Ethical dilemmas in the choreographic approach. Actors vs dancers

Alice VELICHE
PhD Student
"George Enescu" National University Arts Iași
ROMANIA[1]

Abstract: The beginning of my career as a young choreographer often finds me working with both dancers and actors. This duality implies approaching different ways of working, a different structuring of the creative stages, but also an adaptation at a conversational, explanatory, bodily level. All these factors give rise to a series of hypotheses that I intend to address from an ethical perspective. Between the two forms of work there are observable differences that arise from the bodily capacities of the actors, a fact, moreover, absolutely natural. But a flawed approach that I have observed both in my interaction with the two stage formulas and in external projects is closely related to the underestimation of performers, a kind of identical label applied to a variety of products. Is it morally right to make an early work plan and anticipate how we will work with a team of actors? Or should we prepare a module only after observing the capabilities of the team, the ones that might exceed our expectations? Is it ethically normal to construct a large amount of choreographic material just to replace the presence of unspoken words on stage? All of these represent ethical dilemmas, although they appear to be components of ordinary behavior. I will look at both personal mistakes in working with actors vs. dancers, as well as those observed from the outside, trying to find out why underestimation occurs so often in the choreographic world.

Keywords: actors, dancers, ethical, dilemmas.

1. Introduction

The beginning of my career as a young choreographer often finds me working with both dancers and actors. This duality implies different ways of working, a different structuring of the creative stages, but also a conversational, explanatory and corporal adaptation. All these factors give rise to a series of hypotheses that I intend to address from an ethical perspective.

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[1] velichealice@yahoo.com.

natural. But one flawed approach that I have observed both in my interaction with the two stage formulas and in other projects is closely related to the undervaluing of the performers, a kind of identical label applied to a variety of products. Initially I thought that this phenomenon occurred only in the case of actors, those whom we choreographers sometimes tend to protect by giving them elements of moderate complexity or by obsessively repeating a bodily discourse that we want to make as well understood as possible. The exact same situation, but in a different approach, happens with dancers. The inability to express themselves verbally on stage, the facial expressiveness which is often lacking, conveying a concept through purely choreographic variations, all of these, as in the previous case, are actions that are poorly directed. I will highlight some of the personal concerns I have encountered in previous projects, but also others that I have discovered at a generic level, in an attempt to clarify these ethical dilemmas.

2. Ethical perspectives in choreographical work

I will start with a question that comes up frequently in my field of interest. Is it morally right to make an early work plan and anticipate how we will work with a team of actors? Or should we prepare a pattern only after observing the capabilities of the team, which may exceed our expectations? I can refer to a collaboration I had at the beginning of this year, in January, at the *Matei Vişniec* Municipal Theatre in Suceava. For the creation of the choreographic show "Asylum" I only had two weeks to organize the entire process. In other words, the time was far too short compared to the large volume of information that came with the territory. Thus, the choreography was simplified due to the uncertainty that a troupe of actors, whose bodies were completely unknown to me, would cope with a complex choreography. The wonder arose at the moment they proved the opposite. I discovered several harmonious, energetic bodies capable of complex movement phrases, but the short time and strict planning did not allow me to modify everything I had already built. I took this loss in stride and realized for the first time that underestimating can mean self-sabotage. This underestimation occurs when a previous failed experience is used as a general benchmark.

Is it ethically normal to design a vast amount of choreographic material just to make up for unspoken words on stage? Another example of mine is closely related to the choreographic show "FeMale", a show of about 45 minutes, the cast of which consisted of five professional dancers and one actress. The choreographic material is constantly present as far as the five dancers are concerned, without alternating body movement with the utterance of words that could have emphasized their inner state. Although the use of the motion-speech relationship crossed my mind, I quickly dismissed the idea for exactly the same

reason mentioned in the previous example: underestimation. The movement is almost insignificant in the case of the actress, who has an explosion of words at the end of the performance. She is present in space, watching and performing a series of moves that I could now describe as amateurish. For her character, I initially chose somebody else from the dancing milieu, but I was attracted by comfort and safety, knowing that the text cannot fail, if spoken by a person with experience in the field.

We look for actors only for their pleasant voices and use dancers only for their harmonious bodies. "I don't use actors in a choreography show because they don't move as well" or "I don't make the dancers speak because it sounds awkward" are just some of the phrases I've heard from project coordinators. Contemporary dance does not tell us about the beauty of movement, but about its meaning, just as an actor will not seek to gracefully execute a movement, but to contain it. This is the key trait that dancers need. Gigi Căciuleanu confessed: "If in dance-theatre the dancers are treated as actors, and the choreography as a mise-en-scène, I do the opposite: I treat the actors as dancers and the show as a choreography. (…) The dancers, if they are professionals, I turn them into actors and after that I turn them back into dancers. I am only trying, I'm not saying I succeed."[2] This was probably the main reason why the cast of the choreographic show "The Little Prince" consisted of three dancers and eight actors, whose choreographic scores had the same level of difficulty as the dancers. The voices of all actors were exploited, the text being equally divided among them. I tried to rebalance the balance that I myself tipped at a certain point.

