

Dejan Srhoj, dancer and choreographer

Dance is an Overlooked Potential of Intercultural Cooperation

Interviewed by Aldo Milohnić

Dejan Srhoj, a performer and author in the field of contemporary dance, celebrated his 40th birthday on 31 October of this year. Currently, most of his work focuses on the long-term project, *Composition of Differences*, where he researches choreographic principles through dance improvisations, sharing practices and education. Upon finding out that a robot could evoke emotions in him, he created a performance in Sweden for a Nao robot who speaks, dances and thinks. In addition to that, he curates CoFestival in Ljubljana and actively collaborates in developing the programmes of the Nomad Dance Academy network, which he established together with colleagues from Slovenia and the Balkans. Since 2001, he is an independent artist. A co-founder of Fičo Balet, he collaborated as either a dancer or author in the performances *1:0*, *Sweat & Soot*, *Emofad*, *Sun City*, *Confidance*, *Edge of Eden*, *Formula*, *2:0* etc. During this time, he also performed in dance and theatre projects with Janez Janša, Ivica Buljan, Sebastijan Horvat, Betontanc, Magdalena Reiter, Silvan Omerzu, Kaja Lorenci, and others. Before that, between 1998 and 2001, he was a soloist at the SNT Opera and Ballet Ljubljana, where he mostly danced principal roles in classical ballets.

In the 1990s, you danced in the performances of the ballet ensemble at the SNT Opera and Ballet Ljubljana, but in the new millennium, you shifted to contemporary dance and movement theatre. How and why did you make this shift from classical ballet to contemporary dance?

Your question reminded me of the *Fake it!* project that we did with Emil Hrvatin, or Janez Janša. In the project, we reconstructed old performances that we transposed into the contemporary context while researching and questioning the context in which these performances were created: what has changed, how do we experience space, body and movement now, who were these choreographers, why did they do it, what was their education, in what kind of environment were they creating these performances ...

Ballet didn't have this approach. In ballet, we blindly copied movements that certain choreographers determined a hundred or more years ago. As for those movements, we didn't place them in the context of that or the present time, as we were merely to repeat them as a prescribed form. It bothered me that I didn't know what I was doing, even though ballet appears to be very clear, simple. It also bothered me that ballet choreographers didn't work with people, with individuals, they didn't create choreographies for particular dancers, but we were simply some sort of putty objects that choreographers could mould according to their wishes.

Recently, a Russian ballet dancer was telling me that the first three years in ballet school in Russia are aimed at killing the person's sense of self with the very clear objective of transforming the dancer into putty. But when I started creating in the field of contemporary dance, a new world opened up to me. The very course of a rehearsal is different – it can start a couple of minutes late, you can take a break, you can talk, your opinion matters, you feel some basic respect among your co-workers ...

When you transitioned to contemporary dance, did you first have to “cleanse” the residue of ballet training? Did the rehearsed ballet moves interfere with creating contemporary dance performances?

With ballet, the centre of the body is in the chest (probably connected to the fact that you project yourself as strong, handsome, the best, flawless), and in contemporary dance, it's in the pelvis. That very fact creates different images, emotions and so on for the dancer. It took me several years to move the centre from the chest to the pelvis, or to be able to research where it could be shifted.

Establishing Fičo Balet was a milestone in your dance creativity. How do you evaluate its importance today, twenty years later, and the place it has in the recent history of contemporary dance in Slovenia?

The Fičo Balet website once stated that we were in the business of democratising high-brow art. What we wanted to say was that we'd inject classical ballet with humour, casualness, perhaps even mischief, and we'd have fun doing this. Personally, I felt that was my own dance emancipation, because with all the knowledge that dance teachers and choreographers had given me so meticulously, I could, at the end of the day, play, reflect or ironise it. Perhaps this playfulness regarding ballet and introducing humour in this otherwise serious dance form has been the greatest achievement of Fičo Balet in our environment. And another interesting thing: almost all the dancers were male. When we entered this space between the classical and contemporary

dance and started touring the festivals, it became obvious that this wasn't so common. I remember when John Ashford, a contemporary dance producer, who at the time was the director of The Place theatre in London, said, quite surprised: "Well, look, in Slovenia, men dance."

