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/ HISTORIES

Choreopolitics and Haunted Bodies

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The aim of this article is, first, to illuminate the history of Polish dance by examining how contemporary choreographers narrate that past in their performances, making significant breaks with tradition while simultaneously reinterpreting it in various ways. Second, it seeks to highlight the analogies between the situation of independent dance in Poland in the twenty-first century and the place of modern dance during the interwar period. The author analyses performances by Wojciech Grudziński (*Threesome*), Edyta Kozak (*Dancing for You Longer than One Minute*), and Iwona Pasińska (*Ostatnia niedziela*), which she interprets as examples of what André Lepecki terms ‘choreopolitics.’ These are performances in which artists critically examine the official narratives of ballet and dance theatre, deconstructing and rewriting their archives with regard to what is absent or distorted within them. The author demonstrates how contemporary choreographers participate in shaping not only the future but also the past of dance.

Keywords: ballet; dance theatre; new choreography; choreopolitics

Hacking History

On the back wall of a smoke-filled stage, an animated inscription in red spells out: ‘The power of three will set us free.’ The phrase undulates across the space in a sinuous, serpentine motion, reminiscent of a retro computer screen. An electronically distorted, androgynous, seemingly multiplied voice

loops the sentence to the rhythm of an enigmatic ambient and darkwave soundscape. The quasi-chant is evocative of an incantation, yet it seems unclear whether this trance-like invocation heralds an exorcism or calls forth a haunting. Collapsed against the wall, as if prostrated, lies a motionless body that appears strangely dematerialised, if not cosmic. It resembles a traveller from some distant universe who, regrettably, has not survived the transfer. The figure wears torn lace panties (it will later become apparent that they cover the genitals but not the buttocks), with fragments of the same fabric partially draping its torso. The face and head are concealed by a latex mask, suggestive of BDSM practices, though the grotesquely enlarged, peculiar ears lend the figure a Teletubby-like appearance. Every element of the costume, including shoes and socks, is blue, akin to an astral glow.

The opening scene of *Threesome*, choreographed by Wojciech Grudziński,[1] made me think of stills from the visual order of the 1980s and ‘90s demoscene, i.e., the avant-garde of early digital art. Its history is tied to the practice of hacking commercial computer games: programmers would break the original security codes and insert their own *intros*, which took the form of animated signatures of a given hacker group. By contrast, Grudziński hacks into the history of Polish ballet, on the one hand, and into the imagery of native folk and national dances, on the other. He seeks to infiltrate these structures with alien bodies – queer, passionate, unabashed – thereby unsettling the normative canon by awakening within it the energies of alterity.

In this text, I wish, in a sense, to replicate Grudziński’s gesture: to peer into the fissures of the history of Polish dance, addressing not only its turning points but also – on the one hand – the ways in which it becomes entangled, sometimes in unexpected constellations, with the *here and now*, and – on the

other – how the *here and now* hacks into the archives, sowing within them the seeds of creative ferment. I will use as my guides not the official narratives of what has transpired, but rather the contemporary choreographies whose authors revisit the past to imprint their own traces upon it while simultaneously summoning its spectres to consider along with them the future of choreographic practices. This will therefore be a history of mutual hauntings, frictions, and entanglements between astral and corporeal bodies. Therein, Grudziński's body-medium will emerge as a conjurer, prompting various strategies for critical alliances with the spectres summoned.

In *Threesome*, Grudziński summons the spirits of three legendary dancers once associated with the Teatr Wielki – Opera Narodowa a in Warsaw: Stanisław Szymański (1930–1999), Wojciech Wiesiołłowski (1939–1995), and Gerard Wilk (1944–1995). He invites them into his own body and, transforming the ballet archive into a chamber of orgiastic encounters, dances with them – or perhaps *through* them – an *oberek*. Grudziński lends himself to these spectres, seeking to displace their biographies and, in a sense, to return them to a queer history of classical dance. Browsing through *Słownik tańca współczesnego* (Dictionary of Contemporary Dance, 2022), one finds entries detailing some of the most celebrated roles, awards, film and television appearances, medals, and pedagogical achievements of these three figures, yet with no mention of who they loved, how they died, or what kind of ferment their eccentric attire and non-normative desires provoked in the public sphere. According to Katarzyna Gardzina, the 1980s saw Szymański 'take leave of the stage and donate all his memorabilia to the […] Muzeum Teatralne' (2022a, p. 595). What she fails to consider, however, is why a man who had danced for forty years chose to sever himself from his own archive. Gardzina cites a passage from Irena Turska's review, which

reported on the dancer's 'extraordinary grace' in the role of Shakespearean's Mercutio. Yet nothing in this biographical entry suggests that Szymański dissolved the boundaries between masculinity and femininity, moving and performing across binary divisions, both on stage and in life. In *Dictionary…*, Gardzina also recounts the vibrant career of Wilk (2022b, p. 688–689), at the same time omitting the fact that he also worked as a photo model, regularly frequented gay clubs, and possessed a beautiful, sensual body which he occasionally harnessed into provocative spectacles in Poland. While little is known about Wiesiołłowski's off-stage life,[2] the fortunes of Wilk have been the subject of numerous captivating narratives, not least of all Zofia Rudnicka's 2019 monograph.

