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CSABA KUTSZEGI: A flash of world-class level in the Depo - DEPO DANCE FESTIVAL – 10th Olympics of Theatre*

...the gravest issue is that we can no longer differentiate between high-quality mass production and true artistic excellence.

No medals are awarded at the Olympics of Theatre. No winners ascend to the podium there. Perhaps that is why Baron Coubertin's well-known saying is so fitting for this event: it's the participation that really matters.

To my eyes, DEPO, the home of the Budapest Dance Theatre, emerged as the emblematic location for the 10th Olympics of Theatre already on the first day of the DEPO Dance Festival, for there, even if on a smaller scale, the encounter of different cultures can be witnessed every second. The location itself is very striking: a mere ten minutes' stroll from the rather well-to-do neighbourhood of the National Theatre, we are in a derelict industrial area, where culture finds its asylum in a dance studio surrounded by vacant, unkempt parcels and abandoned buildings sporting broken windows. One does not have to visit faraway continents on the globe to witness enormous cultural differences: entirely different worlds can be found in a single district of a city, separated by nothing more but a busy hotspot of public transport and two railway overpasses.

The best way to establish a connection between disparate regions is, undoubtedly, art. When Béla Földi, director of Budapest Dance Theatre opened the festival with a concise speech, interpretation was indeed necessary, since at contemporary dance performances in Budapest much of the audience consists of English-speaking youth.

The first performance of the first day is *Three Sisters*. Besides the Hungarians, the stage is populated by dancers from England, Italy and the Far East as well, who interpret Alexandra Sággy's Chekhov-inspired choreography as a well-knit unit - meaning not only a consistent level of discipline and technical prowess, but also a shared inner, emotional, spiritual and conceptual platform. Why would it be otherwise, when women (and of course men) all over the world desire to feel the elevating and cleansing power of love and want to break free from seemingly hopeless constraints in search of a new, more useful and more beautiful life. Anyone who talks about these feelings and emotional states eloquently, with sufficient empathy and in a way that reveals and displays the depths talks, in fact, about

Chekhov's *Three Sisters* as well. For the essence of the ingenious masterpiece of world theatre is more or less that.

Sághy communicates through the bodies with skillful sensitivity: she doesn't narrate the story but endeavours to uncover the chekhovian essence. She is a master of not only smooth, pliant and attractively technical dance but also of minute touches, soft, barely noticeable shifts and significant exchanges of glance that summon an eerie atmosphere. She is great at exhibiting and highlighting personal destinies, a character who is still or is in the process of slowly executing a single gesture is counterpointed by a dynamic or indifferent parallel mass scene. The character in the spotlight is observed "from the outside", given a wide berth by the others or assimilated into their ranks with gentle violence. The three sisters are three different women who, despite their struggles with each other, share a common destiny nonetheless: following their individual attempts at breaking free, they are reunited in a huge hall, their loved and protected home that is also their prison.

Set and costume designer Péter Klimo is well-versed in his craft, the back of the stage is dominated by a large building with pleasing proportions, the walls created by hung-up ropes are visually stunning and besides yielding to being lit innovatively/well they also support different actions, climbs and grips. Composer Benjámín Kovács created a musical background that serves the dance well, sometimes weaving strands of Slavic vocal sonorities in it. For Chekhov and his story is Russian to the core, however, as it could be witnessed in the DEPO, every nation, every culture and era identifies itself with it naturally.

Two days later the festival audience witnessed a choreography inspired by characteristically Hungarian music. *ét nappal később velejéig magyar zene inspirálta koreográfiát láthatott a fesztivál közönsége. Lisztmania* is Lóránd Zachár's revamped work, originally created for the Pécsi Balett in 2012, and since I have seen it back then too, I can confidently assert that the current version, with its simplified and streamlined visuality provides a (literally and figuratively) much better space for both the dance and the music (set and costume design: Béla Földi). Visually, both the set and the costumes are dominated by black and white: the choreographer summons the piano keyboard not only with the colour scheme but also with the movements of the dancers and the sound of Ferenc Liszt's 2nd Hungarian Rhapsody. It takes only seconds before the dancers lie on the ground next, their bodies lying parallel to one another and twitching to the music of the piano. It doesn't have to be more obvious than that, the core idea is clarified soon enough. Watching *Lisztmania* makes it clear that top-quality dancing technique is adequate with musical virtuosity. At the same time, however, trying to catch up with a Liszt-piano piece as a dancer is as futile an endeavour as if I would challenge Kristóf Milák (*Hungarian swimmer currently holding multiple world records— transl.*) at a swimming competition. Nevertheless, the dancers of Budapest Dance Theatre perform valiantly

in this honourable contest – owing a great deal to the choreographer himself. In fact, Lóránd Zachár is on “home grounds” here: he himself had been a disciple of Béla Földi, therefore, he shares his native tongue in dance with the dancers.

