
FROM MARTIAL ARTS TO BUTOH. ON INSPIRATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY DANCE ON THE EXAMPLE OF TEATR MAAT PROJEKT OF LUBLIN

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Abstract:

The objective of this article is to present trends in the new dance current through the analysis of Teatr MAAT Projekt, a theatre of Lublin. Its founder, Tomasz Bazan, is inspired with martial arts, butoh dance and meditation which offer an alternative method of physical development as compared to the classical ballet system that serves as a foundation for a number of dancing techniques. I interpret several most important productions of the group, i.e. *Misterium Ozyryjskie*, *Krótkie smakowanie życia*, *Lang*, *Station de Corps*, which allow for analysing the course of the artist's most significant inspirations. Tomasz Bazan elects an unconventional method of shaping the body which is consistent with the current referred to as the new dance, opposed to the older technique, i.e. the dance theatre. The proposed distinction is crucial in the interpretation of trends and values prevailing in the contemporary theatre that uses the language of movement.

INTRODUCTION

Teatr MAAT Projekt (MAAT Project Theatre) is a continuously changing group of young artists who co-operate with Tomasz Bazan, a dancer and choreographer. They are considered to be representatives of the new dance current, i.e. the generation in their twenties or thirties that expands the concepts of dance, incorporating it into a wider framework of performative, conceptual or engaged art, thereby opposing the aesthetics of dance theatre.

DANCE THEATRE VS. NEW DANCE

The nineties proved to be a crucial period for stage dance in Poland. At that time, new dancing groups [Królca 2011: 53] started to appear in every prominent town or city, following the work of Conrad Drzewiecki¹, e.g.: Śląski Teatr Tańca (Silesian Dance Theatre), Lubelski Teatr Tańca (Dance Theatre of Lublin), Teatr Dada von Bzdülów (Dada von

¹ In 1973, Conrad Drzewiecki created Polski Teatr Tańca – Balet Poznański (Polish Dance Theatre – Poznan Ballet). The name referred to the German term of 'Tanztheater' which had been developed since the mid-war era. Material influence on the Polish stage dance was also exerted by Henryk Tomaszewski who in 1956 formed Studio Pantomimy (Mime Studio) at Państwowe Teatry Dramatyczne (State Drama Theatres) in Wrocław, today Wrocławski Teatr Pantomimy im. Henryka Tomaszewskiego (Henryk Tomaszewski Wrocław Mime Theatre). He was the first one in Poland to attempt to make mime an autonomic art, by references to the contemporary codifiers: Étienne 'a Decroux, and his students – Marcel Marceau and Jean-Luis Barrault.

Bzdulow Theatre), and others. The basis of their choreographies involved ballet techniques, expressionist dance (Mary Wigman) and Martha Graham's method consisting in the use of contraction and tension of abdominal muscles while simultaneously releasing and stretching lumbar muscles, which results in prolonged movements. Productions by Polski Teatr Tańca (Polish Dance Theatre) and others were constructed based on the category of a conflict, a tragic agon that additionally underlined the binary nature of the technique centred around balancing between extremities. Significant importance was also attributed to dancers' technical preparation and their physical fitness.

Ten years later marked the beginning of the new dance development as the sign of weariness with the existing form of dance narratives. Young artists sought inspirations from entirely different sources than their predecessors. They stayed away from rigid and closed forms; notably, in this case even a premiere does mean that a show is complete, on the contrary – confrontation with the public begins the next phase of improving the work. In contrast to shows produced by dance theatres, the new dance artists prepare performances free of any extended scenography, with their works resembling the notion of 'poor theatre'. The most important and frequently the one and only carrier of a narrative involves a body that despises linearity and rejects simplistic story-telling. The essence boils down to the contemplation of physicality.

Works by Teatr MAAT Projekt

Tomasz Bazan's explorations are deeply rooted in the dance theatre traditions. The artist makes references to his icon, Pina Bausch; nonetheless, he does it in a manner different from that applied by representatives of the dance current from the nineties. Bazan enters the theatrical world from backstage, rejecting the classical dance technique. From the stereotypical point of view, he functions as a layman, given that he did not graduate from any ballet school; nevertheless, the practice he had gathered following the footsteps of Grotowski's heirs ranks him among the most interesting artists of the young generation who do not fear to experiment and are open to new forms.