In general, however, I think that Fičo Balet remains in some sort of interspace and this might be why to this day it hasn't been present enough in the theory of either classical or contemporary dance. Perhaps the reason is also that we've never followed particular trends in contemporary dance, but have preferred to pick particular dance elements and mix them in our own way.

How did the establishment of the Nomad Dance Academy (NDA) come about and what were the reasons for its creation?

A couple of days before the theatre network IETM met in 2005 in Belgrade, the Bunker Institute organised a meeting of the Balkan Express network, in which many NGOs and independent artists from the territories of the former Yugoslavia and other Balkan countries participated. At one of the meetings, dancers, choreographers and contemporary dance producers from the region gathered and talked about the unusual fact that we knew what was happening in Berlin, Paris or London, but not what was happening in the cities nearby, although we came from a once united cultural space, and had a common history, spoke similar languages, etc. We also found out that we were facing similar production limitations. From there, the desire to meet again and strengthen our cooperation grew.

Which achievements of the NDA would you emphasise as the most important from the point of view of regional cooperation?

The cooperation started with the formation of a nomadic educational programme, where 14 to 15 participants travelled through the entire territory of former Yugoslavia and Bulgaria for four months. They spent a couple of weeks in each country, followed lectures, participated in workshops and created their own art. Perhaps most important was that they got to know the local scene – who were the actors, how they worked, thought, what problems they encountered ... From this educational programme, in which in one way or another over 100 people participated, grew a community in which organisers and participants of the programme connected. This was the basis for future cooperation. Later, of course, new challenges appeared, for example, how to ensure the long-term financing of contemporary dance. NDA's activities are funded from the European culture programmes and we're quite successful at that, but we

have immense problems with providing the required 50% co-financing from our local communities. We thus learnt that we had to organise advocacy events where we would convince the deciders that a regional fund should be set up, one that would co-finance the cooperation of artists in the region, as well as the European projects into which these artists are included. As a part of this programme of advocacy, we have so far organised three events in the region, and the fourth will be next year in Ljubljana, where we will defend the idea for setting up a network of residencies in the cities in which we have partners.

The third segment is support for archiving, because the region doesn't have an institution that systematically works on archiving contemporary dance. Let me mention another NDA achievement, the Nomad Dance Institute which offers co-productions to projects that come recommended. We started this community building through coproducing performances some years ago, when we met at the MSUM+ in Ljubljana, where every member of the NDA had a chance to present their project or invite another member's project to a coproducing cooperation. Then we adopted the rule of regional cooperation within the project: you could either offer your own project to other members to coproduce, or you invited another member's project to work with you – both at the same time was not possible according to this rule. We thus tried to evoke interest for participation in every member, about what other members of the community were doing, for co-decision. In short, we didn't want to shift the responsibility to some committee, but rather to give the power of decision to each individual and thus practice some agreed form of direct democracy.

The NDA encouraged the establishment of some contemporary dance festivals in the Balkans. Can you tell us a bit more about the strategy of establishing dance festivals and the role the NDA has in these processes?

The route to these festivals was organic, they were created because their existence was necessary. Dance scenes in the region needed greater visibility and some kind of a platform so they could share their creativity with the interested audience. The NDA guaranteed start-up funding for these festivals, from a European project. In this way, the festivals Antistatic in Sofia, LocoMotion in Skopje, Zvrk in Sarajevo, Kondenz in Belgrade were founded, and even before the NDA, the Platforma festival in Zagreb. In Ljubljana, we presented the student productions from the educational part of the programme at the mini-festival Short Cuts. In 2011, the festival Pleskavica developed from this, and the year after that, we merged with the festival Ukrep (PTL) and Modul Dance Project (Kino Šiška) into CoFestival. To sum up, this is about strengthening visibility, building community, creating audience, but also developing incentive for local cultural politicians in the region to attend festivals and get to know contemporary dance.