Naturally, one can hardly expect encyclopaedic entries to offer in-depth portraits of their subjects, and the restriction of information to meticulous enumerations of the key artistic and pedagogical moments of their careers seems a strategy inherent to the very nature of such texts. Nevertheless, what strikes the reader in examining these three biographical sketches is that they present Szymański, Wiesiołłowski, and Wilk as they were likely intended to be conceived by the authorities of the Polish People's Republic and by the management of the Teatr Wielki, i.e., as outstanding dancers whose difference and incongruity with hegemonic masculinity could be suppressed, silenced, or exorcised.

Wilk and Wiesiołłowski died from AIDS-related complications. Szymański, who unlike those two chose not to leave Poland – although the Vaslav Nijinsky Award (Paris, 1959) might likewise have open doors for him to join foreign companies – was open about his own non-heteronormativity. By invoking these three biographies and their spectres and staging their tryst, Grudziński constructs an embodied counter-history, a narrative which, in the

words of Michel Foucault, brings to light that which ‘has been hidden, and which has been hidden not only because it has been neglected, but because it has been carefully, deliberately, and wickedly misrepresented’ (2003, p. 72). From his performance we learn, among others, that Szymański was forced to ‘walk the plank’ at the Teatr Wielki, and that, behind his back, he was called a ‘clown’ and a ‘pervert.’ What is crucial, however, is that little textual material features in the performance itself, with the body emerging as the medium of alternative memory.

In *Threesome*, that which was addressed only in whispers in the latter half of the twentieth century serves the point of departure, yet the choreographer’s gesture is more than merely one of reclamation. By establishing for himself a queer ballet genealogy that integrates the experiences of ‘perverts, migrants, ballerinas, outcasts, fags, aunts, and freaks,’ whom he dubs his ‘companions from the past,’ Grudziński composes a history of dance that is sensual, moist, and hospitable to otherness, a history that celebrates the queerness of the bodies that comprise it. Allowing these spectres to permeate his skin and opening himself to the experience of haunting, Grudziński turns into a somatic, living archive. His act of remembering is performative: it not only rescues from oblivion but also – and perhaps above all – partakes in the project of imagining a history and a future of dance and choreography in which alterity is not dissolved but continually breaches and destabilises normative regimes.

The Margins and the Centre

It is no coincidence that I begin the chapter on the constellations of Polish dance history with the story of Grudziński’s performance. I have chosen to do so primarily because the artist brings into collision two orders – classical

ballet and contemporary dance – whose divergent trajectories delineate the principal political tensions (institutional and aesthetic) within the field of Polish choreography. The former is part of a world of privilege, canon, and tradition; the latter is situated in the space of marginality, and consequently, of experiment and resistance, but also of precarity. Secondly, Grudziński blurs the boundary between what was and what is, producing a choreographic *bricolage* and thereby demonstrating how archives of movement continue to affect the *here and now*.

Responding to the question of why dance and choreography 'lack the institutional, infrastructural, and academic surroundings established around other arts' (2019a, p. 276), Hanna Raszewska-Kursa discusses the parallels between the position of the discipline she studies and that of women and minority groups within patriarchy. She addresses historical grassroots initiatives undertaken to autonomise contemporary dance. Raszewska-Kursa devotes particular attention to the efforts of Tacjanna Wysocka (1884–1970), who, in collaboration with fellow female dancers, sought to establish a dance theatre in Warsaw in 1933. The project neither came to fruition nor was it meaningfully commemorated, which Raszewska-Kursa construes in the context of institutional bias ('the initiative was undertaken by a group of women, and therefore attracted less interest,' p. 282) and of entrenched stereotypes juxtaposing the female dancer-performer with the male choreographer-demiurge.

When Szymański, Wiesiołłowski, and Wilk made their debut on the stage of the Teatr Wielki (the first two in 1956, the third in 1965), the ballet company – known until 1964 as the Balet Opery Warszawskiej and from 1965 as the Zespół Baletowy Teatru Wielkiego – was gradually entertaining influences other than Soviet ones. Among others, this process was a consequence of the

Khrushchev thaw, which enabled a partial departure from the communist strategy of isolating Polish culture from Western trends and from the aesthetic and political revolutions staged abroad. However, regardless of what was happening in national and global politics, ballet remained in a privileged position in the sense that it was always, in a way, pleasing to power (and not only in Poland). This was due, on the one hand, to its courtly history and its dependence on the royal body, and, on the other – particularly in the Polish context – from the place it occupied first under the Russian Empire and subsequently in the Soviet Union. In the words of Paweł Chynowski,

> Warsaw […] remained under Russian rule for a hundred years, which devastated the country economically, politically, and culturally. Perhaps the least affected was ballet, cherished by the Russians; nevertheless, the occupying authorities were careful to ensure that, even there, national and patriotic tendencies did not find too strong an expression.

The situation was markedly different for other forms of stage dance, which in the early twentieth century emerged as an alternative to classical aesthetics and the traditional ballet repertoire. During this period and throughout the interwar years, Poland became an important centre for the development of modern dance, and above all of the free dance inspired by Isadora Duncan (1877–1927), as well as the German tradition of the expressionist *Ausdruckstanz*, popularised by the students of Mary Wigman (1886–1973). Among the Polish artists who honed their skills in Duncan's schools were Stefania Dąbrowska (c. 1894–1929), Janina Mieczyńska (1888–1981), and the aforementioned Tacjanna Wysocka. The tradition of

expressionist dance, in turn, materialized, among others, in the practices of Mieczyńska and Irena Prusicka (1911–2001). In Warsaw, Mieczyńska and Wysocka ran two of the most significant schools and companies of modern dance, promoting this new art form as well as Émile Jaques-Dalcrozes eurythmics, central to their respective methodologies. Predictably, World War II brought these initiatives to a halt, and the subsequent communist regime effectively obstructed any return of their former intensities, prohibiting private schools from continuing their activities, and restricting state patronage exclusively to folk and ballet ensembles. The period of socialist realism saw the establishment of companies such as Śląsk and Mazowsze, which transformed traditional folk dances into stage spectacles (see Szymajda, 2013, p. 45-46; Turska, 1962, p. 274-278).

