

William Forsythe, Ballett Frankfurt
Photo: Dominik Mentzos

Nothing DANCE AND CHOREOGRAPHY IN THE 1990's Left But Nerves

When one peers into the current situation of dance in Germany from the outside, the picture that presents itself is both confused and confusing. Revolution and revival on the one hand, demolition and decline on the other; flux and upheaval here, rigidity and ossification there. The reality is indeed paradoxical: although in some respects, dance is stronger than ever, it is also more severely jeopardized than ever before. Strength and self-confidence are juxtaposed with timidity and sheepishness to create a bewildering and contradictory situation. A look at the programs presented this year by a range of performance venues reveals a similar contradictory situation: Berlin saw little more than another crop of anachronistic balletic irrelevancies, while Frankfurt witnessed the articulation of a highly elaborate movement vocabulary, incorporating significant contributions from the dancers. The choreographic works presented at smaller and medium-sized state and civic theaters were characterized by a great diversity, randomness and heterogeneity, while strong-willed and idiosyncratic members of the younger generation of choreographers created dances whose only common denominator lays in their uncommonly pluralistic approaches.

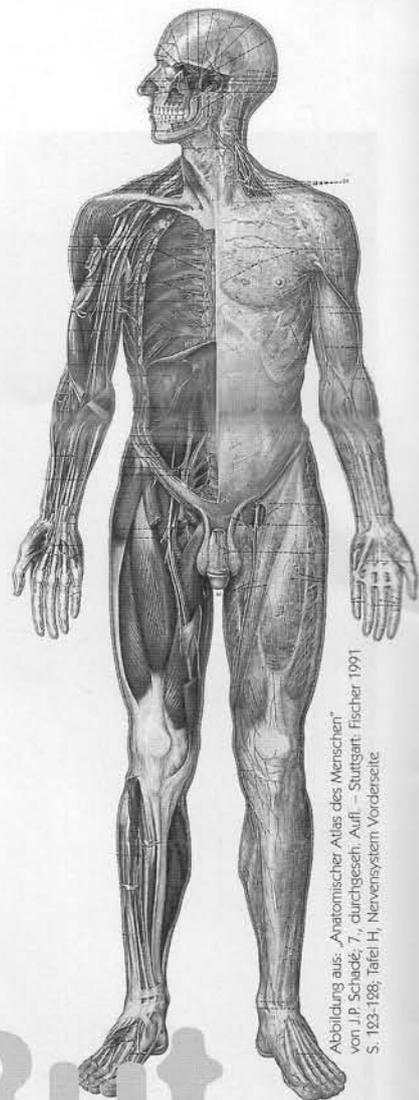


Abbildung aus: „Anatomischer Atlas des Menschen“
von J.P. Schade, 7., durchgeseh. Aufl. – Stuttgart: Fischer 1991
S. 192-198; Tafel H, Nervensystem Vorderseite

DEMOLITION, REVOLUTION, REVIVAL

The most significant changes were twofold: on the one hand, there were and still are valiant attempts to formulate a new aesthetic; while on the other hand, a new wave of movement is presently re-vivifying the two sides of German dance's dual structure, namely the theater-based ensembles and the so-called „independent“ groups. Chances for the future are largely dependent upon how this dual structure continues to evolve and upon the ways in which people who are interested in dance decide to take things in hand. Here too a paradoxical situation presents itself, with openings and closings following closely upon each other's heels. Although positive approaches and concrete steps are evident both institutionally and in various forms of collaborative organization, voices calling for austerity and cutbacks in spending have become louder and more strident than ever.

The financial situation is not likely to improve much in the next few years. Most prophets expect things to become worse rather than better. Coping with difficult conditions will require creative thinking and carefully planned action. At best, we can hope that the sheer difficulty of the situation will prompt choreographers and producers to search for and find unusual solutions. Whether the future will bring reconstruction or reduction depends in part upon the actions and reactions taken by the dance scene itself. One thing is certain: the network will continue to grow. Cooperation, exchange and collaborative effort will continue to increase among the various parties.

**POLITICAL BOUNDARIES –
UNIVERSAL CULTURE**

Globalizing tendencies in today's social reality (especially in economics and communications) are countered by newly gaping fissions and freshly drawn boundaries in the political sphere. The cultural world, however, though it embraces a multitude of different artistic visions, is decidedly universalist in its attitudes and steadfastly opposed to parochial divisiveness. Artistic forms and themes have long since transcended national boundaries; the international exchange of ideas and results is commonplace, fluent and global, as is the circulation and availability of art and performance works. Germany would be ill advised to isolate itself by developing only a national network for its independent dance scene, but ought instead to begin finding ways to link and use resources available in the existing theatrical landscape while simultaneously exploring ways to restructure that landscape.

