

Vibrations of Emptiness |

A review of the performance SJENA (SHADOW) by MARIJA ŠČEKIĆ

| Iva Nerina Sibila

*The same stream of life that runs through my veins
night and day runs through the world and dances
in rhythmic measures.*

*It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of
the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into
tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.*

*It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of
birth and of death, in ebb and in flow.*

*I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this
world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages
dancing in my blood this moment.*

Tagore

I recently participated in a discussion on the various ways in which one can write about a dance performance. This theme opened up numerous questions including: who are we addressing with such texts – the audience who has seen the performance, or the one who has not seen it, the authors of the performance, connoisseurs of dance art or perhaps the general public? Is it the duty of the writer of the text to know the background of how a certain performance came into being or rather the opposite, does the duty lie in ignoring any kind of pre-insights and only write about a performance based on what was seen? Is objective writing a myth that finally needs to be let go and to embrace one's own subjectivity in the hope that such a view might perhaps interest someone? These and similar questions flow into that what is most important – what do we do to the performance itself when we publicly publish our personal (dis)agreement with that seen?

One thing is certain, the question about the meaning and approach to writing about dance comes to a complete halt when the task at hand is writing about an exceptional performance. Such performances offer us numerous forays into the world of the author, numerous interpretations and analyses, as well as reasons why to write about it. I believe that *Shadow*, which is the impetus for this text, is one such performance.

Implosion of Opposites

Travelling within the space of *Shadow*, we encounter a series of opposite notions. Art – science, East – West, body – spirit, improvisation – choreography, male – female, young – old are all dualities that are continuously repeated no matter which direction the analysis takes.

Treated in the pre-text of Marija Ščekić and her associates these oppositions do not cancel each other out, do not join together, do not enter into conflict, nor confirm each other. *Shadow*, namely, draws us into the space *in between* these notions. In that space, these opposites, which hold the framework of social, cultural, aesthetic and other ideologies like a safety net, implode and disappear. Thanks to its abstract form, *Shadow* rejects ordinary categories of representation and instead of the dancers underlining their mutual otherness with their oppositeness, they co-exist on stage with a dance which arises from the simple and quiet levels of the body freeing each other from the limits of fixed bodily

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» from Croatian stages:

identities. Duality thus becomes a channel for one's own self-obliteration and with *Shadow* we participate in the creation of a new (stage) reality which comes closer to the ideal of continuance in the body which is not conditioned by this time and this space.

From the e-mail correspondence:

INS: *How did the collaboration with Endo come about?*

MŠ: *Tadashi's main preoccupation in his work is the tension between the opposite poles of Yin and Yang which in dance vocabulary corresponds to the notion of muscular tension in the body, both within and without... and which on the other hand is the mark of my own vocabulary. And because I had attended his Butoh-MA seminar where I couldn't find any way of fitting in with the rest of the group and after many heated arguments and encounters during the work, we realized that it wasn't a question of cultural misunderstanding and arrogance, but in fact a very deep philosophical understanding of the dance piece and material we were both exploring – I decided to present him with „Shadow“ and to offer him a dance collaboration in the project.*

Fluidity of Movement

A body emerges from the dark, turned towards the audience, with widespread arms in light motion. Lit from above, with a warm muted light. We discern that it is the body of a woman (Marija Ščekić), dressed in black, with bare back and arms. Another body slowly emerges from the depths of the stage to her left. During the first ten minutes of the performance, barely noticeable, like a white fog it makes its way forward, sliding with an invisible walk. The female dancer moves from the calm part into a frenetic jumping solo which seems like an unusual ballet exercise. She repeats it in various directions. The choreography functions as a solution to specific difficult-to-understand tasks. Despite such abstraction, the performance is expressive, touching and emotionally charged. The female dancer is serious, equated with what she is doing. Her body is of a firm build, compact. When the second body comes close enough, we can recognize the body of a man (Tadashi Endo). With a bare torso and the lower half of his body covered in a long white skirt. This body is lighter, more fragile, with longer limbs. Its expression is more open, more aggressive, focused on the audience. In the face we can recognize the dancer's Oriental features, and the movement is based on the Japanese butoh technique. When he begins to dance, the performance begins to move in its full form, in the shape of two parallel solo dances.

The choreographic material that the female dancer continues to perform moves from a transformation of classic ballet steps and poses, through expressive butoh influences, Laban-type diagonals of the body, to simple waves that pass through the body and whose source lies somewhere deep in

the space of the body. In one part we see her lightly jumping, and in the next part how she is lying on the ground in an almost animal-like crawl, overcome by gravity. In one of the most impressive scenes from the entire performance, the dancer is in a deep bow, and the choreography takes place only on her back and arms. Movements spread like waves from their source and periodically, like explosions in silence, end in powerful jerks of the head and arms. The scene is simultaneously sculpturally abstract and emotionally very striking. Thus the dance expression of Marija Ščekić changes completely from scene to scene, revealing to us a dancer of enviable transformational power and knowledge about many dance styles.