It is nevertheless worth noting that, in 1953, Janina Jarzynówna-Sobczak (1915–2004) founded the ballet company of the Opera Bałtycka, which she directed until 1976. As per Stefan Drajewski,

> She was the first choreographer in Poland to recognise in folklore an opportunity to revitalise stage dance in the wake of socialist realism. She saw folk dance as equal to classical, historical, and modern dance… She believed that one could combine all these techniques and mutually adapt them on stage, drawing from each what might ultimately lead to the creation of one's own movement language (2019, p. 89–90).

Drajewski underscores Jarzynówna-Sobczak's crucial role in the process of democratising the field of dance, yet also confers the status of reformer to Conrad Drzewiecki (1926–2007), whom he recognizes for introducing a new

genre – dance theatre – to the Polish context and for developing his own distinctive style, i.e., a synthesis of neoclassicism, modern dance, and elements of stylised folk movement.

Although Drzewiecki's company first came to be in the same year as the Tanztheater Wuppertal, there are few points of contact between his dance theatre and that of Pina Bausch. In Drzewiecki's case, the ethos of technical virtuosity still prevailed, and the principal shift away from ballet consisted in the blending of diverse choreographic languages within a new genre. By contrast, in Bausch's theatre, experimentation extended to dramaturgical and compositional strategies, while emotion supplanted the now-dethroned technique in its codified form (see Królica, 2011b).

In the subsequent decades of the twentieth century, several Polish cities became host to newly established dance theatre companies, while contemporary dance – owing in part to their activity – affirmed itself as independent and distinct from ballet. Nevertheless, this did not necessarily translate into its economic or infrastructural consolidation. In Poland, there have long existed only three institutional dance theatres, with contemporary dance developing primarily within the independent circuit. Operating within this sphere are artists associated with new choreography; dance theatre companies functioning as non-governmental organisations (such as the Krakowski Teatr Tańca and Teatr Tańca Zawirowania); as well as hybrid forms that elude classification within either of the two main currents.

It is difficult to pinpoint the precise moment when new choreography – historically linked to American postmodern dance that emerged in the context of the countercultural upheavals of the 1960s and to the practices of those regarded as the movement's pioneers (among others Anna Halprin and Merce Cunningham; see Banes, 2013), on the one hand, and to such

tendencies as conceptual dance, non-dance, and critical dance, on the other – entered the sphere of Polish performing arts. Nonetheless, one can regard the year 2004 as a crucial turning point: it was then that Joanna Leśnierowska, supported by Grażyna Kulczyk's Art Stations Foundation, launched the programme *Stary Browar Nowy Taniec* (Old Brewery New Dance, SBNT) in Poznań. For sixteen years, the space of Studio Słodownia +3, situated at the Stary Browar shopping mall, functioned as the Polish counterpart to Western dance houses, albeit one fostered by private rather than state patronage. The term 'new dance' signalled both a generational shift (as SBNT initially focused on supporting debuts) and an aesthetic and political framework, defined by a move away from ballet and dance theatre forms.

Contemporary dance continues to grapple with the problems arising from its marginal position within Polish cultural policies and from its existence in a state of perpetual precarity imposed by a fickle system of grants and fellowships. Nevertheless, one should acknowledge several significant systemic shifts that have energized the field: the introduction of the new Dance Theatre Actor/Actress major at the Akademia Sztuk Teatralnych in Krakow in 2007; the establishment of the Narodowy Instytut Muzyki i Tańca (2010);[3] and, finally, the administrative separation of dance from theatre in the funding programmes of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage (2020). One should also note, however, that while these developments ascertain the relevance of dance and choreography, they do not necessarily testify to the authorities' recognition of their autonomy. Training at the department of dance in Bytom (a branch of Akademia Sztuk Teatralnych in Krakow) remains framed within an acting curriculum, and the Institute's very name, with its unfortunate conjunction 'and Dance,' has become the subject of darkly humorous professional jokes: choreography is to be

acknowledged, but only as part of something larger, more powerful, more important. Likewise, an examination of the Ministry's grant programmes reveals a stark disproportion between the budgets allocated to dance and those designated for theatre.

Although the discussion at hand concerns significant operations of power, I should emphasize that the admittedly fragile autonomy of contemporary dance is, above all, a grassroots achievement, an outcome of the sustained efforts undertaken by non-governmental organisations, as well as producer, curator, artist, and researcher collectives and individuals who cultivate relationships with the audiences and institutions fostering the development of choreography (for instance, by providing access to their respective venues), and with the media. The activities of these stakeholders also involve exerting constant pressure on those who determine the distribution of space, capital, and prestige among representatives of different arts (directors of theatres and festivals, policymakers, and organisers of major competitions) as well as raising awareness of the role choreographers play within theatre processes. In doing so, they challenge the persistent stereotype that confines choreography to the mere arrangement of dance scenes.