There can be no doubt that contemporary dance in Germany has grown in significance and strength. Internationally, this growth has enhanced the reputation of Germany's dance scene; domestically, it has created a salubrious climate for new efforts within the country. The number and significance of dance festivals have both increased. Dance Biennial in Munich and the still young festival 'Sprachen des Körpers' (body languages) in Stuttgart are two examples of the healthy, speedy growth and up-to-the-minute thematic focus that characterize Germany's dance festivals. Tanzwerkstatt Europa (Dance

Workshop Europe) in Munich and TanzWerkstatt (DanceWorkshop) Berlin both offer valuable workshops which help to fill the gap in educational opportunities for young people eager to learn contemporary dance. By going beyond mere co-productions, these festivals also test the viability of networking with public institutions. (Networking of this sort was successful at Dance 95: the Bayerisches Staatsballett (Bavarian State Ballet) and Marstall Theater helped to support a production by Golonka/Wölfl in Munich and Schauburg Theater provided support for a new production by Sasha Waltz.)

Other trend-setting developments include the newly established 'Deutscher Produzentenpreis für Choreographie' (German Producer's Prize for Choreographic Work) from various theater and festival directors which helps to defray the production and touring expenses of a new choreographic project, the efforts of the Landesbüro Tanz (State Dance Office) in North Rhine-Westphalia to raise dancers' awareness of and skills in engaging with the arena of arts politics, a new funding model in Munich, which more strongly concentrates available funds, as well as local efforts to find sponsors (in Berlin) and establish rehearsal spaces (in Hamburg) for dancers and performance groups.

Certain top ensembles have (again) embarked on an artistically and organizationally creative path. The Ballett Frankfurt (Frankfurt Ballet), which gives annual guest performances at Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris as part of an artists-in-residence arrangement, has just concluded a new cooperative agreement with Nederlands Dans Theater. This agreement calls for a

long-term, continuing exchange between the two ensembles. The Bayerisches Staatsballett (Bavarian State Ballet) has initiated efforts to make postmodern and contemporary dance a regular and fixed element in its annual program. With the ten-year extension of his contract in Hamburg, John Neumeier has gained far more autonomy and soon plans to establish a daring junior company that will provide him with the freedom to take greater risks. At the Komische Oper in Berlin, Marc Jonkers is testing the potential benefits of working shoulder-to-shoulder with choreographers and lesser-known groups from the independent dance scene while also encouraging closer contact with established institutions like the Hebbel-Theater.

Certain changes in aesthetic emphasis are also worthy of note. Some members of the first generation of choreographers have reoriented or restructured their work. Jenny Coogan in Munich, for example, is now working as a pedagogue; Vivienne Newport in Frankfurt is creating pieces for the theatrical stage on a project-by-project basis; and Tanzfabrik in Berlin has become more individual in its focus. At the same time, a number of new groups have been formed. These ensembles are strikingly dissimilar in their approaches, character and subjective shadings. New choreographers and youthful dancers are cropping up everywhere. The difference between the older generation and the one that is succeeding it lies in the latter's search for forms that have little or nothing in common with the interests and styles of the 1970s and '80s. A similar generational divergence is also currently taking place in Netherlands.

Angelin Prejocaj, Bayerisches Staatsballett, Photo: Wilfried Hösli



THE NEW ARTIST

According to Durs Grünbein, lyric poet and winner of the Georg Büchner Prize, „The new artist no longer has a program; nothing is left but nerves.“ Such artists are less likely to pay attention to social or moral contexts and are more likely to focus on the crumbling ego to whom the world appears as a shimmering multiplicity. Grünbein is fascinated by „inner neural fodder,“ the energetic and perceptive processes that take place under the skin. Guiding and directing the ego, these neural processes also guide and direct the act of writing itself. In contemporary dance and choreography, we are also witnessing the emergence of a specific kind of fragmented, finely nerved corporeality.

