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# Choreographed Balances: New Synergies between Circus and Dance

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: International creator trained at the Institut del Teatre in Barcelona and at the PARTS school in Brussels. He began his career as a professional dancer in the distinguished company ROSAS, directed by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. He has also danced under the direction of the reputed creators Robert Wilson, Tom Jansen and Josse de Pauw. He is currently the director of the dance company ROPA / Roberto Olivan Performing Arts. In 2004 he founded the festival Deltebre Dansa, which he directs. In 2016, he launched the Obrador Espai de Creació, a centre for contemporary artistic creation specialised in arts of movement, of which he is also the artistic director.

English translation, Neil CHARLTON.

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## Abstract

In a time when the hybridisation of forms is no longer an experiment but the latent hallmark of social reflection on our daily life, there is a fragmentation between certain types of audience according to the degrees of depth that we wish to perceive in our understanding of our environment. In the early 2000s, and very particularly in Brussels, the focus of the Flemish phenomenon, a magnetic rapprochement between the dance sector and contemporary circus was palpable, just after – chronologically speaking – the interdisciplinary coming together between music, theatre (in all its genres) and dance, which had already greatly exploited the innovative creative possibilities of their fusion. It was time to take another step to satisfy the perpetual appetite of the contemporary avant-garde. We might think that, on this occasion, the inherent curiosity and the need for the eternal search for identity in the DNA of the performing arts inevitably brought the branches of dance and circus, so close and yet so distanced, face to face.

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In 2006, the *École Supérieure des Arts du Cirque (ESAC)* in Brussels invited me to create the final show by students who graduated that year. In that period, I was already leading dance workshops in other circus schools such as *CNAC (Châlons-en-Champagne, France)*, the *Scuola di Circo FLIC (Turin, Italy)* and *DOCH (Stockholm, Sweden)*.

That research-based show was called *Landmark*, with the aim of examining the different circus disciplines and the particularities and complexities of the specific technical aspects. In a later stage, I would create a show called *Homeland* outside the framework of the schools to integrate it into the professional circuit. This wonderful opportunity led me to suggest a collaboration with the *Performing Arts Research and Training Studios (PARTS)*, a dance school also based in Brussels, founded and directed by the choreographer Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, where I was a first-year student in 1996 and where, at the very moment of the invitation from ESAC, I had already created four hybrid shows with my own company (understanding hybrid show as the mixing of artistic disciplines). It was already part of my personal hallmark as a choreographer.

Getting these two benchmark international institutions to work together and navigate this relatively unspoilt formula, as I saw it, was necessary and exciting, and, very particularly, enabled me to explore the kinetic poetry of dance with the bold and virtuous poetry of contemporary circus. It should be pointed out, surprisingly, that there were some isolated reactions of scepticism and disbelief from some people within the artistic sector in relation to this proposal and also from the regular audience. Needless to say, this relation between dance and circus was not yet formalised, and not yet likely to be quickly accepted. And it is precisely here where one of the most interesting and valuable aspects of creative progress lies: to provoke frictions between the established and the insurgent, and light a possible flame from the sparks that emerge from it.

Curiously, also at that time some reputed contemporary choreographers began to welcome circus artists into their dance companies as a response to the need for a new vocabulary. These creative concerns led to responses with a kind of renewed spirit that brought about an extension of the physical and dramaturgical possibilities of the grassroots stage material (a starting point from which certain sequences of complex movement were developed). Circus also provided a sense of collectivism, and not only when creating and performing, but also when setting up and dismantling infrastructures, travelling, coexisting, and carrying out the entire performance process. A group entity in all its dimensions.

Moreover, dance contributed subtlety and fluidity to the movement, rapidity in the resolution and duration of choreographic sequences and transitions, depth of abstract concepts, and more dynamic perspectives to the very creative universe of circus, through which an explosively inspiring crossover began in earnest.

A new door opened and, with it, a whole range of performance options and possibilities that enriched both disciplines. But, as I said, not everybody was in agreement with the result or with this heterogeneous and eclectic approach. Some occasional conservative resistance could be sensed from those who felt that leaving the established parameters and patterns that made up the traditional circus spirit was a minor sacrilege, although its corresponding contemporaneity had been established.