When I speak of the autonomy of contemporary dance in Poland, I do not mean a modernist utopia of 'art for art's sake,' wherein choreography would be armoured, impermeable, and radically detached from the social sphere and from other artistic practices. Following Marta Keil's formulation, I understand autonomy as the status of 'a subjective, fully legitimate field of art' (2019, p. 1) and as the capacity for self-determination, i.e., 'the ability to decide for oneself, and thus also the ability to speak, to determine the modes of one's own organisation, and to propose one's own solutions' (p. 2). If Keil correctly argues that 'the process of self-determination consists not so much

in positioning oneself in opposition to other art forms, as in delineating a territory that enables development and contact with audiences, and in seeking various forms of agency' (ibid.), then one can rightfully identify the areas in which choreography continually reaffirms and renews its autonomous status.

I have nevertheless referred to this autonomy as 'fragile,' because, as Raszewska-Kursa notes in the context of dance development, 'creation, infrastructure, language: these three factors must emerge simultaneously, which is difficult in and of itself; moreover, the stabilisation of funding rests on the goodwill of the state apparatus' (2019a, p. 278). In Poland, it is of course the middle element of this triad – the infrastructure – that remains most problematic. While this does not undermine choreography's subjectivity, it does leave it in a state of constant vulnerability. Importantly, contemporary dance has developed various strategies of survival. These include the grassroots establishment of venues such as Centrum w Ruchu;[4] the negotiation of a permanent place within institutional structures (for instance, the Lubelski Teatr Tańca operating within the Lubelskie Centrum Kultury, or the Krakowskie Centrum Choreograficzne, part of the Nowohuckie Centrum Kultury); as well as the establishment of long-term collaborations with such institutions, as exemplified by the Krakowski Teatr Tańca, which for the past seven years has hosted the dance presentation programme *Rollercoaster* at Cricoteka.

It would be impossible to list all the areas in which the various potentials of contemporary dance and the agency of those who co-create its universe have manifested themselves; I will therefore limit myself to just two such developments from recent seasons. Firstly, four choreographic productions entered the repertoires of major institutional theatres: *Dotyk za dotyk.*

Dansing (Touch For Touch. Dansing), choreographed by Katarzyna Sikora (Teatr Współczesny in Szczecin, January 2023); *Boa* (Stary Teatr in Krakow, November 2023); *Laguna* by Paweł Sakowicz (TR Warszawa, February 2025); and *Anonimowi performerzy* (Performers Anonymous), choreographed by Ramona Nagabczyńska (Teatr Studio in Warsaw, September 2024). Second, as I write this text, Alicja Berejowska, Renata Piotrowska-Auffret, and Joanna Szymajda – winners in the competition for the curatorial concept of the pilot year at the Pawilon Tańca i Innych Sztuk Performatywnych, located in the former premises of the Muzeum Sztuki Współczesnej in Warsaw – are preparing for the opening of this new venue.

(Re)writing History

In sketching this perfunctory and omissive history of contemporary dance in Poland, my aim has been, above all, to map its turning points, but also to indicate that its many tensions, ruptures, and unexpected continuities endure shaping choreographic territories. This is not only because the archives demand our attention, but also because – and despite changing conditions – dancers and choreographers alike are engaged in a shared project of reorganising (or perhaps, more precisely, dismantling) hierarchies within the field of the performing arts. Their efforts seek to ensure that what is different, resistant, or elusive within dominant aesthetic and political configurations of the perceptible[5] may attain visibility and autonomy, one understood, above all, as the right to self-determination.

Both the practices of artists such as Dąbrowska, Mieczyńska, and Wysocka, and those of contemporary independent dance professionals, occupy the position of the Other within this field, for they all share a condition of fragility and precarity. In this context, both the writing of dance history (or

the rewriting of theatre history in a way that acknowledges the agency of women choreographers),[6] and the activist struggle for the infrastructural independence of contemporary dance constitute parts of the same mission.

It is perhaps also for this reason that artists representing new choreography regard the archives of modern dance as invitations to dance,[7] creating performances such as *Druga natura* (Second Nature, 2019) and *Projekt Yanka Rudzka: Wielogłos* (Yanka Rudzka Project: Polyphony, 2018), in which they do not so much reconstruct archival dances as transform them, unearthing within them previously unarticulated potentialities.[8] Contemporary dance also engages in a critical dialogue with the past, deconstructing the dominant narratives of dance history, revealing the silences and distortions embedded within them, and, in opposition to these, establishing its own subjectivity. This is true not only for Grudziński's *Threesome*, but also for pieces such as *Dancing for You Longer than One Minute* (choreographed by Edyta Kozak, 2009) and *Ostatnia niedziela. RE//MIX Conrad Drzewiecki* (The Last Sunday. RE//MIX Conrad Drzewiecki, choreographed by Iwona Pasińska, 2013).