The dance that Tadashi Endo performs is more consistent in its butoh aesthetics, and seemingly less receptive to her energy. With both dancers, the quality of the movements, thanks to the attention that is directed to the tiniest details of the body, is fascinatingly fluid, soft and gentle, regardless of the dynamic and energy contrasts.

From the e-mail correspondence:

INS: *How do you feel the interaction between Endo and yourself while you are on stage?*

MŠ: *We enter the interaction both through choreography (and this is very clear but less visible as our bodies never touch) and through performance, and from my discussions with Tadashi I can see that my influences on him are equally powerful as they are autonomous. Therefore, experiences that are equal to mine. The point is that through those 36 minutes neither he nor I are aware of each other just as we have a very strong feeling that we are not alone on the stage at any one moment. In the „scientific“ sense of the word, that what is called „theory of zero energy“ (a vacuum is not an empty space).*

During the performance, both dancers remain in their positions on the stage, she to the left, he to the right. They do not enter into a bodily interaction and rarely cross into the other's space. Concentration is spilled over the entire body which then becomes almost self-existent, exempt and independent of the space. Even though they are in fact in the same space, each exists in a separate space of their body, their movement and their consciousness. We are thus given the impression that we are following a performance on two levels, in two time zones or two qualities of time, like a photographic double exposure. Dancing, they bring us to the unusual experience of synchronicity on all levels of time and existence.

The choreographies performed by Marija Ščekić and Tadashi Endo are conditioned by their different physical conditions, diverse cultural and aesthetic inscriptions into the bodies as well as different gendered and generational experiences. Transferring the quality and occasional yet passing

reverberation of movement from one body onto the other, and immersion into the same music, the abstract movement is transformed into a story about human loneliness, inevitable by the fact of existence in the *from-the-other-detached* body. At the same time, because of the strong kinetic communication which is like a magnetic force between two separate worlds, two completely separate solo dances become a duet or – a story about the deep, invisible, mystical link with the other.

The subtle choreographic interaction, multi-layeredness and aesthetic refinement, as the main characteristics of this performance, point to a series of very powerful intellectual selections and explorations that preceded the choreographic act.

Pre-text

Studying the materials from this performance, it is impossible to ignore the influences which served its development. They range from the classical ballet sciences of Vaganova and Laban, through physics and anatomy up to the religious motifs of Zen-Buddhism. Even though knowledge of these influences is not necessary for the pleasure of communicating with the performance, I think it is interesting to make a note of them here, not only as information about the process of creation, but because I believe that it is precisely in the linking of science and spirituality that we can find the answer to the question with which I began this text – what makes this performance able to transcend the ordinary boundaries of the production of a dance performance.

The first unusual act in the emergence of this performance is the graphic inscription of the choreography which the author calls a "choreographic web". Marija Ščekić elaborated on this in an interview for *Zarez VI/131*:

The dynamics of movement and the length of the duration of every segment is predetermined via a choreographic web and drawing of the energy flow... Through the choreographic web the most important dance parameters (time, space and inner impulse of movement) allow every dancer to understand and recognize in detail the kind of technical but also psycho-physical expectations this project is about. This type of work emerged as a result of the need for bringing about a specific conclusion" which is the consequence of experimenting in improvisation.

Inscribing choreography, that is, the dance path from one body into a graphic inscription and using this on stage through the second dancer, music and lighting is interesting, above all, as an approach to pinpoint every segment of the choreography. Such a scientific analysis leads to an extracorporeal definition of movement and to its emancipation from the dancing body. Choreography, which often exists only and solely in the corporal memory of the dancer, exists beyond it here.



» Shadow | Photo > Sandra Vitaljić

» from Croatian stages:

This opens up the possibility for a different type of communication and opens up a space for creative freedom to all participants in the project, because through inscribing the choreography into a choreographic web the author liberates them from any conditions with their own interpretation of the choreography. In other words, through a firm intellectual limit – the choreographic web, all the authors receive the freedom of *improvisation to enter into their own fantasies and experiences, and that one does not disturb the other but that they complement each other.* (Marija Ščekić in *Zarez*, VI/131)

In the final product, the lighting of Branko Cvjetičanin blends completely with the movement and contributes to an atmosphere of tenderness and unreality. On the other hand, the music of Zoran Ščekić functions like a completely separate piece that is taking place parallel to what is happening on stage. It can be a part of this performance or it can live independently from the dance. Also, the dance can, but does not have to, take place with this music, that is, the music functions as one of the possible interpretations of the choreography. With its dynamic and emotional charge it sometimes overly determines that what is happening on stage and deprives the movement of the interpretative openness that the author achieved.

In the structuring of the performance itself, Marija Ščekić used a model based on Chinese philosophy, the *Wu Xing* cycle. Very often interpreted as five elements, *Wu Xing* can mean five agents, five qualities, five states of change or five phases, that is, five types of *chi* – life energies. Following this circular model, the performance takes place in five scenes of which each corresponds to the qualities of one *chi*, but also to the transformations of one quality into another. Working on the performance using this model, the author shifts the dramaturgy from the area of her own decisions (corporal and intellectual) and surrenders the structure of the performance into the hands of traditional Chinese philosophy. By this she obtains an unexpected but intuitively logical sequence of scenes and a defined series of qualities which she explores in the physical improvisations.

