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Theses

The Development of Form-language of Ballet in the 20th and 21st Centuries - Creating Syntheses on Stage and in Ballet Education

As ballet master and director of the artist training institute of the Hungarian Dance Academy I consider my task, even more my mission, to ensure the development and future of classical ballet in the 21st century to which it is essential – beyond being acquainted with its traditions – to sustain the flexibility of the *form-language of ballet* that is able to adopt changes as integral parts but still remaining a *self-identical language* as it has been for centuries.

As ballet master my aim is to gain proper understanding of the form-language of the academic ballet (the basis of the romantic, classical, later neo-classical, modern and contemporary ballets appear on stage) that I teach. On the one hand the stages of historic development, the determining ballet master personalities and their ideas, the work of choreographers and dance artists who have formed dance language and certainly more closely on the other: the different schools of classical ballet, their diverse methods and style characteristics as well as the anatomical and biomechanical background supporting ballet education.

When I was searching for the topic of my doctoral dissertation it was my pleasure to see *The changes of theatrical language and theatrical speech in particular as regards the radical social and cultural changes in the 20th century* among the announced themes of the Doctoral School of the University of Theatre and Film Arts. I believed that with my research I would be able to contribute not only to my development but to this theme as well analyzing the events of the past century from the aspect of dance. The changes of ballet language as (dance)theatre language in the 20th century are especially exciting and, moreover, as I have observed it, are of significant importance in dance history as well. It had also made me think about how politics and social changes affected the development of ballet not only in the course of the 20th century but in earlier centuries as well: even more, they affected not only the theatrical genre but more closely dance language as well.

In the year following my admittance to the doctoral school I taught a graduating grade at the Hungarian Dance Academy, and this period brought deep elaboration and active research in my chosen topic – in the examination of ballet language – nevertheless, my aims and ‘ars poetica’ as ballet master could clear-out and crystallize.

The basis of my research constituted of two decades of my dance artist career, through which I could dance choreographies on the widest scale or get to know at first hand, as well as of my scholastic activities – and my previous interest in the achievements of my profession – that brought me closer to further creators, creations and dance languages. My devotion and vocation towards teaching (since my childhood) together with the precision, openness to cognition and to continuous development, usually characteristic of me, combined with my inclination to synthesis have always encouraged me to proceed continuous research in ballet teaching and in my self-development.

I concluded to embark on this theme on the basis of the foregoing in order to come ever closer, and so will my reader too, to the better understanding of the form-language of ballet.

THESIS:

The thesis of my essay: the language of ballet functioned as inclusive medium in the past centuries (15th-21st centuries), its development was ensured by continuous synthesis, and in terms of enrichment of dance language the most fertile period of the ballet history is the 20th century.

In the past centuries the language of ballet continuously developed and the most significant element of this centuries-old development is that it could function as an inclusive medium. Its apparently ultimately closed form-language was and is still able to integrate elements from various other dance languages, treasury of movements and remained therefore alive. At first, typically until the end of the 19th century, it embedded elements from social dances and then later, at the beginning of the 20th century, from new and modern dances as well as from folk dances again (in more waves, with different approaches), and then up to the present days from contemporary and street dances. This continuous *synthesis* could ensure that – next to pantomime (presented indeed without words, in the 20th century), the borderline of acting and dance art – ballet managed to survive as classical European dance art¹.

In my essay I intend to elaborate exclusively on the form-language of ballet, and I will descend into the analysis of dramaturgy, form and genre of theatrical works only as far as is necessary. Other branches of dance art will be included only in so far as their form-language effected the changes of ballet form language (folk dance as source and constant point of return

¹ European folk dances appeared on stage in a more or less authentic form only in the 20th century. Before that it was actually the character dances of ballet that presented folkish style on stage.

for renewal; interactions between modern dance and ballet : the modern ballet and the crossover in the 20th century).

The determinant stages of the development were as follows:

It was the ballet masters' scientific approach that led to the development of the language of ballet.

The roots of ballet can be found in court dances stylized from folk dances, while its language was formed by the scientific approach of ballet masters. At the time of the Renaissance the approach of masters with expertise in anatomy and other fields of science lead to the recognition of the significance of *en dehors*. Later, in the Baroque era organization and the need for conscious development fostered academic processes, the first codification. By the end of the 17th century the language of ballet had evolved in a way which could be taught in schools afterwards (to civil apprentices in increasing number) and, after undergoing continuous development, the 'academic ballet' became the language of stage productions and the technique of the training for polishing dance skills every day. For dancing ballet practice on a daily basis and physical condition emerged as prerequisite: *en dehors* (up to 180°) became of increasing importance and the language separated from its roots, from ballroom dances and developed individually. It can be therefore concluded that 'the language of classical/academic ballet' evolved along the axes of folk dance-ballroom dance-court dance as well as of serfhood-nobility, bourgeois-aristocracy. (Chapter 2.1.1; 2.1.2)

The development of the language of ballet and therefore its survival were ensured by the following factors:

- from the end of the 17th century it turned into *theatrical* dance art and partially detached from ballroom dances of common use,

- by the first third of the 19th century *pointe* technique had crystallized and the language of ballet had thereby detached from ballroom dances as well as become an *autonomous* theatrical genre,

- Politics and globalization saved it from elimination in the times of crises of the 19th-20th century.

Chapter (2.2) *The development of the language of ballet until the first third of the 20th century* explores how classical ballet has sustain as form-language up until today. How could its survival be ensured in the midst of considerably varying social-political conditions or of the crises of dance as a branch of art? How did it overcome the 'attacks from outside', such were the reign of pantomime in the age of Enlightenment or the loss of values at the beginning of the 20th century or the more or less vehement denial of the modern dancer generations?

