someone’s place or home, eating soup and chatting about the problems we face as young independent artists, came from Romanian cinematography.

It is said that in most Romanian films the main action takes place around a soup. So I asked myself, why not in a dance performance? This was the first thought, the second was, as you said, about community – to stick together in a safe place, gathered around the table. When we eat, the satisfaction of eating produces many truths that were blocked somewhere in our minds. Unfortunately, in the performance, soup is eaten by the envelope, which is what young independent artists can afford, metaphorically speaking. Also, the table is the place we need because we are in a continuous run after projects, castings, project reports, scholarships and stuff like that.

Borisav Matić: Since *Bodies on the Line* simultaneously explores the precarious position of contemporary dancers and aims to create a safe space for artistic

expression, how did you balance the need for a safe environment and to articulate anxieties that come from the outside world?

Ioana Marchidan: I have always said that we, the artists, have in a way the “luxury” of expressing our worries, joys, needs, injustices – you name it – in front of many people, not only in front of your neighbor on a bench in front of your house. The stage can be called a safe space to articulate necessary and important concepts. Together, we tried to express as clearly and honestly as possible what hurts us, what it costs us, how much it costs us, what is the monthly decency with which we can survive. The question is if there is still a safe space for artists. Everything is precarious and in the recent history of contemporary dance or performance, there was space or there was not. That is a cold war that we independent artists are continuously fighting with the system.

Borisav Matić: You created the performance with graduates of the CNDB Dance and Performance Academy who are in their 20s. What were their most prominent hopes and anxieties regarding their prospective careers in contemporary dance?

Ioana Marchidan: First of all, we all need stability. The question of what I am doing tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, next week, next month, maybe next year is unhealthy and non-productive. We live in uncertain times and we hope for better times for artists in general, not only for emerging young people but also for those who have been in the field for some time. What do better times mean? I don’t know. Maybe some help from the state, some recognition that the independent field exists.

Borisav Matić: Did you find a way to incorporate the thoughts and concerns of young dancers in the performance?

Ioana Marchidan: The entire performance is based on this. 80 percent of everything comes from them.

We had time to talk. I gave them some clues and I asked them some questions, in groups and individually, because we are different, each of us thinks differently, we have different experiences and different expectations. But at some point, we meet with the same problems – this continuous run for projects, instability and worrying about tomorrow.

Borisav Matić: Which choreographic and dance procedures were central in expressing this dynamic between safety and uncertainty, hopes and anxieties?

Ioana Marchidan: I don’t know if I use any particular choreographic method. I started with the group choreography to create this kind of community. They support each other, they must trust that someone is there to offer them a hand, a shoulder, a leg, stability. On the other hand, we have their statements that come against the dynamic of the group moment in which there is still hope, there is still someone you can rely on. The statements are unfortunately hopeless.

Borisav Matić: Even though *Bodies on the Line* are a choreographic piece, dialogues and enactment of scenes play an important role several times throughout the performance. How much did the work on those segments, and the collaboration with the dramaturg Mihaela Michailov, help you to explore the topics of the performance?

Ioana Marchidan: I am on my second collaboration with Mihaela on the dramaturgy side. I spoke with her about what I wanted, she did some interviews with the performers and at the end she wrote some texts based on their stories. We were very open in terms of intervening in the text, cutting or modifying it where necessary. However, 80 percent of the text is written by performers in

collaboration with Mihaela and me. Discussions with her on the topic or different topics helped the most in gathering valuable information.

Borisav Matić: How much is the interaction with the audience important for the performance?

Ioana Marchidan: It's very important. A large part of the show is performed by looking at the audience. Four out of five statements are said directly to the audience, there is nothing theatrical. The performers are speaking with the audience and the audience has the opportunity to respond at some point. And also, they present themselves, they are very sincere and that makes this openness to the audience very intimate and true. They watch us with open eyes, we give them open truth.

Borisav Matić: How much did the creative process of *Bodies on the Line* mean for you and the performers personally in dealing with the challenges of working in contemporary dance?

Ioana Marchidan: First of all, I want to thank CNDB for inviting me to create something with 5 wonderful people who graduated from the academy. I had another concept in my mind, not so far from the current one. But when we started to meet and discuss, something changed my view. I realise that we have to speak loudly about our decency. The question is: Can you make a decent living from independent projects? What does decent mean?

In Romania, contemporary dance is like: run for your life or dance for your life.

Texts:

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