The years have gone by and we cannot hold onto a floating stick in the current of a river without eventually being in a different place from before. Reflecting society dictates new vocabularies that people want and need to understand and where they feel more identified despite this resistance of wishing to maintain a traditional, familiar and established language.

Here we must consider the digital integration of understanding the new world into our daily life, not only in the practical field of use but in thought. Digitalisation of life, which is sometimes excessively invasive, and certain contents from public media and high levels of consumption, have contributed to distorting and causing some confusion and, controversially but also fortunately, have built fascinating intangible bridges between the concepts of art and entertainment.

This inevitable thin line between these two concepts can be seen mainly among the youngest artists. At present, their most immediate references emerge out of the devices they have at hand. This shift in paradigm has blurred the continuity of the long path covered that still forms part of current formal artistic education. Undoubtedly, there is a generational leap that differs among the learning methodologies, commitment, attitude, expectations and goals to be achieved.

Here we could begin a long intense debate on the training criterion, because the performing arts schools have a key role in mentoring future artists. It is paramount to understand that everything learnt and that trains a person does not only fall to schools and universities specialised in the subject. Today, there are not so many alternative venues in which the performative exploration can allow the absolutely necessary trial and error within the

creative process. The regulation and legal rules of the official education centres hinder the individual's personal space as a breeding ground of curiosity and exploration. In addition, the digital intrusion I mentioned before has established a new paradigm of the natural temporal process that is unquestionably necessary in any creative act. The immediacy that takes hold in all fields does not aid creativity. In the end, alternative spaces had more or less repercussion within the official scene. They were temples of pure desire to create and share without any kind of imposition between what was and was not correct. Trial and error in its purest form.

In many cases, the approach of the current formal education system is questionable, however firm and logical its guidelines may seem. The pressure to which the solidity of critical thinking is subject is often a breach, depending from where we take the reference, because current global patterns have changed. Nothing is as it used to be.

Here a compelling and urgent need emerges to understand these new realities to fully explore them. We must analyse and challenge the guidelines inherited, which might unconsciously be one's own, and open up to an exploration of new forms of expression that are in keeping with the most current reality. The emotions may be the same, similar or very similar, but the forms of expression and content have undoubtedly mutated. Necessarily.

This wonderful complexity of constant change also opens up to the possibility of being surprised by the new sensitivities loaded with grassroots information different from what had hitherto been known.

Moreover, this direct flow of information and natural evolution of the arts has synchronised the magnetic curiosity between dance and circus, which has expanded the performance possibilities. Aspects such as science, technology, the social movements around new identities, and the non-conformist flight from the hypocritical stereotype of the obsolete sectoral context solidify new starting points that are profoundly necessary. At present, I myself find it hard to differentiate the concepts of circus and dance. I prefer to use broader terms such as *spectacle* and *movement*. In English the concept of mover is broadly used to speak of a dancer or a circus artist. The differences have become wonderfully blurred.

An interesting and, even, profoundly curious note for those who may have the opportunity would be to look at the dynamics and activity of a performer during a creative process. It is very exciting to identify within their daily life which things call their attention, how they react, how they recycle them, even what they do when they amuse themselves between the work breaks. These people have final responsibility for what we will see on stage beyond the artistic direction or the concept of the piece. These people in particular will be those we will analyse with our soul and our intellect like a blank open book. Therefore, it is a very valuable indication when discussing the training of future performers to analyse this filter of personal genuine emotions and thoughts that cross the minds and hearts of those on stage. Every performer is a messenger-driver who, at the same time, becomes the determining factor from which the final user, the audience, will feel and experience sensorial and/or intellectual emotions.

By carrying out this exercise, we can better understand the thinking and motivation that leads the person behind the artist to dedicate themselves to the stage, possibly creating far more empathy than we can imagine. Perhaps we will better understand why we have this need to see shows. In fact, this is the start of a guided tour to the basement and attic of the human being, going through all stages. From the individual to the group.

