

Dance Theatre and Performance in Slovakia

Kristína Zátrochová in conversation with Marta Poláková about the newly established study programme 'Dance Theatre and Performance' at the Academy of the Performing Arts in Bratislava

Kristína Zátrochová: In recent years, performance as a genre has grown in popularity. But only recently, dancers were able to study performance as an independent study programme. For years, performers had usually been dancers or actors who opted for an alternative path after they had finished their studies. What made you establish this study programme and for how long have you been working on it?

Marta Poláková: The study programme 'Dance Theatre and Performance' was inaugurated in 2015. So, this year we have already had our first graduates from the Bachelor programme. So far, it's just a Bachelor's degree programme, but we're trying to establish a Master's degree programme, too. I named this study programme 'Dance Theatre and Performance' pre-

cisely because dance theatre (as I perceive it) has quite good prospects in Slovakia - there is an interest on the part of the creators (performers and dancers) and there is also a curious audience, because 'the ordinary viewer' can understand dance theatre a bit better than pure dance. We are still convinced that the interest of the audience mainly focuses on things where they feel they know what they are looking at. Dance with its abstract aspects is rather less comprehensible, and therefore finding a target audience is also rather difficult. Not to mention that we have no tradition in modern dance in Slovakia - I mean, any professional tradition. There was, of course, some tradition, even quite strong and at almost professional level, but due to political reasons it only remained at amateur level.



In the 90s, while all arts were finally able to develop freely, my generation, but also the next generation, immediately began to experiment with what is nowadays called contemporary dance. However, the conditions are still not professional yet, and so we still have no place exclusively for contemporary dance (not just contemporary dance, but simply a place primarily for contemporary dance). This makes it much more difficult for us to build up that target audience. So, contemporary dance forms still remain to be a little less comprehensible in Slovakia compared to dance theatre. There is one professional dance ensemble, which has an expressive focus on dance theatre - Štúdio Tanca Dance Theatre - located in the small city of Banská Bystrica, in the heart of Slovakia. In general, I would say people are more aware of the existence of dance theatre than of the existence of performance.

On the other hand, performance was something that had been pursued to a certain degree - by professional dancers but also by University students with an early affinity for conceptual dance. It was more like a 'side stream'. Nevertheless, it existed. I saw there was an interest in developing this side stream. So, I said to myself: We will name this programme 'Dance Theatre and Performance' to give students some space and opportunity to experiment and work on those concepts; not to mention the many other art forms that exist nowadays and that are somewhere in-between (e.g. cross-disciplinary art). My main objective is to provide students with the opportunity to learn about the basics of dance theatre and the basics of performance. How they might see their own path and where their future interests might direct them – those choices are completely up to them.

KZ: Performance as a genre might be a subcategory of alternative / independent theatre. So, do you think there is an audience in Slovakia for this kind of art?

MP: Everything that is experimental in terms of art faces the problem of finding a target audience in Slovakia, because as a country we are very young in terms of building our own culture. We were terribly cut off from what was happening internationally, in the neighbouring countries, for example in Austria. These days, however, young artists have found access to these art forms. So, it's important to try to find a place for it and to support it.

KZ: If you compare the current situation of the alternative theatre scene in Slovakia with other European countries, how do you review it?

MP: That would be a little difficult, because it's very different in each country. So, those comparisons would be very difficult as well. I would rather focus on the post-communist countries, because there we have some common ground regarding our past. Still, given such a comparison, I can see very clearly that Slovakia has fallen behind. It has fallen behind in regard to the determination to create conditions for the independent scene, to create a space for this scene. This can be related to the fact that we really are a young country, and our culture is still cautious and very conservative. We have strong ballet and folk dance traditions, but contemporary dance has not been professionally rooted in our culture yet. That 'experiment' poses a deviation from what we are used to. So, the ordinary viewer just does not know how to deal with it.

We have realised that we have to work very actively on securing some space for the presentation of contemporary dance, because the localisation is very important for the spectator. This is what I have understood from all the years of presenting contemporary dance in Bratislava: there were so many small and different places that after a certain time I just stopped counting them. This way, the energy diffuses, and it clouds this essential singular point of access. Therefore, it



is important to have this one place where everything is happening, so the spectator can find a connection to that place. For example: 'Um, that place looks a little strange, let's go and check it out sometime!' Or one person might recommend that place: 'Last time, I saw a very good performance there' - this is the kind of word-of-mouth marketing we need.

