

Ethical perspectives of choreographic discourse

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Abstract: It is a well-known fact that choreography is part of the area of performing arts that requires a certain rigor of the body and precision in movement. However, over time, the art of choreography has evolved, transforming into a form of expression that is no longer necessarily conditioned by impressive technical skills. Although my training in the choreographic field is structured according to classical norms, the subject of my doctoral research is directed towards an area where movement is not the main point of interest, but rather is used as a therapeutic tool. Therefore, as expected, the way I normally look at movement, in the construction of a show for example, has undergone drastic changes. I believe that this is also the moment when the issue of ethics intervened during my research, with which I already made contact in the construction of the first practical laboratory, where I interacted from a choreographic point of view with approximately seventeen seniors between the ages of 65 and 93, creating a 30-minute performance-experiment. This lab put me in the position to restructure the discourse that I would normally have when constructing a choreographic performance, which I had to adapt according to the different ages and bodies I worked with. So, many times I found myself in the position where I was reflecting on the indications I give, so that they are as correct as possible from an ethical point of view, contributing to a healthy relationship between me and the seniors, but to also regulate certain clear, scenic situations that could not be left to chance.

Keywords: choreography, ethical, dance.

1. Introduction

It is a well-known fact that choreography is part of the performing arts that require a certain rigor of the body and precision in movement. However, over time, choreographic art has evolved, turning into a form of expression that is no longer necessarily conditioned by impressive technical skills. Although my training in the choreographic field is structured according to classical norms, the topic of my doctoral research is directed towards an area where movement is not

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the main point of interest, but rather is used as a therapeutic tool. So, naturally, the way I normally look at movement, when constructing a show for example, has undergone radical changes.

2. Ethical perspectives

“A code of ethics articulates values and principles, and informs the understanding of the moral qualities necessary to work in the profession.”² Although I delved into the topic of ethics during my doctoral research, my first contact with it took place earlier, during the creation of my debut show, KARNAL, which premiered at the *Teatrul din Stejar*, Iași in 2021. Due to the concept chosen for the show, body shaming, I had to study before starting the creative process and the ways in which I have to relate, from an ethical point of view, to the performers chosen. Knowing that the cast included people who, over time, have experienced traumatic situations relative to their own bodies and that we will have to reveal them in the dramatics of the show, it was necessary, by documenting myself, to reshape the path of verbal expression and movement. So, I turned my attention rather to how I use movement to externalize negative experience, especially to start a therapeutic process of accepting corporeality, through exercises that combined the psychological with the physical. From an ethical point of view, being such a sensitive subject, I had to understand this phenomenon we call *body shaming* as well as possible, to be informed in such a way that I would not find myself in the position of being the triggering factor of traumas, in an unintentional way of course.

The discussion frames the possibilities of collaboration seen through an ethical lens in which the dialogic is seen as a system of our complex relations that facilitates opportunities to create responses to ideas and experience. (...) The crux is to consider what can be learned when we recognize ethics to be at the heart of how together we can investigate possible futures.³

Having worked over time with different types of corporeality, with different sensitivities and with psychological themes, I think I have developed a kind of necessary empathy, which could easily be placed in the area of ethics, if we think about the dictionary definition of the latter. In doing so, I have always tried to move away from the “classical” model of teaching movement, which often violates the rules of ethics, causing performers short-term discomfort and even long-term trauma.

² Colin Noyale, Catherine Seago, Kathryn Stamp (2024), *Ethical Agility in Dance. Rethinking Technique in British Contemporary Dance*, Routledge, London, p. 1.

³ Fiona Bannon (2018), *Considering Ethics in Dance, Theatre and Performance*, Palgrave Macmillan Publishing House, London, p. 11.

As noted in Chapter One, a phrase used to describe dance teacher behaviour “*teaching by terror*” (Geeves 1993, p. 8) captured my imagination, transporting me back to my own memories both of learning to dance and of learning to teach: and, in particular, the deep-seated fear of not getting it right in case I was accused of not trying. I still remember the deep feelings of injustice when I was accused of not trying – somehow not getting it right meant I was not trying. No doubt there were times I did not try as hard as I could but generally, I did try, I tried very hard. And all too often, it just wasn’t enough. (...) I also realize looking back that at least some of the accusations of not trying were not really levelled at my level of effort but rather they were criticisms of my anatomical shortfalls such as a neck that was too short (and not surprisingly, still is) and, toes that were too long with feet that did not possess the naturally high, overly flexible arches that were so often prized for classical ballet.⁴

Given the fact that I have also lived such unpleasant experiences, I realized that I should not apply the same working method, especially in projects that do not aim at technical perfection. Thus, I suggest an exercise of imagination to prove the above. Let’s say that in the work process I ask a performer to perform a particular movement, which we will very simply call movement 0. After the performer memorizes and performs movement 0, I realize that the shape of his body does not create the connection that I previously visualized for movement 0 and moreover puts him at a scenic disadvantage. So, I decide that I must replace movement 0 with movement 1. Of course, the rule of professional ethics already dictates me a verbal expression that does not cause a conflict between me and the interpreter, but in order to reach the desired effect, I must assume his corporeality and approach his way of moving. At no point do I need to give the impression that the performer’s body shape or type of movement is the cause of creative difficulties, but on the contrary, I need to make the right decisions in such a way that the performer feels comfortable, as an active participant in the creative act. Empathy develops over time and I consider it an extension of the use of ethics in the performing arts.