I also dare say, and from a very personal point of view, that those who move through life diagonally are those who have more vision and criterion in terms of the creative entity. The creative unsettling non-conformist mind is of course the one that makes more noise, the one that upsets the applecart in matching up existing patterns. But it is also the bravest, or most unconscious, mind, depending on how we see it, when exploring new dimensions. These explorers of society are absolutely necessary in order to advance in collective thinking. Monitoring and observing these creative processes is, in my view, paramount and primordial. This is why this journey into the core of the current sensitivity beyond inherited aesthetics no longer needs to identify the limits of each discipline. Rather the contrary, these disciplines become tools aimed at the performers who return in a kind of liquid form of hybridisation that invites us, almost obligatorily, to modify the perspective towards a more suitable understanding of reality.

We must maintain this transfer to the artists, the bold, the explorers of society, who delve into unknown spots to take us by the hand to the place discovered, if they have discovered one. We must understand the spaces of training and creation for these creatures of curiosity. We must protect their wild nature and let them go with the confidence that the search for universal emotional uncertainty deserves. If we want to continue advancing. If we are ready for the occasionally disturbing social metamorphosis.

We must bring circus closer to people in a more visceral way, in less condescending contexts, and give them the tools to complete the circle and become part of the experience.

All the other aspects of the stage beyond the presence of the artist are also, of course, primordial. The way circus props are understood achieves a similar level in terms of the creative objective. The understanding and conviction of this communion between object and person reinforce the concept of “movement” beyond the fragmentation of artistic disciplines, freeing and refocusing the direct link between imagination and its settlement on the performance action.

Simply performing a movement will never mean understanding dance, just as demonstrating virtuosity does not completely define the essence of circus. These subtleties that we can see in the creative commitment are driven by a noble spirit and respond to ethical, aesthetic and artistic values that define the person who lives behind the artist. Because the saturation characteristic of daily life has led us to develop these filtering mechanisms that make us simplify not only the *mise-en-scène* but also to be more specific in what the artist wants to express. Far from the determining political and administrative pressure, from the recovery of the essence of traditional spaces and obsolete specialities, from the trends in vogue, the use of animals

or state-of-the-art technology, lies the authentic and sincere intention that gives meaning to the most current circus scene. The simpler the better.

In my case, I usually respond to the personal intuition that has always guided me when making important decisions. For many years, I assimilated and digested all that frenetic and intravenous activity that the pure essences of each discipline I was discovering pumped out. Irremediably, from my perspective as a dancer, an unconditional lover of dance, in which movement has always been the focus.

At some key moment I tried to settle and consolidate this whole convergence of trends in an unknown terrain. I wanted to physically consolidate it in a familiar terrain in my past history and in a place where it could grow more naturally and with fewer structural restrictions. This is how what would later be the Festival Deltebre Dansa was born, in the region of Les Terres de l'Ebre in the municipality of Deltebre, where there was and still is no kind of theatre infrastructure of any kind, and still is not. The training activities of the festival responded to the real interest, distanced at that time, in what was established in the official schools. This made me understand that the following step in stage innovation lay in the genuine attraction of what was considered part of the identity of the moment. Although it was not in the formal education curriculum.

In this sector, history is constructed more rapidly than we think. What has been discovered, demonstrated and identified is likely to be immediately obsolete at an overwhelming speed. Reaching a general audience today involves a greater challenge because of access to the mass information that comes to us digitally. Captivating a hyperstimulated mind rich in more or less profound knowledge of the subject means hitting the target in a visceral way. This means that the current creative mind does not have it easy, but will be highly relevant if it is capable of deciphering contemporary emotions and thoughts. It is precisely what we, as a constantly insatiable audience expect.

In conclusion, I believe it is important to create from the most primitive organicity of gestural theatre, from the genuine strength and energy of circus, from the dance of the most profound emotions, to build oneself more solidly upon the naked raw reality: the personal reality of the performers, re-sewn according to the need of each production, but also the reality shared with the audience, who, somehow, increasingly ask to participate, and in very diverse and creative ways.