As the members of the NDA, you have developed your own principles of operation – how do you use these principles when you organise and realise the CoFestival?

The fundamental principle is definitely the invitation, as I've already mentioned. We do have an artistic board which decides, but we don't have designated functions; someone might focus more on production, someone else on workshop organisation etc., depending on their own preference, but we all prepare the programme together. In addition to that, we use the principle of balance, which means we make sure we invite performances from different countries and that different genres and styles of performances are represented. We're also careful that there aren't disproportionate differences in fees for performers and other collaborators. We also have the open space principle, which allows us to leave open the opportunity for the unknown. This can be a performance that has surprised up, a lecturer that brings in a fresh approach, or could also mean to let someone from the outside of the NDA organise a meeting, etc. It's a moment of coincidence that may bring new knowledge or insight. What currently interests me most in contemporary dance is this very moment, which inside a certain frame allows for a possibility of research, testing, also mistakes. And how this principle, through the idea of choreography as an expanded practice, can be applied to the organisation of a festival or another event.

As you have already mentioned, one of the festivals created on the NDA initiative is the LocoMotion in Skopje, whose producer (until 2015) was Lokomotiva, a cultural NGO. How does the cooperation with Lokomotiva work and how would you rate its importance for the dance scene in Macedonia?

In addition to the Macedonian part of the NDA, Lokomotiva is one of the few cultural NGOs in Macedonia that is working in the production and promotion of contemporary dance, so it is very important for the development of their dance scene. Biljana Tanurovska Kjulavkovski and Iskra Shukarova were the most instrumental in making Lokomotiva the leading NGO for contemporary dance in Macedonia. In addition to that, Biljana has been a member of the NDA coordination group throughout, and has greatly contributed to retaining the platform, that it was financially sustainable and that it developed in the production sense. But I think that in Macedonia they may not be fully aware how important Lokomotiva is for their dance scene. I participated in the Locomotion Festival several times and it was excellent, there was always a lot of audience, many discussions, educational programmes, in short, the festival offered everything that we believe a contemporary dance festival should offer: artistic events, reflection of these events, education and creating a community.

What's your opinion about the situation of contemporary dance in Macedonia? Could you compare the production circumstances (for example, financial support, technical conditions of work, promotional practices, etc.) in Macedonia and Slovenia?

Compared to the Slovenian dance scene, the Macedonian one is small. Besides that, there is a huge difference in the number of performing venues. Ljubljana has several venues that relatively regularly present contemporary dance (PTL, Španski borci, Stara elektrarna, Cankarjev dom ...), they are relevant, well-equipped, supported by technical and PR personnel, etc. In Skopje, there is not a single stage dedicated exclusively, or even predominantly, to contemporary dance. For the last two years, Lokomotiva has used the premises of the former cinema Kultura in Skopje, where they show contemporary dance, but in the financial and technical sense, this is still extremely undernourished. Iskra Shukarova, who has been on the dance scenes for two decades, is able to raise only between one and two thousand euros on the calls for public tender, but in Slovenia, we get funding up to ten times higher for a similar project. But we both have a similar problem: we don't have a dance studio that would be dedicated exclusively to practising contemporary dance.

In the context of the bilateral research project about Macedonian-Slovenian theatre links, your collaboration with the Macedonian choreographer Iskra Shukarova is particularly interesting. How did it come about?

Iskra and I collaborated intensively in the project Formula. When I was teaching dance in Macedonia years ago, Iskra suggested that we take a couple of days to research the stage as an extended Laban's cube, within which we studied geometrical relationships and at the same time the deconstruction of ballet, from which we both started. We were interested in how ballet could be placed in the paradigm of contemporary dance, and we worked on it for several years; we took a couple of days before each reprise, to develop a new formula. This word, formula, must be understood in all its meanings: as a recipe, formula for success, formula of use of time and space, as a mathematical formula and even as a vehicle – at one point we really brought a model of a car shaped as a formula that was remotely controlled, and moved instead of us along the lines and diagonals inside the Laban's cube. This was a truly inspiring and entertaining project.