Amanda Miller, who ranks among the most distinctive of these contemporary choreographers, is developing a style of movement that resembles what Durs Grünbein describes as „scaling the facades in nervously vibratory style.“ Also worthy of a place in this exclusive group is the duo of Wanda Golonka and VA Wölfl, whose most recent production featured a space that was more like a slide than a stage, where bodies temporarily assumed and then quickly abandoned self-presentational poses, only to be swept aimlessly away or to tumble through and submerge themselves within ephemeral dreams. Other members of this talented group are Joachim Schlömer, in whose „Hochland oder der Nachhall der Steine“ („Highland or The Echo of the Stones“) various eras intersect and interact until one can no longer distinguish between the changing time frames; Urs Dietrich, whose solo works invariably search for a new approach, a new route through, a distillation to the essential; and Daniel Goldin, who, along with Schlömer and Dietrich, belongs to the latest generation of Folkwang School graduates.

But the thrown stone of the new aesthetic is creating choreographic waves of an even larger diameter. Rui Horta's formerly luxuriant and extroverted style of dancing has fallen into long phases of silence and veiled itself in lengthy monologues. Jo Fabian is becoming increasingly entangled in the difficulties of sifting through the layers of history. Fabian's Kleist piece comes undone in a morass of subjective questions and existential doubts. Sasha Waltz borrows the grotesqueries of the silent movies to conceal/reveal the dramas of an unfathomable world. Micha Purucker wanders through a soft-clock landscape where outlines melt and contours dissolve.

UNBOUND TIME

Time is out of balance. At first, time was pressed into a linear sequence, only to be subsequently cast adrift from every reliable anchorage. Space was left behind and fell by the wayside. But what about the bodies? They too no longer have a fixed, determined value. Bodies can be manipulated almost infinitely (a malleability made abundantly clear by the theme of „Dance 95“). Bodies have become thinskin and highly-strung, extremely absorbent and awfully uneasy. Individual freedom is ambivalent, wide-ranging and inscrutable. A plethora of possibilities overwhelms one's limited ability to survey, while the pressure to make decisions has grown more urgent than ever. How is dance reacting to this situation? It has distanced itself from the emphatic openness and new freedoms as championed by Cunningham, yet it has also grown equally aloof from the radical subversion of corporeal habits as practiced in postmodern dance.

Today's dance is torn between yesterday and tomorrow, between reminiscences of a lost era and the proximity to an uncertain future. Dance inquires into memories of the past while allowing itself to be infinitely vulnerable to the present. It has bid adieu to an age when the world was (perhaps) still comprehensible, as in Pina Bausch's last piece about childhood. Today's dance spectrum also includes William Forsythe's attempts to compose a new,



Wanda Golonka und VA Wölfl, Neuer Tanz; Photo: VA Wölfl

confusingly complex polyphony as a way of bringing order into a muddled, impenetrable thicket of sensory data. (Forsythe's projects focus on what Lyotard describes as one of our era's basic motifs, an indecipherable pattern that neither artistic nor scientific methods will ever be able to fully comprehend.) Dance also involves Meg Stuart's method of using tics (movements that have assumed an independent life of their own) as a means of comprehending the loss of self. And dance is broad and multifarious enough to include Saburo Teshigawara's compositions which embody the art of making time palpable in bodies that have been wholly divorced from every temporal context.

It would be inappropriate to congratulate ourselves or pat ourselves on the backs. The future of important, independent groups, of civic and state-funded ensembles is in grave jeopardy. The compulsion to conserve public funds threatens everyone, the marginal fringe of little-known dance companies no less than the cradles of choreographic and dancerly (r)evolution. But destructive forces are also at work within the dance scene itself. The ensemble in Stuttgart, for example, bent over backward to please and nearly crippled itself in the process. The dance stages in Berlin, as Jochen Schmidt says, featured so many arcane productions that they very nearly suc-

ceeded in making themselves entirely superfluous. The future of classical dance and of the larger theaters in general is severely threatened by a shortage of talented choreographers, and this is a problem that affects everyone. Although the entrenched battle between contemporary and traditional dance forms has never been so near an armistice as it is today, the boundaries between the two genres become painfully clear as soon as one begins to do any concrete work. Progressive dance has withdrawn too far from traditions and especially from institutionalized traditions; a seemingly unbridgeable abyss yawns between avant-garde choreographers and conservative dancers, between old-fashioned choreographers and daring young dancers. In the context of classical dance, particularly, we would do well to follow the advice of Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards, who urged colleagues who sullenly and doggedly strive for ever higher levels of musical virtuosity to simply „Throw away your acoustic guitars. It's just a question of attitude anyway!“ The problem isn't a particular technique. The problem is a barrier in one's head.

What do the artists say? „We have no program any more. We have nothing left but our nerves.“ It looks like they're going to be needing those strong nerves more than ever in the next few years.

■ Edith Boxberger