Despite the formalism and formality of any kind of creation, albeit with extreme control and precision, we must create with real emotions to respond to the profound social void. This emotional relation that artists seek to establish with the audience is an exercise in confidence for the human group. In fact, the task of performing is an exercise in confidence, a pact of commitment between peers, and they also point out that it is an open-hearted endeavour.

It is the craft and trade against the snobbish artistic sophistication and the pseudo-mystical aura of some creations, that of the direct presentation against the masking representation, that of the confidence in the group that still gives us a meaning against the mistrust of much postmodern autism, that

of the truth of the body against the hypocrisy of the mind. It is not magic: it is the reality of illusion. The creative imagination of the gaze that arranges and injects meaning into the work is paramount.

Circus and dance are a real space, the territory of truth. They are a field of gifted truth. They are also the permanent assertion of the craft, the habitat of the subtle craft of details, of body contact and physical and mental nomadism (permanent dislocation contributes to the creativity of an unspoilt gaze).

Circus is a village square and point of shared celebration. It is the field of better coexistence of differences. It is the independent republic par excellence, where we can be true to ourselves and fulfil our real potential.

Dance helps to seek the truth of the body, to recover real details, to establish new relations of trust between the performers and to change perspective.

Together, circus and dance enlarge the angles of vision and the changes of points of view to position themselves in a lateral, circular, peripheral gaze which – just like from underneath the big top – always points to a shared centre. In this case, expressivity above any form of empty exhibitionism. Risk. Trust. Perhaps it is about avoiding the hypocrisy of the theatre event, its most evident play of masks, to draw truth as a weapon loaded with future, that is, with intentions.

Any production needs the backbone of a dramaturgy that targets and commits to providing meaning and not only to eliciting feeling, although emotivity is the starting point for creation and contact with the audience.

I consider that the skills of the circus artist are a “dream of liberation of the body” for the dancer, and I also believe that dance can help loosen up the musculature and certain attitudes of people. The spectacle of circus shows a point of virtuosity that is of course necessary to comply with the content of its essence, and contemporary dance, in its turn, has made it an article of faith, harmonically combining virtuosity with expressivity, as naked as you wish or is possible.

Any production reaches deep within if it is created sincerely. We seek humility, we seek the logical, healthy and natural sense of those that create from their humble and open self, who offer it with the spontaneity of the energy of wishing to live-create without the limits imposed by the ego or hypocrisy.

The show as a craft, a real space of construction; the show as a place where things really happen, experienced with a pact of absolute trust between its members, recognised as peers. The interdependence is emotional and physical. Letting things happen and knowing which ones are worthwhile. This is the greatest and bravest of ambitions. To teach us the grandeur of the little life, the most authentic strength of the common life, however stressed we are, however hysterical it makes us, however frightening it is, however many things we wish for and however long it takes us to find and recognise them. The strength that moves us continues beyond each of us.

We need to offer the audience the natural truths, productions with a social meaning, and languages of personal movement. We need productions in which difference reaches us honestly without apparent effort, or clichés and sensationalisms, because the artist feels it as their own and flows with just enough intensity.

We need rhythm, dosed time, the perfect measure of sensations and changes of register, because they take us with surprise from humour to pain, from play to reflection. We need to see productions that consider the show as a whole and clearly move us with tenderness, suffering or solitude.

We need productions to make us feel that time flies, to draw a tear from our eyes, to laugh and be bewildered. We also need dance to shake our consciousness, to make easy aesthetics finally give way to the truth of the stage. And those who do not wish to think, be moved or imagine, turn on the TV. We are convinced that creation can be addressed to the community, not its ego or matter.

An artistic attitude that goes beyond the idea of work. A gesture of bravery, of construction, of recognition. A gesture that ennobles them as creators and as people, who know who they are, where they come from and what they want. Since dance and contemporary circus have become a space for aesthetic reflection, which has incorporated social narrative into the foreground, it is normal that these arts return to society, positioning themselves at its level, interacting one on one. It is not possible to build more towers of ivory and exclusivity, art must mix with life to be alive. And genius must transform into humanity.