Do you plan for new future projects in cooperation with Iskra Shukarova? Perhaps also with other Macedonian artists?

At this moment, Iskra and I are discussing organising "co-teaching" in Skopje – a form of education where several teachers teach the same training method or lead the same

workshop so that the same training or workshop gives the participants different views, and also so that transfer of knowledge becomes a process during which the teachers learn, too. Since Iskra teaches contemporary dance at the University of Skopje, she envisioned that this format should be tested there. Within the NDA frame, the cooperation with contemporary dance artists from Macedonia continues, so it is not impossible that we would bring some of them to the CoFestival in the future.

What do you think of the intensity of the cooperation between Slovenian and Macedonian dancers and choreographers so far? Have the possibilities for cooperation been explored and used enough so far?

There were, of course, some guest performances by dance performances or artists, within the festivals or educational programmes, but these were sporadic events and not a more systemic form of cooperation. Which is surprising, in fact, because the countries are, after all, quite similar – in size, number of citizens, they also have decades of common history, the nations have never been in conflict, quite the opposite, when I come to Macedonia, I always feel some respect and friendship. It is thus clear that the politicians of both countries haven't yet recognised contemporary dance as a form of artistic production with which we could strengthen intercultural cooperation. The basic question is therefore how to conceive a state – through contemporary creativity or through some out-dated patterns and stereotypes, through folklore, etc.

The NDA, the Balkan Dance Project and similar projects of regional cooperation point at a thoughtful approach to conceiving joint projects. Is this approach, in general, comparable to similar projects of years-long cooperation with partner organisations and individuals from other European countries?

Last year, Nina Božič – with whom I've been working for a long time on projects connecting art and industry – and I ran a workshop for directors of *co-working* spaces in Stockholm. During this workshop, I was really surprised that they didn't really feel a need for cooperation, because where they are, such spaces have sufficient financial support and have their target user groups. For this reason, the meeting was completely artificial, everybody was extremely polite, we brainstormed about how we could cooperate, but in reality, they had no need for that. To link this to contemporary dance in Europe, I can tell you that there are many dance groups, particularly in Western Europe, that are adequately financed, including via long-term programmes, so I haven't noticed a particular need for cooperation from their side. Of course, they have to collaborate, because the European financiers usually demand that, but they more or less do it to comply with the grant requirements and not because they really want to.

In Yugoslavia, there was relatively a lot of collaboration between the Slovenian and Macedonian ballet artists, particularly as a part of the regular festival manifestations. After the disintegration of our former shared country, the intensity of this collaboration was significantly reduced and is now sporadic. Do you see possibilities for the intensification of future collaboration between Macedonian and Slovenian ballet ensembles and individual artists?

I'm not familiar enough with the regional and bilateral policies in the field of ballet, so I can only agree with your observation, as mine is the same – the collaboration is minimal, it depends on individual initiatives, but there is no structural support. As a part of CoFestival, for example, it happens that we can much more easily invite Swiss, Austrian or German artists than the artists from the Balkans; although the former cost a lot more, we can bring them, because such tours and appearances are financially supported by the cultural policies of their countries. On the other hand, the festival would have to fully cover the cost of the appearance if we wanted to bring someone from Macedonia. The moment you start to explain to the politicians about the cooperation in the region, you get a lovely smile and a polite word, but in reality, there is no real interest to support cultural cooperation, because the countries in the Balkans are still in the phase of constructing their own identity and are living with the false conviction that by evoking some made-up, mythical history and shifting the cultural cooperation from the Balkans to Western Europe will reinforce their recognisability.

What should we improve on the level of cultural policies of both countries so that there are more reciprocal guest appearances of ballet ensembles and ballet artists?

The least we should expect and demand of organised cultural policies is that, in the strategic documents, it clearly states how it will contribute to the development of an individual field and how it will encourage tours and other forms of bilateral and regional cooperation in this field. Among the artists, there is a desire for cooperation, there's also potential, but there is not enough support for the latter to be realised.

Translated by Barbara Skubic