Pasińska currently serves as the director of the Polski Teatr Tańca (since 2016;[9] at the time of *The Last Sunday*'s premiere, the position was held by Ewa Wycichowska). In her performance, produced at Komuna Warszawa, she casts a sidelong glance not so much at the tradition of dance theatre itself as at the cult of Drzewiecki, subverting the narratives of his supposed progressive visionariness. I read her work – created within an experimental framework and, importantly, in collaboration with the independent choreographer Mikołaj Mikołajczyk (formerly a soloist of the Teatr Wieki in Poznań) – as an attempt to unsettle the monument erected to the choreographer of *Krzesany* by historians of Polish dance. As an aside, it is

worth noting that although dance theatre today operates both within institutional and independent circuits, historically (at least in the Polish context) it has been closely connected to ballet, a fact signalled in the very name of Drzewiecki's company. Grudziński and Kozak, who both work in the field of independent choreography, employ an auto-theatrical mode to explore their own encounters with the classical tradition, while also reflecting on the divergent politics of contemporary dance and ballet. Kozak was herself a soloist of the Teatr Wielki in Poznań, whose phantoms haunt *Threesome;* in *Dancing for You…* she recounts her encounters with the aesthetics of Pina Bausch's *Tanztheater* and French *danse critique*, both of which profoundly shaped not only her artistic trajectory but also the broader development of contemporary dance in Poland.

I believe on can examine the tensions between ballet, dance theatre, and new choreography – currently some of the most prominent forms of stage dance – through the dialectic of choreopolice and choreopolitics,[10] concepts first introduced by André Lepecki (2012, p. 13–27), which correspond, respectively, to the practices reinforcing the status quo and to those that articulate resistance to the dominant order. Choreopoliced movement is permeated by hegemonic ideology and aesthetics; one of its most striking manifestations is the communist revue. By contrast, the choreopolitical embodies nonconformist impulses seeking to overturn prevailing regimes of being-in-the-world and the Rancièrian principles of the distribution of the sensible, manifested, for example, in the empowerment of subordinated Others. Choreopolitical practices include both queer and crip dances and the techniques of contact improvisation, understood as a dialogic practice that abolishes hierarchies and suspends relations of power, valuing attentiveness over virtuosity. In analysing *Threesome*, *Dancing for You…*, and *The Last Sunday*, I will discuss certain choreopolitical strategies that lend themselves

to the emancipation of dancing bodies while also generating new historical constellations in their own vein.

Choreopolitics

In the aforementioned opening scene of *Threesome*, theatrical smoke swirls in the air. As the scene brightens, the performer, remaining in a horizontal position, begins a choreography of micro-gestures, as if shyly examining the shapes and materials appearing before him, but invisible to the audience. The musical composition by Lubomir Grzelak and Wojtek Blecharz employed in this segment is evocative a mix of ballet motifs, infused with electronic blips and glitches, which in old computer games signalled interactions or system errors.

The dancer gradually expands the range of his kinesphere, taking on various bizarre forms, until finally, 'with his legs thrown over his head, as if he had stopped halfway through a backflip, he sticks his bare buttocks high up in the air and supports himself with his hands, his bent neck turning redder and redder as a result of the strain,' as Agata Skrzypek puts it (2024). Grudziński remains in this position for several minutes and performs a series of peculiar movements. His raised, tense bare buttocks are exposed at all times; they have taken the role of his face.

In *Threesome*, choreography becomes a laboratory of unrecognisability, indeterminacy, and perversity (a type of perversity that is not aimed at pornographic seduction, but rather one aligned with trickster-like shapeshifting and subversion). By exposing his (not his?) body in this way, Grudziński performs choreopolitical gestures. First, it becomes immediately apparent that one will be looking at the figures of Wilk, Szymański, and

Wiesiołłowski from the anal angle, i.e., from a perspective quite unlike that of official dance history. Indeed, the spirits enter the performer's body precisely through the anal route, further grounding the performance within the context of homoerotic desires. Secondly, the choreographer inverts the traditional hierarchy of the body: he conceals his head and face, grotesquely distorting the outline of his figure and thereby thwarting straightforward identification. Thus 'reshuffled,' the body becomes a pliable locus of potentiality rather than a marker of identity. The fact that Grudziński's genitals are also hidden may, I suggest, be decoded as an attempt to reclaim the indeterminacies inscribed in the biographies of his astral companions.

In the following sequences, Grudziński sits down and turns his masked face towards the audience. At times, his hands seem to arrange themselves into successive ballet positions; at others, he appears to bow to invisible forces whose intensity convulses his body. Finally, he stands at the centre of an invisible circle: his neck bent in painful contraction, his sweat-drenched back hunched, his hands pressed dramatically against his face, as if it were about to fall away. The performer faces the back wall, where red inscriptions reappear, this time forming Polish subtitles to a monologue delivered in English by Grudziński's off-stage voice. The choreographer returns to the year 2001 and to his first *plié* in the rehearsal room of the Opera Narodowa, the very space where Wiesiołłowski, Szymański, and Wilk all once prepared for their great roles. He shares fragments of their queer biographies, which seem to seep into his own.

In the course of his monologue, Grudziński removes the mask from his head and face, before finally turning his face to the audience and performing the basic step of the oberek dance, which, deconstructed in various ways, continues for several minutes, until the end of the performance. During this

time, archival recordings of performances by Wilk, Szymański, and Wiesiołłowski are projected onto the wall, edited by Rafał Dominik in such a way that the virtual bodies of the dancers seem to interpenetrate each other, as if one spirit were flowing through another and merging with Grudziński, who becomes haunted and multiplied himself, in a wild, rhythmic vortex. The lights (Jacqueline Sobiszewski) pulsate incessantly, alternately dimming and flaring, eventually exploding dancingly into a delirious lumino show.