Teatr MAAT Projekt was created on Tomasz Bazan's initiative. He was the promoter of all of the ensemble's activities. When asked for a reason why he decided to set up a theatre, he responds: "Perhaps because back then, more than ten years ago, I could not find a group with which I could convincingly identify myself? I failed to find my territory? With some friends, we reached a conclusion that the only way to go forward is to set up our own retreat, the place where we could fulfil our needs. On top of that, we also wanted to earn a million dollars" [<http://teatralny.pl/rozmowy/przestalismy-myslec-o-teatrze-tanca-a-zaczalismy-o-tancu-samym-w-sobie,996.html>, date of access: 21.01. 2019].

Markedly, the group name has never included the designation 'dance theatre' (or 'teatr tańca' in Polish) which in an everyday language is commonly used to refer to the activities of almost every non-ballet group.

In his comments, the choreographer decidedly dissociates himself from the designation of a 'dancer'; instead, he prefers to describe himself as a 'man that lives with his body'[Interview with Tomasz Bazan conducted by the author, own archives]. Similarly, he does not perceive the idea of a theatre in a traditional way. In his shows, the artist does not make use of a classical narrative; predominantly, he focuses on sustaining the sense of commonality. "Nowadays, when community and deeper relations with a fellow human being disappear, it is a theatre that provides a territory where this exchange of peculiar energy

between audience and an artist might still take place” [Interview with Tomasz Bazan conducted by the author, own archives].

Martial Arts

Bazan’s work with body is based on the constant exploration of physical capacities. In his early youth, the artist trained martial arts, and namely the wushu system, commonly referred to as Kung Fu – Mantis Style (Tang Lang Man). “The Mantis Style (Tanglang Men) is one of the classical Chinese martial arts. Its development is attributed to master Wang Lang of Shandong inspired after having observed a battle between a mantis and a cicada style was inspired by the combative spirit of a mantis rather than intended as the emulation of its movements. Owing to the incorporation of the principal techniques and principles of the Northern martial arts’ styles, the mantis system-technique has become extensively comprehensive. Tanglang Men uses the full spectrum of strikes, grips, levers, foot throwing techniques and throws, combined with attacks on vital spots. All strikes and throws are performed in flash sequences from low, robust and dynamic positions. Legwork in Tanglang involves rapid and constantly changing steps allowing for a devastating attack, and swift and elusive defence. Even though Tanglang Men was created and initially developed among Taoists of the Laoshan Mountain, it bears close resemblance to Shaolin boxing. The impact of Shaolin is visible when we compare jiben gong, i.e. basic exercises, in both systems. However, these similarities tend to decline in the more advanced techniques of Tanglang Men (the Mantis)” [Zamorska 2014: 126].

For Bazan, the martial arts were an important experience that has been resounding in his performances up to the present day. “Kung Fu training sessions were hard for me, as I was a rather small child, and during competitions or sparring matches you can be beaten in the face, even by your best friend, if you do not know how to defend yourself. I did not treat it as fun; I felt that it did me good and made sense for me. I never prepared for any competitions even though I attended a dozen of them; neither did I particularly apply myself in terms of fighting *per se*. What I believed to be important was to practice forms; I always wanted for the martial arts to consist only in this; still, all the teachers were repeating that it was pointless as the goal should consist in winning in confrontation with an opponent. Years later, I think this was some inside call of my body for physical practice” [Interview with Tomasz Bazan conducted by the author, own archives].

Bazan gathered a group of people who regularly met and exchanged various experiences. A basis for any exercise involved the way of working developed at Gardzienice that served to expand perceptive capabilities, stimulate a body blocked by habits and everyday activities and discover an organic manner of movement. Further, the correlation of physical exercises with vocal ones – aimed at finding the natural melodics of a voice – played a highly important role [Zamorska 2014: 126]. Not only did that practice affect the formal shape of the young ensemble’s training sessions, but it also had strong bearing on the group’s identity. In accordance with training assumptions applied at Gardzienice, the basis thereof boiled down to the relation of an individual with a group that forms a certain ‘collective body’.

Misterium Ozyryjskie (Mystery of Osiris) was the first production born out of inspiration with Włodzimierz Staniewski centre’s activity. Bazan applied a technique of the reconstruction of movement encrypted in ancient paintings. The preparations for the show took six months and in addition to rehearsals they involved intellectual explorations consisting in studying the history of ancient Egypt, reading mythology and other texts.

When working on the subsequent productions, Bazan remained faithful to intensive workouts based on martial arts originating from Far East whose essence is to achieve higher, greater existence through self-improvement.

