

A SHORT DANCE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A PASSIONATE AMATEUR

By Robert Trappi

For several years, I had been attending pantomime classes in Vienna and two-week intensive courses led by Samy Molcho, professor at the Reinhardt Seminar in Vienna, or his assistant, Maria Thanhoffer, in Kirchberg am Wechsel/Lower Austria. In one of these seminars, a participant told me that, after the seminar, she would be attending the "Internationale Sommertanzwochen", as the ImPulsTanz workshop-program was called back then, and she showed me a program.

So I went there too. The Sommertanzwochen had already been going for many years, before they moved into the large gyms of the Arsenal at the University Sports Center at the Schmelz in Vienna's 15th district. I took several classes, one of them called something like "Modern Jazz". The teacher was Alvin McDuffie, a young, black American, who told me in the cafeteria, after asking me what I was doing, that he had originally studied medicine but found dance far more exciting. We all enjoyed his classes enormously.

When returning to the "Wintertanzwochen" the following year - yes, ImPulsTanz at that time, back in 1987, also organized dance classes in February -, looking forward to yet another enjoyable class with him, we saw a poster with a picture of him at the entrance, framed by thick black lines - he was dead! This man, full of energy, rhythm and charm, was dead. We were shocked. We were informed he had died of Aids.

The teachers decided to organize an evening in his memory. We all went there, the teachers were dancing in his memory - I especially remember Rosalia Chladek, the founder of the Vienna School of Dance Pedagogics, at that time 82 years of age, dancing "Die Baumwollpflückerin" - and, finally, we were all dancing, with tears running down our faces.

I could not help but remember a funeral "ceremony" of a dear friend of mine, who had died of leukemia, and which had taken place a few weeks before. In a cold "modern" church, made of concrete; a priest, who had probably never met her, giving a sermon, her daughter shivering so that I put my coat over her shoulders.

What a contrast: there a "frozen" church, which showed zero understanding when it came to the emotions of the bereaved, here a community that helped each member to cope with the loss of a friend by dancing in his memory. I am happy to have experienced this wonderful community feeling on many more, less sad occasions at the Tanzwochen.

Fascinating experiences followed

Many many classes in the course of many many years followed. Jazz, Modern, Laban, Contemporary, Post-Modern, Dance Butoh, Classical Ballet - where I felt really lost among the small girl students with their tutus, being both, far older and 6 feet 1 inch tall -, and others.

Some of them have left a lasting impression on my memory:

- Nina Martin, with the "Ensemble Improvisation". Among other things, I learned how to see with 180-degree vision, and also to build up a "mental map" by closing my eyes and imagining where most members of our ensemble were positioned and in which direction they would probably be moving. And I learned how important it is to "give focus" but also "to take focus", an awareness also useful in many other settings.
- Words could not possibly capture the essence of Jean-Yves Ginoux' "Danse Contemporaine", a video perhaps could. Anyone who has ever participated in one of his workshops and many, like myself, have participated in many of them, still misses him.
- Marie Chouinard's workshop on "Post-modern Dance". She hated the title. She told us that someone in the office had given her class this title to attract more participants; she would have preferred "Breathing and Moving", which was exactly the theme of the class. In one of the lessons she taught us to breathe with the base of our pelvis. We were familiar with breathing with our chest and abdomen, but with the base of the pelvis? We had to lower our bodies until our buttocks were on our heels, put our hands under the base of our pelvis, one hand from

the front and the other one from behind, and try to breathe into our hands. It worked and we felt as if we were breathing with an insect's abdomen. But I learned a technique which I still often practise.

— In Ko Murobushi's workshop "Dance Butoh", I had another strange experience: Ko asked us to go down to the floor at 8 and return to standing at 8. Then at 4. Then at 2. Then at 1. We were soaked in sweat. He had instructed us before that, when giving us the command "walk", we should walk as slowly as possible. Walk! I was immediately feeling myself in my whole body, from toes to fingertips. This experience may have lasted for only a few seconds, but it left an unforgettable trace.