Grudziński harnesses the oblique potential of the *oberek* as a trance-like, whirling dance and transforms it into a hauntological, paranormal revel. He queers a Polish national dance and, in a broader sense, the very notions of community and archive as structures that relegate otherness to darkness. He dances both in his own name and on behalf of his companions, turning the *obertas* into a choreopolitical, ecstatic manifestation of liberation (not from spirits, but from the power of the spirit of normative history). The gesture of effacing himself and dissolving into the figures of Szymański, Wilk, and Wiesiołłowski may be construed both as an affirmation of a porous, receptive, and open subjectivity – one ready for creative dispersal into the Other – and as an attempt to intersect multiple temporalities, thereby queering both historical and contemporary spaces of the perceptible.

A strange, alien body also haunts Edyta Kozak in her autobiographical *Dancing for You Longer than One Minute*. It belongs to Tina Turner, who appears on stage like a holographic projection (in fact, embodied by Krzysztof Miłkowski dressed as the American singer) and becomes a symbol of the world from which Kozak, as a ballet student and later a soloist, had been estranged. The performer recalls that she first encountered Turner when the singer ‘was already the grandmother of rock.’ This anecdote serves as one of the signs of a regained contact with reality, with a reality no longer

distorted by the discipline of ballet and its corporeal regimes. Yet the ghosts of the past continue to circulate throughout the performance. Projected on the screen is archival footage of Kozak's ballet appearances, while on stage a young girl performs a classical warm-up routine, attempting to hold a sheet of paper between her buttocks. As the performance suggests, ballet cannot simply be torn off like a plaster.

Kozak created *Dancing for You…* in collaboration with director Roland Rowiński, who also 'plays' the role of the male gaze, an oppressive force that shapes and disciplines the dancer's – and, more broadly, the woman's – body. Although the man remains invisible, his offstage voice guides the performer as if an omnipresent demiurge, an internalised guardian of obedience. The performance is framed as a rehearsal for a 'personal' and 'contemporary' production. Its dramaturgy is strikingly simple: at first, Kozak follows the director's instructions (always with a touch of comic grotesque); later, she begins to resist him, with the successive stages of rebellion corresponding to her progressive divergence from ballet and her attachment to contemporary dance. One of the most spectacular scenes is the cancan, which the performer initially refuses to dance (given its sexist nature). In the end, however, she executes a wild, grotesque version of the dance, beginning with a sequence of sensual leg stretches that gradually morphs into something resembling manic boxing. The process of liberation from the frameworks of classical aesthetics thus interjects with an emancipation from male fantasies.

In the subsequent scenes, Kozak engages in a conversation with Rowiński about the workings of classical dance. She explains and demonstrates everything in a comic mode, thereby exposing the absurdities of ballet, which in her interpretation emerges as one of the agents of patriarchal

power. For instance, she notes that a woman may express fear or love on stage, but not anger or aggression, as the latter belong exclusively to the masculine repertoire. Although Kozak exaggerates every convention associated with the modulation of emotion and the aestheticisation of suffering, it is difficult not to discern (despite her buffoonery) the uncanny effects underpinning ballet's surrealities. The choreopolitical dimension of these scenes lies, among others, in the deconstruction of ballet's supposed extraordinariness, i.e., in revealing and mocking its sleights of hand. While stories of the murderous, dehumanising training endured by ballet bodies are common knowledge (which was also no doubt the case back in 2009), what seems crucial in *Dancing for You…* is the fact that, in evoking these themes, Kozak never romanticises suffering or mobilises the poetics of body horror. Instead, she speaks of the profundity of aesthetic indoctrination. She illustrates this with characteristic self-irony through her reaction to the dance of the Chosen One in Pina Bausch's *The Rite of Spring*(1975), a performance she saw in 1987, while still a ballet student who considered the dancer performing the role to be a scandalously 'fat woman.' *Dancing for You…* features yet another reference to choreographic reinterpretations of *The Rite of Spring*. Kozak recounts Jérôme Bel's *Jérôme Bel* (1995), explaining the radical nature of Bel's deconstruction of Vaslav Nijinsky's legendary 1913 ballet, centred on the search for a zero degree of choreography. Kozak attempts to replicate one of the most provocative gestures from Bel's manifesto-performance, attempting to urinate on stage, but fails, admitting that she is too embarrassed to proceed. She also distances herself from choreographic transgression in other scenes, for example when she throws a piece of raw meat at the audience as part of a task set by the director (to depict contemporary male-female relations). Nevertheless, it is in the field of new dance that she ultimately finds her

place, a fact evidenced not only by *Dancing for You…* itself, but also by her ongoing curatorial work.

Kozak blurs the boundaries between the private and the public, weaving into the performance stories from her family and sexual life. Through these gestures, she not only reveals the irreversible fusion between the personal and the performative body, but also completes a reflection on what new dance is (or can become): a political practice, a critical analysis of social hierarchies and of the systems that discipline the female body and desire, an emancipatory strategy. In *Dancing for You…*, the tendencies that have shaped not only the identity of the Ciało/Umysł (Body/Mind) Festival but also that of the new Polish choreography come sharply into focus.

New choreography, particularly at its inception, positioned itself in clear opposition to the tradition of Polish dance theatre, a stance exemplified by Leśnierowska's 2006 statement, 'It remains excessively emotional, seemingly insensitive to reality, perpetually focused on probing its own feelings, invariably narrating its experiences without distance, often infantile, banal, and naïve' (2006, p. 17). Pasińska, whose artistic biography has been enmeshed with the Polski Teatr Tańca, does not offer such a diagnosis in *The Last Sunday*. Instead, she turns her gaze toward her own remix of Drzewiecki's 1985 production, which, according to contemporary accounts and reviews collected by Stefan Drajewski in *Conrad Drzewiecki. Reformator polskiego baletu* (Conrad Drzewiecki. The Reformer of Polish Ballet) (2014, p. 260–266), was booed at its premiere.