Butoh Period

Meeting with Daisuke Yoshimoto, a Japanese butoh dancer, was a turning point in Tomasz Bazan's work. He saw the Japanese dancer for the very first time in *Eros and Thanatos* presented during Konfrontacje Teatralne Festival in Lublin.

It is only when I have seen Daisuke Yoshimoto, his body and what it brings with itself, that everything has changed. The area of explorations has narrowed down and focused on a body. In MAAT, we have started working on the aspect that occupies us up till now, that is on the body in oppression, the body against the system. We have been looking for answers to the questions as to what the limits of the body are, what transformations we can subject it to, and what results from them. In doing so, we do not limit ourselves exclusively to physicality [Interview with Tomasz Bazan conducted by the author, own archives].

At the same time, Bazan started an intensive training programme, attending workshops to study the butoh technique from such masters as Ken Katsura, Atsushi Takenouchi, Ushio Amagatsu, Minako Seki or Rui Ishihara. As of that moment, he has no longer been perceived as a representative of the student theatre movement. Dancing circles quickly recognised him as a professional, and he started cooperation with Sylwia Hanff, the most prominent butoh dancer in Poland.

Bazan invited her to his show, *Krótkie smakowanie życia (Brief Tasting of Life)*, where they jointly play the roles of Waki and Shite. Their names refer to the manner of calling the second and first actor in the Japanese theatre Nō. "*Smakowanie* refers to the obsession of a perpetual motion machine – in my view, everyone has this obsession of an ideal machine. This is my personal search for such a 'machine' that creates a show, theatre, dance, forms a new reality. ... The main carrier of the entire performance involves the body – crippled, poor, stripped of clothing, deprived of vitalisation. And on the other hand – exceptionally vital – when the body comes close to self-destruction, it can come to life again in a completely different dimension." [Interview with Tomasz Bazan conducted by the author, own archives].

Bazan describes his theatre of that time as 'non-exhibitionist', i.e. not measurable with dance theatre means, thereby excluding the aspect of visuality as less valuable, and assigning the primacy to communality. "[For us, the most significant thing is] to take a step forward, together with a spectator, rather than a step back. In such terms, the performance is not exhibitionist – it is a meeting, not a presentation" [Interview with Tomasz Bazan conducted by the author, own archives].

The subject of death has appeared in Bazan's works on numerous occasions, as the artist himself admits: "I have feared, and fear, death ... My theatre is full of life; it is exactly this hasty run in the direction of what is going away, what is losing its energy. These are fast jumps so as to be on time before a final solution. When we are late for a train, theoretically we could run very quickly, surpass its speed and manage to get on at the final station. I believe it" [http://teatrmaat.pl, date of access: 05.05.2018].

Death appears in Bazan's works in the context of transcendence, a liminal body, that goes beyond its own conditionality, bearing intense and total consciousness. It is specific of butoh which views the body from the perspective of suffering, but concurrently from that of joy. It domesticates and integrates it. However, it can also bear witness to the disintegration of the external and individual world [Hoczyk 2013: 133]. When exploring butoh, it is crucial to simultaneously exercise body and mind; in consequence, the dance closely resembles meditation techniques. It is a "specific mental and physical practice that opens an artist to a possibility of experiencing oneself and the world in a more careful manner, in time and space dimensions" [www.taniecpolska.pl/krytyka/145, date of access: 21.01.2019].

Bazan developed his own way of the butoh practice which he called the 'form of leading a body in butoh'. "This formula allows for bypassing such strict terms as a method or technique. I do not say that I dance; I say that I lead my body within the form" [www.taniecpolska.pl/krytyka/145, date of access: 21.01.2019]. By searching and examining his physical limitations, the artist discovers the most suitable means of artistic expression. He applies the *subbody* tactics employed by some butoh dancers, e.g. Lee Rhizome. Its name refers to the concept of an unconscious body and is classified as one of the psychosomatic practices. It consists in improving the extra-daily body technique through the concurrent activation of body and mind. The extra-daily body techniques aim at inFormation, i.e. performing communication functions while simultaneously forming a body, making it artificial/artistic, but also credible [Barba 2007: 33].

New Dance

Bazan's next piece, *Lang*, combined the martial arts: Tang Lang with butoh. It is a performance that bears no trace of acting, entering into a role or presenting choreography. This is an experiment that consists in transferring real experiences. In *Lang*, there are no characters or performers; there is an experimental body that undergoes metamorphoses. It combines human and animal features, decidedly relinquishing anthropocentrism. The artist makes very slow and precise movements, he does so solemnly, with concentration. All the muscles are tight all the time, without the moment of relaxation. On the one hand, it resembles meditation; on the other hand, it is similar to a fight or attack. In the background, the sounds of nature can be heard invoking water which is the symbol of variability and transformation, and has cleansing and sacralising powers.