In this case, however, a dilemma arises for the creator of the show, which raises a set of questions about the decisions to be made during the construction. Such questions I have often faced myself when it was necessary to make the crucial decisions for the shows I worked on. Is it ethical to force the performer to assimilate and reproduce a certain movement perfectly, just because it adds value to the performance? Does the ethical dimension of the process extend to the viewers, too, as I am morally directly responsible for what I offer the audience? Is it ethical to sacrifice the final product in favor of the work process, or vice versa? Of course, as I gain experience, I formulate answers to all these

⁴ Botham Sho (2012), *Ethical Issues in the Training and Development of Dance Teachers in the Private Sector*, University of Brighton, p. 67.

questions. So they are changeable, unexpected and sometimes very hard to find. I am concerned about this area of creation and motivated to research further. “In the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, a major question arises: to what extent can the artistic fact, the creation or, later, the reception of the work be considered moral? It is usually considered that reading a novel and, likewise, watching a theatre performance or listening to a symphonic concert are not considered to be ethical actions. However, the act of reception, by adapting to the reality of the scene, is one that involves – looking at things in extremis – either “the illusion of reality” or “distancing”, in other words a reaction that, following the stages of the descriptive, norms attitudes and institutes a process of valorization. If what is transmitted to us through the stage act is accompanied by a direct or implicit evaluation, the reception of the message (of some messages, to be more precise, since there are also statements with neutral value) will involve a translation of it through the grids of values and norms that the universe of morality has in mind.”⁵

During my doctoral research, I came across ethical perspectives, more precisely in the construction of the first practical laboratory, where I interacted from a choreographic point of view with approximately seventeen seniors aged 65 to 93 years old, making a performance-experiment of 30 minutes. This laboratory put me in the position to restructure the speech that I would normally give when constructing a choreographic show, which I had to adapt according to the different ages I work with. My speech took on the most ethically correct nuances, thus contributing to a healthy relationship between me and the seniors, but which also regulated certain clear, staged situations that could not be left to chance. At the end of this project there was another question that stuck in my mind: is it ethical to feel compassion for the performers of a show just because they are elderly people? Does this not interfere in our perception, as a spectator, and modify the vision we have of the performance we have watched, not being able to follow perhaps other artistic directions that are dealt with within the project?

In conclusion, we could reinforce here the idea that, in dance, the passage of an ontological dimension of the gesture to an ethic of form does not mean a reduction or a substitution. The displacement from an ontological discussion to an ethical discussion of dance is only a circulation between body-in-movement and gesture and it is in this circulation that the dancing body is becoming. The two axes of discussion have in common the notion of mediality as a fundamental presupposition. The importance of thinking the mediality not only as a support, but as a movement of inclusion and

⁵ Tiberius Vasiniuc (2020), *Principii de etică și integritate în arta spectacolului și în cercetarea artistică* [Principles of Ethics and Integrity in Performing Arts and Artistic Research], UArtPress, p. 56.

devolution requires: 1) to keep open any discursive plan and to include the Other; 2) disregard the tendencies of imprisonment of the work in categories; 3) to measure knowledge by identifying the construction strategies or the meta-discourses involved.⁶

This specific demographic implies a heightened sensitivity to the physical, emotional and social aspects of the participants. By adopting clear and inclusive ethical norms, an environment of trust and mutual respect is created between the choreographer and the performers, contributing to the general well-being and commitment to the artistic process. It is essential to take into account individual limits, promote open communication and adapt dance practices according to the needs and abilities of each participant. By applying these ethical norms, an artistic harmony is built in which the experience of dance becomes an inclusive and fulfilling way for everyone involved.

3. Conclusions

The conclusion we can reach is that the ethical side has major implications in the performing arts, because the process is done by people, together with other people. I have noticed that although choreography has traditionally been associated with rigorous demand on the body and technical precision, the evolution of the art of choreography has brought with it a transformation in the perspective on movement. In the case of my doctoral research and practical projects, I chose to focus on the use of movement as a therapeutic tool, and this approach required an adaptation of the way I looked at the construction of performances.

A crucial aspect in this approach played the implementation of a code of ethics, which articulates the values and principles necessary to work with sensitivity and respect for the individual experiences of dancers of all ages. In the construction of the performances, I was careful to keep being open to discussion, to respect individual boundaries and to promote open and empathetic communication. I have also been careful to avoid the “classical” model of teaching movement techniques, replacing it with an approach that takes into account the body diversity and specific sensitivities of the participants.

The whole experience highlighted the importance of an ethical approach in the artistic field and shed light on essential questions regarding ethical decisions in the creative process. It is essential to ask to what extent the artistic fact and the reception of the work can be considered moral and how this impacts the relationship with the spectators.

⁶ Barros Né (2017), *Dance and mediality: for an ontological and ethical discussion of the performative body*, Comunicação e Sociedade, vol. 31, pp. 77-78.

Finally, a special attention paid to ethics in the choreographic process not only contributes to the quality of the artistic experience, but also to the development of a healthy relationship between the creator and the performers, valuing the diversity and individuality of each participant. Thus, I consider it essential that a creator (director or choreographer) be involved in studying the issue of ethics in order to develop their skill for a harmonious coordination of the entire artistic process.

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