Pasińska's performance, however, is neither an attempt at reconstruction nor even a deconstruction of the original choreography; in fact, apart from the title and the recurring musical motif (invoking Mieczysław Fogg's hit song), it bears little direct relation thereto. Rather, it serves as an analysis of

Drzewiecki's failure, viewed through the lens of his earlier productions. This is already signalled by the final sentence of the performance description, published on Komuna Warszawa's website:

It [the performance of *The Last Sunday* – A.M.] showed that an experiment extending beyond the compositional structures employed by Drzewiecki proved more difficult for the Master than continuing along the path that guaranteed him glory. In referencing *The Last Sunday* and other performances by Drzewiecki (*Adagio for Strings and Organ*, *Krzesany* and *Eternal Songs*; see Drajewski, 2018, p. 142), Pasińska weaves a narrative about artistic risk, at the same time taking it herself.

Drzewiecki's *The Last Sunday* was a performance about war and the reality of concentration camps (the stage was arranged to resemble a barracks). It incorporated pantomimic and dramatic scenes in which dance played a restrained role; according to Jacek Łumiński's account, the choreography also featured elements of postmodern dance, including gestures drawn from everyday movement (1985, cited in Drajewski, 2014, p. 263). In his review, Kazimierz Młynarz recounts one of the pivotal scenes, in which 'the female dancers move lethargically (exhausted? drunk?) in a circle that symbolises death. They are ruled by a woman (a kapo?) with a whip, who humiliates them with sadistic ferocity. Sadism and sex, sadism and music' (1985, cited in Drajewski, 2014, p. 265). This final phrase could just as well correspond to what transpires in Pasińska's thirty-minute *remix*. Drab and somewhat derelict, the stage features several poles from which long ropes hang. From the speakers comes the sound of heavy, pathological breathing that accompanies the opening sequences of the choreography; amplifying the cacophony is the creaking of two life-sized wooden mannequins– one with female, the other with male contours – manipulated by Pasińska and

Mikołajczyk, dressed in tight, flesh-and-earth-tinged costumes.

Although jointed like human bodies, the crude, rigid mannequins resist the performers; they appear obstinate rather than pliant. The attempts to choreograph this wooden matter resemble acts of coercion, of forcibly imposed poses, gestures as persistent as they are violent. In the opening stages, Pasińska and Mikołajczyk arrange the mannequins in a series of postures, pausing after each configuration as though posing for some macabre photoshoots, perhaps akin to those that one once used to take at home with one's recently deceased loved ones. At a certain point, the performers drag the objects across the floor like inert, unconscious bodies (or simply corpses) and, now in horizontal positions, continue this nightmarish photo-theatre. Their faces remain implacably expressionless, as if they too belonged to lifeless (or inanimate) figures. Gradually, the forms assumed by Pasińska and Mikołajczyk grow increasingly spectacular, evoking frozen ballet poses and lifts, imbued with a deep poignancy, for it is clear that the mannequins can never substitute for the warmth of human embrace. As the dancers lift their legs into quasi-acrobatic positions, every tremor of their tensed muscles becomes visible.

This part concludes with a scene in which Mikołajczyk simulates sexual intercourse – or perhaps rape – with his wooden partner, alternately rubbing himself slowly against its body and convulsing orgasmically above it to the rhythm of Hanka Klepacka and Bartłomiej Sowa's music, which for a moment slips into heavy-metal sonorities. Gradually, superimposed on his panting are unsettling reverberations and isolated, truncated tones from various instruments, as well as what seem like corrupted classical melodies: the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* by Claude Debussy and Karol Szymanowski's *Songs of the Night*. Next, Pasińska and Mikołajczyk, roll

frenetically across the entire stage, as if possessed, until they collide, transitioning into a duet in which they fluidly and gracefully repeat the poses rehearsed earlier. This choreography offers only an illusion of release, for soon they begin to move as though cursed, trapped within the bodies of mannequins that have briefly inhabited organic, sentient flesh. They end their duet like discharging robots, their bodies convulsed from within by electric shocks. In the finale, they return to the mannequins and bind them with ropes. Pasińska hoists her former wooden partner and leaves her suspended in the posture of a hanged body. As the hanging takes place, a rasping, grinding version of *The Last Sunday* resounds from the speakers, as if performed by a drunken choir from beyond the grave.

The original song lyrics are changed to, 'This is your last Sunday… / Why did you not venture further? / Why did you pack / Dance and ballet into a hump? / This is your last Sunday… / A grand finale at the summit… / Was this your zenith? / Or were you… / overcome by fear?'