The next big thing is audience development. We're just getting started there. We're beginning to think about how to communicate with our spectators outside of the performance venues, how to get a little closer to them. We want the viewers to get closer to the process of creating a performance. Maybe then, they will find out that, what he intuitively perceived, is exactly what the authors and creators tried to portray. Or, maybe, it resonates with them because it reminds him of some of their own life experiences. This is exactly what art is about - it's like a mirror, it mirrors what is inside of us. And this is really new to them, this way of looking at art; it is much more free. Or, if they have to think about it more, they also have to open up more. Therefore, they must be proactive in this process.

Recently, I created a performance that was aimed at an audience of young people. We performed a lot at high schools, not only for the artsy ones, but also for grammar schools and secondary vocational schools, and we always had discussions afterwards. These students knew how to immerse themselves (or at least some of them). They had the ability to see something substantial happening there and they asked quite interesting questions. So, I do have a little hope that this young audience will eventually find its way to us once there

is a greater variety of performances and there are specific performance venues.

KZ: Is there currently any space in Slovakia at all that could serve as a base for contemporary dance?

MP: Yes, we had something in sight. The Bratislava self-governing region had the ambition to create such a base in an unused gym at a high school. This gym has since been leased to the Cvernovka Foundation, an association of creative artists and people from the creative industries. But after the elections, it all came to halt somehow. The initiator of the entire reconstruction project, who was also the director of the Department of Culture, left and we do not know what will happen next. So, it was very promising, something was finally going to happen here, but then it all came to a standstill again. It's hard to say, I don't know... honestly, I'm quite sad. 30 years have passed and culture is still the last thing on the list, the very last thing. Not to mention education... or, well, culture and education are interconnected. So, it all feels like we're still very much at the beginning...

KZ: Let's go back a little to the study programme itself. What are the requirements for candidates who would like to study Dance Theatre and Performance at the Academy of the Performing Arts in Bratislava? Which personality is more suitable for this programme - actor or dancer? And could you perhaps briefly describe the 'ideal candidate profile'?



MP: Ok. First, I will try to describe that 'ideal candidate profile': It's great if they already have a good dance technique. That means the body is somehow 'ready', because there isn't much room for technique training during the programme. At the beginning, technique will only be fine-tuned through an understanding of one's own body - e.g. how the body works and how one can get rid of pre-existing habits. Being free from habits is only possible when some habit exists, so, it's fine.

Then, of course, creativity is the most important thing: the ability to respond to assignments, to be creative, to bring in ideas and to have the desire to open up to new things, which might be completely new to dancers. During their studies, they will complete what I call a 'basic actor training' - some kind of introduction to acting: How to work with the voice and how to grasp and create a theatrical figure. The ability to work on this, that is, some kind of openness, is also very important.

Lastly, perseverance is also of great importance. It's not easy to work in this field - it's physically and mentally challenging. So, you have to be sure that this is the path you want to take. Nowadays, everything is very different. Young people have so many opportunities and they are unable to choose one and stick to it. They are not able to cope with times of crisis, when one simply has to fight either with oneself or with some other external issues that destabilise somehow. But this is what university is for - I have to give and give and give, so that my personality can begin to take shape. So, these are the qualities we are looking for in an ideal candidate.

And which candidates have mostly applied? So far, it is very diverse. Undoubtedly, we have a lot of candidates from dance conservatories, but at the moment we have a music & drama graduate from a conservatory, who is in her first year of studies, and she is doing pretty well and works on herself. She must catch up mainly with the dance technique, but so far so good. She said she wanted it and she keeps working on it. So, we'll see.

KZ: Is conservatory graduation a prerequisite?

MP: No, it is not. We also have very skilful students who are from grammar schools.

KZ: But they have completed at least some training in dance at preparatory schools, though?

MP: Definitely. It's not like they arrive completely without any experience. The system of dance preparatory schools is of very high standard in Slovakia. Those students, of course, might not be on the same level at the beginning of the studies as students from conservatories, as far as technique is concerned. That's obvious, but most of them have such a good foundation that in three to four years they can work their way up to become professionals.

KZ: Could you possibly elaborate a bit on the concept / structure of this study programme? Which courses do you consider to be the most important?