Another important aspect that goes hand in hand with the above, and which I would like to bring to your attention, is pleasure. That inner pleasure that is triggered when we take part in the conception of an artistic product. A state that should normally be felt by the entire team, not just the creator of the performance. What happens when one person's pleasure builds on the discomfort of others? Various creators, whether choreographers or directors, choose to access a certain state by pressurizing and intimidating performers. Working under pressure creates frustration, tension and even direct conflict, but it can also tap into unexplored depths. This method of working, which is increasingly present in the 21st century, can result in remarkable performances. Is this a sacrifice to make in favor of a successful artistic act? Is it or is it not ethical to behave in such a way that in the end, nevertheless, creates pleasure, whether on the part of the audience or the team. "Therefore, obtaining a momentary pleasure must be weighed against subsequent losses and a balance tipping in our favor. However, as the advocate of the ethical doctrine of utilitarianism warns us, one's

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[2] https://www.agerpres.ro/cultura/2015/02/13/interviu-gigi-caciuleanu-dansul-e-simplitatea-dusa-la-maximul-complexitatii-11-19-49

own happiness must not conflict with the interests of society, with its norms, which links it directly to the prescriptions of morality."[3]

Since we have also touched on the subject of behavior in the creative process, and since the creator-performer relationship is very important, we will also talk a bit about communication and how it is achieved in a working environment. Choreographic performances use actors and dancers with different backgrounds and movement vocabularies, which implies the use of a variety of language, of terms that can be easily understood by all performers. In most cases, however, the choreographic explanations given to the actors require a longer time, which increases the waiting time for the rehearsal team. What do we do in this situation? Will I feed this discomfort of the crew or will I neglect the additional needs of the actors and continue the explanations at a pace that is too fast for them? Is it ethical or unethical to express yourself differently according to the abilities of the performers? It's hard to strike a balance in this situation, with the perception of the person directly involved to blame. Whether we are talking about a relaxed, colloquial communication or language that includes specialized terms. This can be unsatisfactory in both forms.

In this part we can also discuss about toxic communication, abuse and the trauma of overwork. The dancer's body is perceived as a machine that can move in a constant rhythm without feeling the need to rest. Instead, a healthy approach would be to homogenize the two extremes. "As dancers, we are trained to be adaptable, dynamic, and to always say yes. As students, we never rest; instead, we keep pushing when our teachers say, 'One more time' for the third or fourth time. We are often taught that putting our physical or emotional needs first is somehow disrespectful to our teachers and choreographers. Even when the person in the front of the room asks us how we are doing, we bite our tongues and often refrain from telling the truth, in fear that we could disappoint them. There's no doubt dancers being some of the hardest working people, but why do we lack the ability to advocate for ourselves when we are being pushed too far?"[4]

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[3] Ttiberius 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]*,* Editura UartPess,Târgu Mureș, pp. 34-35.

[4] Sophia Vangelatos (2021), *Should We Have a Code of Ethics as Dance Makers and Teachers?* p. 1, retrieved from https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1xz8g19w.

„As dancers, we are trained to be adaptable, dynamic, and to always say yes. As students, we never rest; instead, we keep pushing when our teachers say, "One more time" for the third or fourth time. We are often taught that putting our physical or emotional needs first is somehow disrespectful to our teachers and choreographers. Even when the person in the front of the room asks us how we are doing, we bite our tongues and often refrain from telling the truth, in fear that we could disappoint them. There's no doubt dancers being some of the hardest working people, but why do we lack the ability to advocate for ourselves when we are being pushed too far?"

While she may not have explicitly articulated her thoughts on 'dance ethics', Pina Bausch's artistic practices, for example, reflected values that align with ethical considerations in the dance world. She emphasized respect for the individuality of the dancer, the importance of creating a safe and nurturing environment for artistic exploration, and the ethical responsibility to describe emotions and stories with integrity and authenticity.

3. Conclusion

Failure to meet ethical standards can have several consequences that affect both individuals and the dance community as a whole. Some of these consequences can be: damaged relationships, loss of trust and good reputation, legal problems, stifled creativity and innovation, fragmentation of the community, and even mental health problems. "Findings show that dance students, dancers and dance teachers are at high risk of experiencing mental health challenges. A range between 30-50% of the dance population (relative to different studies and measures) seem to suffer from at least one mental health issue during a year, while one third has reported a mental health issue as their most severe health problem of which perfectionism, general anxiety, stress due to external factors, eating disorder, and constant tiredness were among the most reported challenges."[5]

In the rhythmic poetry of movement, in which bodies converge to tell unspoken stories, lies an unspoken code - a moral compass that guides the steps of choreographic artists, educators and creators. The dance ethic, a tapestry woven of respect, responsibility and reverence, transcends mere choreography of movement. It embodies the values and principles that shape the soul of this expressive art form. All these briefly presented information represent ethical dilemmas, although they seem to be components of a common behavior. The purpose of this article is to raise awareness, analyze and remedy these problems that seem to be increasingly present in our professional lives.

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[5] Heidi Marian Haraldsen, Michelle Schachtler Dwarika, Einar Thor Jonson (2021), *Resilience and Ethics in Dance Education*, p. 59, retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/88579223/Resilience_and_Ethics_in_Dance_Education_Scoping_Review : „Findings show that dance students, dancers and dance teachers are at high risk of experiencing mental health challenges. A range between 30-50% of the dance population (relative to different studies and measures) seem to suffer from at least one mental health issue during a year, while one third has reported a mental health issue as their most severe health problem of which perfectionism, general anxiety, stress due to external factors, eating disorder, and constant tiredness were among the most reported challenges."

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