In contrast, music can be light and frivolous as well— as it could be observed in the second half of the evening. An excellent Italian duo, Stefania Menestrina and Sofia Galvan (two athletic-energetic, boyishly pretty young ladies) presented a presumably autobiographical choreography: two clowns, inseparable companions performing the grand feats of life. The soundtrack of the performance consists of Italian hit songs from the 60s and 70s that mirror the character’s ever-changing mood: the viewer feels a little bit as if they were on Fellini’s *La Strada*, then the laid-back nostalgia is left behind on multiple occasions in favour of a thought-provoking, abstract actions that are mostly connected to the small totemic figurine dangling from a cord (the title of the piece is *Ototeman*, that is, totem). In my interpretation, what all this represents is that the two characters are on a quest in the past as well as in the present on a quest for finding themselves, each other and the feeling of belonging in general. Both characters of *Ototeman* are very much loveable, their duett is of a very high professional niveau: they are in control of their bodies, the dynamic exchanges of gestures are powerful, technical and well-executed.

On the last evening of the festival, the audience had the chance to see two choreographies by Hammadi. In his customary 7-o’clock introduction, Béla Földi grasped the essence succinctly: we are witnessing time-travel. *After the Fourth Wave* was created merely one and a half years ago and is performed by the young dancers of INVERSEDANCE – Zoltán Fodor Company, while the *Brontë sisters* is an almost 40-year-old piece interpreted by the experienced artists of Ballet Jazz Art, Raza Hammadi’s own company. The evening had quite a few interesting insights up its sleeve.

The dance-language of the world-famous choreographer now residing in Paris is quite a native tongue for the dancers of Zoltan Fodor Company, too. It is not by any chance. Perhaps it doesn’t even have to be mentioned that Fodor learned the tools of the trade at Budapest Dance Company too, and since Raza Hammadi is one of the defining masters of Béla Földi, Hammadi’s influence seeps into Hungarian contemporary dance across several generations.

After the Fourth Wave, a piece created for INVERSEDANCE in 2021, is the kind of choreography that doesn’t require, or rather, outright defies explicatory verbal translations. Based upon the title and the atmosphere, the viewer can immediately and unmistakably deduce that this is an opus inspired by the pandemic - and from this starting point each and every interpretation will be personal and based on personally live dexperience. The performers of INVERSEDANCE (five women and one ma) interpret the feverish dream-visions of isolation and seclusion with seemingly

inexhaustible energy, discipline and humbleness. The viewer feels that no mistake could be found in the gestures, and this style could not be danced any better.

And then, in the *Brontë sisters* three women roll onto the stage, as if – an unavoidable association – blown by the stormy gales raging around Wuthering Heights, the viewer has not yet gathered themselves from the first surprise, the dancers are already unfolding from their rolls into incredibly dynamic, angular stances, and the (professional) viewer is shocked: is it even possible to dance like that? And then memories rise to the surface of consciousness, oh yes, indeed, the best in the world all danced like that already forty years ago. And they continue to do so, even if we get to see them less and less, for the dance scene was (also) hardly impacted by COVID, there is, there was and there will be an economic crisis, there is no money to go abroad, there is no money to invite dancers from abroad, and in the meanwhile, the gravest issue perhaps is that we can no longer differentiate between high-quality mass production and true artistic excellence.

We could catch multiple glimpses of world-class level dancing in *Brontë sisters*, even if the choreography, the dramaturgy, the gestures and the use of props had many outdated elements. No wonder, what used to be a world record forty years ago may not be enough to win the Olympics today... Yet the followers do gain a lot of experience thence.

Three Sisters (Budapest Dance Theater)

Choreographer: Alexandra Sággy. Set and costume designer: Péter Klimó.

Composer: Benjámín Kovács.

Performed by: Alexandra Sággy, Yvette Levine, Maria Borges, Marika Trucci, Marika Masuda, Zita Somogyi, Donát Varga, Bendegúz Varga, Matthew Bell.

Lisztmania (Budapest Dance Theater)

Choreographer, dramaturge: Lóránd Zachár. Set and costume designer: Béla Földi.

Composer: Ferenc Liszt.

Performed by: Alexandra Sággy, Yvette Levine, Maria José Borges, Marika Trucci, Marika Masuda, Donát Varga, Bendegúz Varga,, Matthew Bell, Damien Ledenon.

Ototeman (Compagnia Opus Ballet)

Created and performed by: Stefania Menestrina, Sofia Galvan.

After the fourth wave (INVERSEDANCE | Fodor Zoltán Company) Choreographer, dramaturge: Raza Hammadi. Composer: Clément Mames.

Performed by: Chiara Alessandro, Bianka Bódi, Sára Dowidat, Yun Ju Huang, Clark David, Bonus Ortega, Cintia Vanessza Petrőcz.

Brontë-sisters (Ballet Jazz Art)

Choreographer, dramaturge: Raza Hammadi. Composer: Leo Janacek.

Performed by: Charlotte Bermond, Audrey Goubault, Flore Landry, Ahmed Hammadi, Clément Mames.