The Space of Emptiness

The placement of this performance within the fixed spatial plans of Vaganova and Laban, developed through the transformation of the *Wu Xing* cycle and inscribed in the choreographic web, opens up a space for the joint dance journey of Marija Ščekić and Tadashi Endo. And this seemingly incompatible pairing is visibly connected on stage, as mentioned earlier, by the special quality of physical concentration and fluidity of movement. But this union is not just a coincidental compatibility. From two completely different artistic biographies one link is obvious – both artists base their engagement in dance on the search for the source of movement, on the delicate vibrations of a just started

motion, somewhere deep in the space of the spirit/body.

Tadashi Endo is a Japanese dancer and choreographer who has been living and performing in Germany for many years. His education and work combine Eastern theatre forms such as No theatre and Butoh with Western theatre. Even though the synthesis of both these traditions is visible in Endo's work, the starting point for his choreography is in butoh, and the absorption of consciousness into oneself, and the attention directed at maintaining a balance of energy, and not on the aesthetics of movement and choreography, are the basis of the butoh philosophy for him. Combining butoh with the spiritual teaching of Zen-Buddhism he creates the Butoh-MA style about which he says:

MA is a world beyond time and space. In Zen-Buddhism it means „emptiness or the space in-between“. Butoh-MA is the way to make the invisible visible. MA means to be IN BETWEEN. MA is the moment just at the end of a movement and before the beginning of the next one. When the soul is ready for the last step – completely calm – without breathing – completely quiet – not dead and not alive – this is MA (Tadashi Endo, www.butoh-ma.de).

In explaining the paradigm of the quantum mechanical body, modern physics comes closer to this spiritual notion and explains it in the following way:

The body is a complex current of vibrations in the unified field of pure intelligence... Atoms are comprised of energetic particles that move in an empty space. The true nature of the body, is also as empty as the space between the planets, stars and the galaxy. (Contemporary Ayurveda, Sharma and Clark, London: Churchill Livingstone 1998, p. 63).

While Tadashi Endo searches for movement in quietude, Marija Ščekić tries to detect the most delicate vibrations in that space of quietude. She began this search through the study of electroacoustics, which she turned to after completing choreography and contemporary dance at the Concordia University in Montreal.

... in studying the laws of sound (frequency, amplitude, spectre, envelope, timbre). The starting idea was to understand the dancers as energy particles whose real character (shape, colour, strength) comes from the source of movement itself, and those are the internal vibrations of DNA cells as the basic building units of a human body. After these deep vibrations transform into a driving energy, the body moves from its zero position, its state of repose, creating a visual ripple noticeable in the eye of the observer. In that way, the dancer opens up an entire microcosm of movement which choreography, like the membrane of a microphone, transforms into abstract, invisible-to-the-eye vibrations within a dancer's body, into visual dance movements. (Zarez, VI/131)

Tagore describes this same experience through poetry:

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

...

And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

In comparing these quotes, we can conclude that the orientation towards the deepest areas of physiology which Marija Ščekić and Tadashi Endo explore, each in their own way, in the performance *Shadow*, is not just a way of exploring certain dance or performer qualities. It is the universal human search for the source, for that which is extracorporeal and preconscious, for that which exists outside all movements and sounds. This search is also undertaken by science and art and religion as well as poetry with all their instruments. Dance is an organized and conscious exploration of the movement of the human body which, as the most complex organism in our known universe, has the ability to transcend itself and the direct experience of that space *outside*. The orientation towards those finest levels in this performance is like a power shield which reconciles all opposites and imperfections and opens up the path to that *outside*.

From the e-mail correspondence:

INS: *Your performance seems very human and emotional to me, almost lyrical, even though it was created using a scientific approach and is abstract in its expression. Do you think that emotionality and a scientific approach are in conflict?*

MŠ: *No, I don't think so, even though I surrender that question to the philosophers, and I try not to think with my head but with my body (heart, feelings...) in the creation of dance material but if I begin the process of creating constructs – I then study, analyse and logically look at all the material attained and then make a decision what to do next... Of course, in that process there are a million times that I come into a dilemma, doubt, contradiction, and very rarely, conflict.*

And to conclude, I again return to the question from the beginning – what do we do when we write about a dance performance? In the case of the performance *Shadow*, which has only been performed three times to date (at the Osijek Summer of Culture, 18.7.2004 and at ITD Theatre in Zagreb 24–25 January 2005), one of the responses would be, I hope, or could be – we prolong its life... if not the stage one, before the bodies of the audience, then at least in this way, through text, before the eyes of the readers. █

English translation: *Susan Jakopec*



» *Shadow* | Photo > Sandra Vitaljić