The role of the mannequins in *The Last Sunday* is far from unequivocal. They may symbolise the ballet forms that Drzewiecki sought to loosen by introducing elements of modern and folk dance, albeit never so radically as to break with the regimes of virtuosity. Alternatively, they may constitute Pasińska's commentary on Drzewiecki's entire oeuvre, whose choreographic idiom had become so distinctive over the years that its disruption in *The Last Sunday* met with audience resistance. Last but not least, in what seems to me the most plausible interpretation, Pasińska's *The Last Sunday* is not (or not merely) a critical examination of Drzewiecki's choreographies, but also of his working methods and beliefs on the one hand,[11] and of the entrenched narratives that have portrayed him, on the other, as a revered Master.[12] 'I've been remembered in different ways, yet kindness and understanding for the

difficulties of my character always prevail. […] I love people. For me, every person is like a set of skills that I've honed,' Drzewiecki declares of himself in Robert Ćwikliński's documentary film, tellingly touted as 'an extended interview with the Master.'

Pasińska's performance provoked a strong reaction from Drajewski, the author of numerous books and articles on Drzewiecki, and one of the chief architects of the choreographer's legend. In his article *Remix in Dance Theatre*, Drajewski accuses Pasińska of distorting quotations drawn from Drzewiecki's oeuvre. Among others, he argues that the dancers 'perform the choreography with the full muscular tension characteristic of the degenerate technique of Soviet, rather than (sic!) Russian, classical dance' (Drajewski, 2018, p. 142), as if forgetting that Pasińska's performance was never intended as a faithful citation, but rather as a critical, choreopolitical intervention.

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In the constellations choreographed by Grudziński, Kozak, and Pasińska, counter-histories intertwine with histories of rescue. What we are witnessing, then, is not merely the exposure of omissions or structures of oppression, but also the release of subversive energies. Thus, for instance, Wilk, Wiesiołłowski, and Szymański return not as victims to be heeded, but as embodiments of queer vitality and figures who alter the official narratives of the Teatr Wielki while simultaneously co-creating the future of queer dance.

In discussing *Threesome*, *Dancing for You…*, and *The Last Sunday*, I have sought to demonstrate how contemporary dance artists situate their own

practices in relation to historical contexts and how they engage in choreographic negotiations with the entrenched narratives surrounding the legends of Polish dance theatre and ballet. These negotiations do not take the form of radical ruptures; rather, they invite the ghosts of the past to collaborate in the *here and now* toward the creation of new – open and porous – archives, ones that accommodate critical perspectives, reparative gestures, and choreopolitical interventions, while actively participating in the mobilisation of choreographic autonomies. The choreographies of Grudziński, Kozak, and Pasińska are haunted by the past, yet they also haunt that past in return, wreaking choreopolitical havoc within its archives, much like ghosts who announce neither their arrival nor their intent, who cross thresholds uninvited and brazenly disturb the prevailing status quo. They demonstrate that not only the future of Polish dance, but also its past, remains in a state of becoming, an ongoing process that involves both the uncovering of blank spaces and the rewriting of pages already inscribed.

Translated by Józef Jaskulski

In 2026, the Jagiellonian University Press will release the Polish-language edition of the collective volume *A History of Polish Theatre*, originally released by Cambridge University Press in 2022 under the editorship of Katarzyna Fazan, Michał Kobiałka, and Bryce Lease. The following text—previously unpublished—was commissioned as a supplement to the English-language volume and will feature in its Polish edition.

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Footnotes

1. The Polish premiere of the piece took place on 7 September 2024, at Warsaw's Nowy Teatr.
2. Tomasz Ciesielski lists the institutions where Wiesiołłowski danced and taught (2022, p. 685–686).
3. Today, it is known as the Narodowy Instytut Muzyki i Tańca, although, in fact, it has always operated as a state institution.
4. See https://www.centrumwruchu.pl/kolektyw/ [accessed: 13.112024].
5. In this instance, I draw on the terminology of Jacques Rancière (2007).
6. One example of this is the renewed reminder that Tacjanna Wysocka's Ballet collaborated with Juliusz Osterwa's Teatr Reduta and that Wysocka herself choreographed many of Leon Schiller's renowned productions (see Ignaczak, 2017, p. 64–81).
7. In this case, I draw on the thought of Dorota Sosnowska, who, referring to Diana Taylor's theory and her dialectic of the archive and the repertoire, notes that, 'Memory is always performative (inseparable from action), and the document is an invitation to dance' (Sosnowska, 2017, p. 88).
8. *Second Nature* by Agata Siniarska and Karolina Grzywnowicz is an interdisciplinary exploration of the life and work of Pola Nireńska (1910–1992) and her *Holocaust Tetralogy*. In turn, *Projekt Yanka Rudzka: Wielogłos* is the second (after *LEAVENING*, 2016) choreography by Joanna Leśnierowska and Janusz Orlik to reactivate the practice associated with Rudzka, an icon of contemporary dance in Brazil, who until recently had remained virtually unknown in Poland (b. 1916, d. 2008), and whose practice combined elements of traditional folk dance with contemporary techniques. I discuss these two performances in my article *Opening the Archives: Traces of Modern Dance in New Choreography* (2023).
9. Pasińska joined the Polski Teatr Tańca – Balet Poznański in1989, becoming its first soloist

in 1997.
10. This distinction is inspired by the Rancièrian opposition between *police* and *politics*.
11. Drzewiecki stepped down as the director of the Polski Teatr Tańca in 1987 and, according to Drajewski, expected the authorities in Poznań to close down the company. ‘He was convinced that with his departure as the founder of an auteur theatre, the latter should cease to exist. Many years passed before he changed his mind.’ According to this account, Drzewiecki also doubted that the theatre could survive without him (2014, p. 273).
12. At this point, however, one should duly note that Pasińska herself has been accused of mobbing (see Szymkowiak, 2022).

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