Budapest Dance Theater – DEPO, 11-15 april 2023.

DEPO Dance Festival – Theatre without words

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CSABA KUTSZEGI: FESTIVAL OF THEATRE WITHOUT WORDS

THREE SISTERS; OTOTEMAN & LISZTMANIA; AFTER THE FOURTH WAVE & THE BRONTË SISTERS DEPO – 10th Olympics of Theatre*

Six companies perform on the five nights of the festival, including significant performers from Hungary and abroad.

DEPO is located in the 9th district of Budapest, in Koppány Street. The building, which functions as a performing, rehearsal and hosting space, is also the studio theatre of Budapest Dance Theatre. The renowned dance company was funded by Béla Földi in 1991, and he was the one who established the DEPO twenty years later, in 2011. Both institutes are linked to Földi Béla's name, who started his career as a dancer, then started to choreograph soon after. Moreover, his art educational activity had a formative impact on Hungarian dance history at the turn of the millennium.

All this defines how the DEPO functions to this day: it is a rehearsal space and a venue, where Budapest Dance Theatre and other companies can and do work and perform, there are various regular classes for diverse groups, including the elite training, which hones the skills of professional dancers. In addition, the management of the venue puts significant effort into organising cultural events as demonstrated by “Theatre without words” DEPO Dance Festival (part of the 10th Olympics of Theatre) starting on 11 April.

Six companies perform on the five nights of the festival, including significant performers from Hungary and abroad. Detailed programme can be found [here](#).

I can wholeheartedly recommend all the performances. Personally, I will attend three nights of the festival in the DEPO, watching the following choreographies: Alexandra SÁghy's *Three Sisters* performed by Budapest Dance Theatre, the night bearing the title *Ototeman & Lisztmania*, a joint performance by Budapest Dance Theatre and the Italian company La Compagnia Opus Ballet (COB), created by Stefania Menestrina, Sofia Galvan and Lóránd Zachár, and also two works by Raza Hammadi: *After the Fourth Wave* and *Brontë Sisters* (performed by INVERSEDANCE – Zoltan Fodor Company and Hammadi's own company, the French Ballet Jazz Art, respectively).

I have wanted to see *Three Sisters* for five years already, since its premiere, where I missed it unfortunately. The choreography has a great reputation (winning renowned professional awards), and I have seen Alexandra SÁghy dancing in top-class performances. She uses dance-language just as eloquently as a choreographer, as she interprets as a dancer. She has mastered the technical dance-language of Budapest Dance Theatre, as testified by *Three Sisters*, too (as I saw it in the few teasers available on video and heard from multiple professionals). Furthermore, (contrary to many others) I have a weak spot for the contemporary dance-interpretation of classical, mythological, literary or theatrical themes. Generally, these do not go through the whole storyline (especially not in detail), rather, they usually focus on significant states and situations, which are abstracted by and enriched with new added layers of meaning.

My attending of *Ototeman & Lisztmania* is motivated by pure curiosity on the one hand, on the other, I am certain that this choice will not be a miss. La Compagnia Opus Ballet was established in 1999, and has been active in Florence ever since, led by its founder, Rosanna Brocanello. Their repertoire reveals that they often work with different guest choreographers, and favour extreme modernity, flamboyant and often provocative stage visuality. *Ototeman* is a twenty-minute-long duet created and performed by two young dancers, Sofia Galvan and Stefania Menestrina. The title means totem, which highlights how relationships are simultaneously ritualistic yet playful, rooted in the past and ever-changing in the present.

Lóránd Zachár's *Lisztmania* is a safe bet as Zachár is one of the most promising Hungarian contemporary dance choreographers, who, upon his return from the Netherlands in 2010, appeared as a bright comet on the sky of Hungarian dance scene. He employs a very technical dance-language that is based on classical ballet, he is very musical, and thus, he has choreographed all over Hungary in the last decade, worked with every major contemporary ballet companies (the first version of *Lisztmania* was created for the Pécsi Balett in 2012).

After the Fourth Wave and *Brontë Sisters* are choreographies by Raza Hammadi. It is no exaggeration to claim that Hammadi has been a star for three decades already. Previously, he had been the master of Béla Földi, and his connection to Budapest Dance Theatre has deepened over the years. However, Hammadi's first work in Hungary took place in cooperation with the Hungarian State Opera House in 1991, when he trained two of his one-act plays (*Tango* and *Archipel*) to the ballet company. This story is also personal memory: as a young dancer in the Opera, I had the honour to be the Hungarian assistant for Hammadi in *Tango*, and in the ensuing few years, while the piece was on repertoire, it was my duty to lead the rehearsals. *Brontë Sisters* was originally created in 1993, and has since become a classic Hammadi-opus, evoking the daring, yet sophisticated "deep bites" of those years, while also remaining actual in this day and age nonetheless.

DEPO Dance Festival, 11-15 April 2023.