

Coffee and Choreography – Considering collaboration in conversation

Sveinbjörg Þórhallsdóttir & Steinunn Ketilsdóttir

ABSTRACT

In a casual conversation over a cup of coffee, Icelandic choreographers Steinunn Ketilsdóttir and Sveinbjörg Þórhallsdóttir look back and contemplate their choreographic collaborations, *Belinda and Goddess* (2011), *Ride* (2014) and *#PRIVATEPUSSY* (2015). In a discussion and debate, they attempt to define their collaboration, reminiscing and reflecting on their processes. They look back and discuss the challenges they faced and the development of ideas and working methods that took place throughout their time working together.

SAMANTEKT

Í spjalli yfir kaffibolla líta danshöfundarnir Steinunn Ketilsdóttir og Sveinbjörg Þórhallsdóttir yfir farinn veg og hugleiða samstarf sitt við gerð dansverkanna, *Belinda og Gyða* (2011), *Reið* (2014) og *#PRIVATEPUSSY* (2015). Í samtali á léttum nótum rýna þær í þróun hugmynda og aðferða við gerð verkanna og gera tilraun til að greina samvinnuna og þær áskoranir sem urðu á vegi þeirra.

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SK – OK, Sveinbjörg, how do you want to do this? As always, we have a deadline and are running out of time. It is so typical for us to find ourselves in a position like this once again. Finding time out of our busy schedules to sit down together is always a challenge. But what do you think is the most challenging aspect of a collaboration?

SP – I think that, in all collaborations, one needs to put ego aside and stay open. I find the collaboration and the creative process the most exciting parts of projects. When like-minded people come together and share an interest in a subject, creativity can multiply, and something magical can happen, but at the same time, it can be fragile and intense. To find this balance is interesting and challenging. For me, our collaboration has always been very dynamic and effortless. We knew each other and had worked together before and already developed trust, which I think helped us.

SK – But, Sveinbjörg, how did it all start? Looking back, I remember you approaching me asking if I wanted to collaborate. I do not think I would have ever dared to approach you and ask. The next thing I remember, we were sitting in your kitchen, drinking coffee, exchanging ideas and cooking up a proposal to apply for funding. But I cannot remember what the original concept was: horses, women, mares, creatures, physicality, strength? Were we dealing with the horse and the mare right away? Or did we start by talking about women and the female body?

SP – Yes, OK? I remember us sitting in our new space, the Reykjavík Dance Atelier above the Kex hostel, wondering about a theme or a starting point. Our main excitement and motivation at the time were to find a

way to work together. We spoke about women's issues and gender equality because of the book you brought with you, *Listin að vinna bylli karlmannna* (Keating W.S., 1950), a handbook written in the 1950s about the art of winning the favour of men. We laughed a lot and had a great time going through those old tips. I also remember us talking about nature and how the weather in Iceland has influenced us as artists, and that is when I shared with you my interest in horses, their beauty and behaviour. And voilà! To make a long story short, the theme was decided: women and mares. Later, it became clear without discussing it directly that women's rights were a subject we both shared an interest in, and it became a stronger emphasis in our collaboration.

SK – Wow, it is so funny that I remember it all quite differently. I do not remember that exact moment at Kex as vividly as you. But we had many very long, interesting and heated discussions about our first project, *Belinda and Goddess*, as we mirrored each other's poses, drinking coffee and deliberating deeply about the concept and our ideas. And, yes, the book, *THE BOOK*. I think that I found it when I was helping my mother clean a book cabinet. For some reason, I decided to hold onto it and bring it to one of our meetings. It is an amazing book and such a great document of the reality that women faced at that time. Some of the things in the book are stereotypical ideas about gender roles and traits that we are still trying to figure out today. But the way I remember us starting to talk about horses was when we were writing a grant proposal. In the application, we expressed that we intended to collaborate, and we used the



Icelandic phrase *að leiða besta sína saman*, which directly translates as ‘leading your horses together’. I always thought that the meaning of the phrase was people putting their strength together to work towards improvement. Later I looked up the actual meaning and translation and found out that it means: ‘to debate, quarrel or fight’, and the ‘phrase normally refers to a strong disagreement’. The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies suggests on its website that horse fighting was popular in the olden days; men would bring their stallions together to fight and watch the spectacle for fun. I think it is interesting to reflect on this definition now all these years later, especially in regards to collaboration. I do not know about you, but my experience has been that sometimes disagreement, heated debates and even fights can fuel creativity and bring new ideas to the surface. I guess we never really have fights in our collaboration, but we can say that, in our case, we are bringing our forces together: two bodies, two individuals, two passionate and emotional females, both very opinionated and political in our