Light and colour entail metaphorical meaning. The red colour in which the dancer is surrounded refers to the Tang Lang philosophy. "The master of this technique, Atsubo Liu Tien, used to say: » The red colour symbolises dying of vital energies, which allows for their re-use to create a new vital channel of activity of our heart...«" [http://teatrmaat.pl date of access: 05.05.2018].

The swift hand movements, in contrast to the hieratic position of the entire body, are inspired by martial arts and are supposed to provoke, immobilise and defeat an opponent. However, the performance is free of any external antagonist the victory over whom would free a new energy. All the actions are aimed at the exploration of interior, introspection, which results in finding the Other within oneself. In such a way, the artist undergoes partial destruction whose objective is to free up a new vital force.

With *Lang*, Bazan distinguished himself from among other dancers: "The body of most contemporary dancers has abandoned soul as an embarrassing or non-existent ballast. In

Bazan's dance, struggle that goes beyond corporality, and thus tries to unveil the 'soul' – albeit presented in a highly physical, blunt manner – seems to be the essence of the work. Pain provokes necessity to look inside the body and to view it not only as a machine" [Kornaś 2013: 317-324].

Thanks to this show, Bazan strongly highlighted his presence on the Polish dance scene. His *Lang* was considered one of the best shows and was included into a programme of the first edition of Polska Platforma Tańca (Polish Dance Platform) (2008) whose purpose is to present the most interesting productions of the domestic artists. In the dance critics' ranking in 2008, Bazan was named the "choreographer of the year" (in the opinion of Jadwiga Majewska and Julia Hoczyk), the "dancer of 2008" (Jadwiga Majewska, Anna Królica), and his choreography – the "solo performance of 2008" (Jadwiga Majewska, Julia Hoczyk).

Fatigue

At times, Bazan is compared to Jan Fabre. Similarly as the Belgian artist, he tends to make fatigue his theme, together with experiencing naked being, relegating himself to his own physicality or endless effort based on repetitions [Klimczyk 2010: 135]. Exhausting choreographies that strive to discover one's physicality, the 'border-line body' are characteristic for MAAT productions. However – in contrast to Fabre – Bazan also pays attention to psyche. This is visible in *Station de Corps*, the piece created in 2012. It starts with a solo part that consists of the long sequences of rapid and precise gestures, incredibly exhausting ones. He subsequently moves on to talk about feelings that accompany the performance: "Arms stretched and tight for a long time – this means tingling, pain and relief, controlling tremor of muscles ... a slap in the face is the worst because there are no bones there. ... It is impossible to perform some movements for a long time as the body will collapse. The pain can be surpassed but not too far" [Kornaś 2013: 324].

The pain which he inflicts upon his body is an attempt to transfer real feelings, an authentic experience on stage. Bazan frequently speaks of the issue related to finalising work on choreographies, which is accompanied by the sense of fear and powerlessness towards a situation that is being created on stage. It kills the possibility of real, authentic 'living', since it is the essence of a long work process that cannot be authentically translated into a communication situation between an artist and a spectator.

Summary

Lublin hosts two contemporary dance companies: Lubelski Teatr Tańca and Teatr MAAT Projekt. The first one represents an approach which makes reference to the dance theatre techniques. They are based on experiences of the founders of the current, i.e. Marta Graham, Pina Baush, and others. In the artistic work of such dance companies, a team spirit is an important factor. They try to prepare new productions on a regular basis, thus coming close to the system of work employed by standard repertory theatres. Teatr MAAT, on the other hand, is an ensemble of artists centred around one person who experiment with various currents, frequently not specific to theatre, such as meditation techniques or martial arts. Further, they often cooperate with other institutions, preparing choreographies for their needs.

The artistic activity of the group shows the variety of interests and influences on the creative output of the Polish contemporary dance groups. Focusing the artistic attention on the physical development is specific for the ensembles of such type. They dedicate much time to

exercises that increase the awareness of a body and expand the spectrum of movements. Basic workout that enhances the body's motility and stamina is significant in the creation of physically demanding shows. Inspirations with martial arts are important as they help develop a dancer's physical aptitudes and reinforce these parts of a dancer's body that are neglected for instance in the classical, ballet technique. They also increase choreography-related imagination, enriching it with new movement experiences.

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