Initially being present in operas, the two genres developed together, and then later stable popularity was brought by Molière's comedies. During that time it was the new features of dance technique (and dance language) that could sustain interest in ballet which had gradually become a theatrical genre leaving the period of opera-ballet, comedy-ballet and ballet-pantomime behind. After the prosperous ages of romanticism and classical ballet it was due to the ambitions of the czarist Russia and later the emerging of the dictatorship of the proletariat that ballet was able to survive the epoch of the total loss of values and attacks from representatives of modern dance (the innovators of which usually expressed their aspirations referring to ballet). Both of these regimes supported the genre, while in the West *Ballets Russes* brought ballet to public attention. Later, the majority of the company members who stayed away from the Soviet Union spread the already renewed ballet's popularity worldwide.

To the better knowledge of the form language in the 21st century I consider it to be essential to be acquainted with the precedents, to review the development of form language thoroughly, since without understanding the language as basis that had undergone two codification processes by the beginning of the 20th century (the second of which took place exactly at the time of Romanticism) and drastic classicization one will not be able to conceive and evaluate the broad scope of development in the 20th century and therefore will not see the progress in the language of ballet in between the point of departure and the point of arrival within one hundred years.

4. In terms of enrichment of dance language the most fertile period of the ballet history is the 20th century.

Not underestimating the achievements of the beginnings during the time of the Renaissance and the advancement during Romanticism I consider that ballet evolved the most and especially in a most differentiated way in the 20th century. In this century ballet included

the achievements of the attacking modern and later contemporary trends as well as special features of other classical dance cultures, what is more it revised and recreated itself – by, of course, outstanding creators' works (Maurice Béjart, Kenneth MacMillan, Hans van Manen, Jiří Kylian, William Forsythe). Moreover, the development of ballet was highly influenced by sports: the expectations towards physique and aesthetics had become higher in which acrobatic Soviet ballets had a determining role, and so did George Balanchine who staged American approach and attitude to life. In the chapter (3) *The enrichment and syntheses of dance language in the 20th century* I will elaborate on the tendencies contributed to the development of dance language (3.1), on creators determined the evolution of the language of ballet and their characteristic pieces that can be even considered as milestones (3.2).

5. The form-language of ballet is a relevant, living language in the 21st century.

Classical ballet is the most elaborated on *movement language* of dance art branches that had crystallized in the course of centuries and is still being used as a means of expression by performer and creators – some of them are ingenious dancer-choreographers with experimental and innovative purposes.

In the chapter *The language of ballet in the 21st century* (4) I will review in a nutshell the achievements of the one and a half decade of this present century – that display on the one hand the continuation and revision of the tendencies of the 20th century and, on the other, neoclassicism that returns at times in a spiraling pattern.

The language in the 21st century – not only because of the short time that has passed – is highly dependent on the recent achievements: not merely because the influential masters are still alive or even active and their pieces determine the repertoire of classical companies, but also because their apprentices/followers can only detach themselves from the languages they possess only to a certain extent. However, some processes can already be observed until 2014.

6. The prevailing ballet education must follow the changes of theatrical language.

Since ballet became a theatrical genre, ballet education had been formed by the ever-changing circumstances and increasing expectations which forced ballet masters not just to keep traditions but to move on from them and to think creatively and flexibly in line with the choreographers' works of their time. The task of the ballet master in the 21st century is to train students to be able to meet the expectations of international ballet art of our times, that

is, to become versatile dancer, to possess trained technique and artistic skills, harmonious body figure and open mind in order to become capable, by the end of their studies, to interpret choreographies of any style and with different requirements or to fill in possible shortcomings emerging in the course of the work process by using their acquired knowledge and flexible way of thinking.

In Chapter 5 I will analyze my work with a graduating class based on my one and a half decade experience as ballet master that summarized and revealed my endeavors to apply up-to-date, 21st century education and its results. Chapters *The language of ballet today – in the light of a qualifying examination at HDA* (5.1) and *The language of theatrical ballet – the creation of a graduation performance responding to the latest demands* (5.2) exposes the process of construction – as well as of research and experiment parallel with it – process over several years (2007-2012) in the end of which my students and I reached the concert exam.

My preparations for the qualifying examination, including the compiling and the staging of the performance pieces in the Opera, the ten-month work process in the ballet studios had brought in-depth study of the language of ballet, just as had my conscious approach in editing the exam material of the previous years, striving to apply wide variety of styles.

The results of my research:

First, the *concert exam*² in 2012 which was, as a result of my endeavors, a *world premiere*³ in Hungary, and the – so far – successful *start of my students' career*.

Secondly, this *essay* in which, for the first time in Hungary, I will analyze the development of ballet putting the changes of its form-language into the focus – certainly elaborating on only a small proportion of this huge topic. In my opinion, for future choreographers who intend to express themselves in the language of (the classical/academic) ballet it would be worth reading my work. Just as I could make unexpected revelations in the field that I have known and elaborated on for already 35 years, it could offer similar experience to other as well – not merely by reading this essay, but also by applying similar approach in choreographies and oeuvres, by analyzing inventions that by nowadays have become common but were novelties in their times, and, principally, the discovery of the wonderful intellectual contents behind choreographic visions and creations. Also, since

² See DVD-Annex

³ Andreis-Monteverdi-Vitali-Mujic: Ahonnan az álom jön (Where the Dreams Come From)

classical trends are on the increase again in the 21st century, perhaps there exists a talented creator striving for it. I hope he will be a Hungarian Balanchine or a MacMillan.