Ride (2014). Snædís Lilja Ingadóttir (left) and Halla Þórðardóttir (right). Photo: Steve Lorenz.

actions who share a deep interest in feminist matters. I do not know; I am just going on and on. What do you think defines our collaboration?

SP – I do not know. There is no one answer, I guess. Our collaboration is very effortless. We respect each other, and as I mentioned earlier, there is trust. We are passionate about the same subjects and agree on transferring them through the medium of dance and performance in our works. I think that we also share a similar work ethic, and we often call ourselves *vinnukonur* (workers), super-active women—sometimes too active, I guess. We work fast, and we finish things. There is a drive that characterises our collaboration. We are passionate and ambitious, and we have a motivating influence on each other. We also have fun, and we laugh a lot. That is important, very important! This kind of collaboration allows for freedom to express different opinions and creates opportunities for the work to go in different directions.

Of course, we do not agree on everything. That is normal; we are very different, but your comments never offend me. Disagreeing and debating are part of the game. I like the dialogue and the debate in decision-making. In general, I more enjoy working in collective work in a democratic way, sharing ideas with others. I believe that working collaboratively can have more creative results, although that does not mean that this is always the case. In my article 'Can creativity multiply within a collective and devised theatre work?' (Thorhallsdottir, 2008), I argue that creativity can multiply within a collective and art-making situation if certain conditions are part of the picture. A highly motivated state is achieved when people are engaged in an activity where the challenges match their skill levels (Sternberg 1999, 301). Creativity can multiply if chemistry, knowledge, a common vision and passion exist within a group. Our voices and our ideas are found through the voices of and the interactions with one another (Thorhallsdottir 2008).

SK – I have to agree with you when you say that our collaboration is mainly defined by trust and respect for each other. The creative process for *Belinda and Goddess* was one of the most fun processes I have ever gone through. As you described earlier, it was fun and quick, almost like a one-night stand—such a crazy time. There was a lot of drama around, too. And gossip, lots of gossip that found its way into the process, and we started researching over-exaggerated dramas on women, for example, Almódovar movies. We kind of went with every crazy idea that came into our minds. We wanted to sing, so we did. We wanted to gossip, so we spoke gibberish. We somehow managed to end up way beyond our comfort zones. Before we knew it, we were on stage in spandex unitards and big hair, on all fours, desperately trying to remember ridiculously complex counts, petit allegro, conversations in made up Spanish, and trying to stay in tune singing the blues. Thinking back, I do not understand what we were thinking, but I think the humour and lack of

time took over. We were just having too much fun with all of it, and we had a deadline, like always. But, in spite of all the fun and humour, we were serious and talking about issues we were very passionate about.

SP – Yes, I'm sweating just thinking about it! But, on a more serious note and back to business, Steinunn, do you think that, during our creation of *Belinda and Goddess*, a certain exploration of the concept was transferred into methodology?

SK – To start with, I think we are both pretty obsessed with the body and physicality. Because we were researching the horse, this extremely strong and sturdy creature, we became heavily interested in the fleshiness and physicality both of the mare and of the woman. The pure animality of a creature, human or animal, became an essential part of our research. I think that, by focusing so heavily on the physicality and materiality of the horse and hence the woman, we somehow managed to display affect and emotions.

SP – I agree. In the simplicity of focusing on the physicality of the creature and its characteristics, we, as female performers, managed to transform and express the complexity of the woman and the ambiguity of the subject; simply placing two female bodies on stage is already a statement on its own. The humour and the sexuality were also important parts of this work that somehow came about without any effort. I had so much fun creating *Belinda and Goddess*. I also remember we were both going through a stressful period in our lives.