MP: The main subject is clearly called Dance Theatre and Performance. This subject is taught by several pedagogues to students of all years, because, naturally, we all have some personal experiences as well as different views on artistic creation. Other essential subjects are improvisation and composition / choreography, respectively. If we want students to be creators, they also have to get a basic understanding of the ways they can actually create and orientate themselves. Equally significant is the basic actor training, which I have already mentioned here. However, training hasn't played such a huge part, and therefore I am trying to convince the academy leadership that this is also an important aspect of the programme. We need to make more time for training, because it greatly expands future possibilities of the dancer. If they are able to work with the voice, if they can handle a text and so on, then they will be able to work in a theatre context as well.

In addition to these creative subjects, there are also various classes on technique: contemporary dance technique and various other techniques that are also taught within other programmes, e.g. classical dance or modern dance.

KZ: So, would you say that this study programme is different to other dance programmes by also including basic actor training?

MP: No. I would say that it differs in particular by having a lot of subjects in which students just have to be creative. They are not presented with any formulas they should copy, but they get some instructions and tools, and then they build and create. We merely guide them through this process of creation. That's probably the most important thing.

KZ: What are the career opportunities for graduates? Theatre? Dance company? Freelancing?

MP: There is only one dance company for contemporary dancers and performers in Slovakia. So, there isn't much choice. This year's graduates (our first bachelor graduates)



have both continued their studies. One of them is currently studying at MUK in Vienna (Music and Arts University of the City of Vienna), thanks to Erasmus Exchange Programme, and the other one has recently won an audition at Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company in Israel. They have a special programme for dancers there. Some sort of dance preparatory school from which they select dancers for their company. He'll go there for the summer semester.

But I think they will have to work as pedagogues, too. Since there are really not that many opportunities right now to be able to survive only from one's own projects or from acting in theatres. Some also star in musicals. Our students are capable of making that switch, I mean, switching to a different genre. However, if they want to create their own productions, we have a special independent public institution in Slovakia called The Slovak Arts Council. They can apply for grants there or they can try to get scholarships. But I try to encourage them to be a little more versatile.

It's the same situation abroad, though. Dancers and performers also work as pedagogues to survive. Almost anywhere in Europe, independent scenes solely function thanks to funding schemes. But there is no certainty there. You create your own production or someone else invites you to take part in a project or you win an audition for a production, and after a few months you have to search again. It's always the same.

But I think that, also thanks to this Slovak Arts Council, the situation in Slovakia has started to change in a positive sense over the last two years. Nonetheless, I still felt I could help this situation somehow. This is the reason I set up this study programme. I was hoping with some movement happening on one side that the other side would soon catch up, too. Because, as I said, everything is connected and someone has to get the ball rolling.

KZ: You mentioned The Slovak Arts Council. Is this the only source for funding such projects in Slovakia or is it still possible to ask for money elsewhere?

MP: It is mainly a fund that can be said to be a very decent resource. The Bratislava self-governing region also had a similar fund. However, since the elections took place, some strange things have been happening. The entire commission, which was formed by independent experts (that is, no employees of the Bratislava self-governing region but an independent commission), resigned. Their decisions were not accepted, so they decided to resign. And now it remains very unclear where we are and what the conditions are. So, this funding body is very questionable at the moment. I think, it worked for three years, better and better each year, and now – it is all unclear again...

KZ: At present, the Dance Theatre and Performance programme can only be studied in Slovak. Do you intend to make it available to foreign students in the future?

MP: We would love to. The entire programme can also be conducted in English to make it available to students from abroad as well. So, yes, we have a great interest in making that happen. I mean, we can all speak English. My colleague Maja Hriešik, a director who is mainly focusing on dramaturgy, aesthetics and dance history within our department, is the person who deals with the theoretical part of this programme and who speaks perfect English.

All other pedagogues, including me, also speak fluent English, since they have all worked abroad for a long time. For instance, Vladislav Šoltýs, who worked for the Irish dance ensemble Fabulous Beast Dance Theater for several years, or Yuri Korec, who worked with Helene Weinzierl and Cie Laroque Company in Austria for quite a long time. And then, there is Emil Léger, who is leading a basic actor training for our students and who worked for the famous Farm in the Cave in Prague. So, we have some talented teachers here, and this is the basis for attracting students from abroad. I hope we will soon be ready to offer this programme in English, too!