— Saburo Teshigawara's Pro Series "Dance with Air", which lasted for two weeks, four hours a day, my colleagues being mostly professional dancers, also made a lasting impression. We started with an exercise that can easily be repeated: Open the fingers of one hand and then slowly bring them together. You can feel the air! We then moved our hands, our arms, our heads, In contact improvisation (see also below), I had learned to dance with the body of a partner, I had experienced dancing with the floor, but this experience was new to all of us. Still, often when I am dancing alone, I feel and use air as my partner.

I have always appreciated a combination of workshops in which I am taught set choreographies and such where the participants improvise. Seeing a teacher making a sequence of movements forces me, and probably everybody else, to master a sequence of three tasks: 1. understanding the movement, 2. making my body perform the (approximately) same movement, and 3. remembering the sequence. And it sometimes is a struggle, but always a joy to solve all three tasks. In addition, by doing this, I often had the chance to considerably extend the vocabulary of my movements. Solo Improvisation elicits actions in my body which I only partially plan and, if I am especially lucky, I surprise myself! Contact Improvisation I would like to dedicate a special (short) chapter to.

Contact Improvisation

It was in Nina Martin's workshop where I saw a man slowly going down to the floor, and then, finally, nearly melting into the floor. After the class, I asked him if he also gave courses. Yes, he said, and then added: my name is Willi Dorner. From then on, I participated in his courses on Contact Improvisation, sometimes once a week, sometimes twice, sometimes at weekend workshops. For many years. Unfortunately, Willi is currently not teaching in Vienna, I hope at some point he will decide to do it again.

I had the pleasure of also having excellent teachers at the Tanzwochen/Impulstanz, the most thrilling of whom was Nina Martin. But I also learned a lot, especially the warm-up, from Mark Tompkins and Andrew L. Harwood. There were several others, whose names I forgot, probably for good reasons.

Contact totally changed the way in which I experience my own body and the bodies of others. Two examples out of several possible: In order to be in contact with another person in a "rolling point", one has to carefully balance between "giving weight" and "taking weight", taking into consideration what the other person can accept, especially in a specific posture, and what oneself can give and accept. And, secondly, I learned how to see with my whole body: When my back is being touched, I immediately "see" (most of the time) which part of the other body is touching me and which direction the movement will take, thus enabling a reaction of my body to keep the point of touch rolling.

Influence on life

The Tanzwochen at Impulstanz have made me aware of the art of dance. Because of my own dancing, I do not only attend more dance performances, but I also see them from a new perspective, the way a (very amateurish) musician experiences a concert. I not only see movements, I can (partially) identify with the bodies of the dancers, and I see the structure, in which they dance. It has also encouraged me to take classes at weekends and throughout the year, unfortunately not always with teachers that "burn" with passion.

It has also influenced my scientific life: When in the mid-nineties Giacomo Rizzolatti and colleagues from the University of Parma found a type of neuron, now known as "mirror neuron", in the brain, which becomes active when an animal (or a human being) observes a movement of another being - one of the few seminal discoveries made in Europe in recent times! - this discovery had a different meaning for me than it would have had in the times before I started to dance. When in the early nineties Rodney Brooks of MIT established "Embodied Artificial

Intelligence", proposing that (artificial) intelligence and a body should not be separated, this was definitely not news to me, being an amateur dancer, however, it enormously influenced our work and the development of robots. And, I am happy that in the late nineties and in this current decade we, i.e. my Research Institute and I, have been able to contribute to the inclusion of emotions in the research area of Artificial Intelligence and especially in the development of personality agents, since it was demonstrated that rationality and emotionality are not opposites, as was suggested for centuries, but can only be effective in cooperation.

Last, but definitely not least, it has had an influence on my sex life. Thanks to my dancing, especially my long years of experience with contact improvisation, I experience a beloved body differently, more intensely, more subtly. I love taking weight, but I am more cautious about giving weight and more careful about where to give it. I take greater pleasure in the difference between fast actions and slow and very slow movements, and the pause. And I enjoy, like in improvisation, the unplanned, being led somewhere by myself. And, like in ensemble improvisation, also being led, a dance in synchrony.

But making love is more than just a combination of two bodies, it is ideally a unification of two bodies, with their borders melting, resulting in a final explosion, with simultaneous, total presence, losing the "I". That then goes beyond dance.

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