SK – Yes, oh, my God, it was such a stressful time. You were starting a new job, and I was starting a new love affair—long days and long nights. All this physicality in *Belinda and Goddess* became a much heavier focus in our next project, *Ride*. We took these ideas and contemplations to a different level and became more serious. We started thinking about how man manipulates nature with form and about the objectification of bodies, of both women and horses. We were looking at the Icelandic horse and how breeding

and training can be a form of violence and comparing that to the pressure that is put on women's physical appearance. I think that, because of these interests of ours, the essence of the choreography in *Ride* became form and formation, which suited the concept of the manipulation of bodies and the idea of taming or domesticating either a woman or a horse.

SP – How do you think we managed to develop the concept of *Belinda and Goddess* into the group work of *Ride*?

SK – To be honest, it was more challenging than I thought it would be. I think that the biggest challenge was to take something that we created for ourselves and transfer it to a group of nine women. How do you make something that worked for two people work for a group? The actual execution was challenging, more difficult than I thought it would be. It was tricky to stick with a concept without getting stuck. I wonder if the concept and the old ideas actually weighed us down. It was a really good foundation to build on, though, but how do you develop an old idea into something new? It sounds simple. Sometimes, I wonder if the drive to do more and develop can actually pull you back and become an obstacle, but at the end of the day, I think we learned much from *Ride* that we took with us into our next project, *#PRIVATEPUSSY*, a few months later. Sveinbjörg, what do you think was different in our approach in *#PRIVATEPUSSY*?

SP – I think we managed to keep the concept in *#PRIVATEPUSSY* clear but open. Anything could happen, and the work could take any direction, which was very liberating in comparison to *Ride*, which was focused on developing a predetermined concept. We learned from the previous works how important it is for us to create an atmosphere with everyone present throughout the whole process. The composer, for example, was with us in the studio the whole time, researching and improvising with the dancers, which was crucial. The subject, women in pop culture was also appealing to our group of young dancers, who all

knew each other really well and were used to working together. We were researching contemporary feminist affairs and artists to whom they easily related, such as Beyoncé, Pussy Riot, Emma Watson, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and more. During the making of *#PRIVATEPUSSY*, the Free the Nipple movement regained steam in Iceland after a teen was taunted for posting a photo of her breasts to promote a Free the Nipple day at her school. That triggered a viral surge of women posting photos of themselves to protest the sexualisation of women's bodies (Dicker, 2015). This movement influenced our dancers and was reflected in improvisations in the studio and in fruitful conversations. They were passionate about the subject, and that shaped the whole process. Working with this group of political, opinionated, strong young women was vivid and fun. I was pleased with the outcome and would love to develop it further, but then again, I do not know about developing a concept again. Are we not always doing that in one way or another anyway? But back to business, Steinunn. How would you describe the main subject in our work?

SK – Yes, oh, my God, what are we always trying to say? It is complicated, or maybe it is very simple. I do not know. Is it something about value? The value of a person? The value of a human or an animal? The value of life? I think it is also about seeing and looking further past the surface, past the glitter and the gold. The value of both the physical and the intangible. I think it is also about the core of collaboration, sticking together and supporting each other. It is about unity, the joining of forces, the joining of ideas, the joining of bodies to create some kind of a change.

SP – Yes, it is complex. It all started to make sense to me when I was studying yoga in Bali in January, and my mentor Emily Kuser taught me an important word: *kula*. *Kula* is a Sanskrit word, and her explanation of it is: a community of like-hearted people dedicated to waking up. For me, it is all about *kula*. But, Steinunn, again, back to business: tell me, now that we have

decided to collaborate again on a very exciting project with many other interesting artists, are you excited?

SK— Oh, my God, yes, I am so excited. Here we go again! We have to develop our ideas and concepts and find the time to do so. When do we start? When is the deadline? Can we have coffee?

To be continued...

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BIOGRAPHIES

Steinunn Ketilsdóttir is an Icelandic choreographer. She received a BSc in business administration from Reykjavík University in 2002 and a BA in dance from Hunter College in NY in 2005. Steinunn completed her MA in Performance Studies at Tisch School of the Arts NYU in 2016 where she was awarded upon graduation.

Steinunn works independently and collaboratively and has been nominated and awarded for her own works and collaborations. She is an active participant in the independent dance scene in Iceland and is currently working on researching expectations in performance through her choreographic projects.

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Sveinbjörg Þórhallsdóttir graduated in 1995 from Alvin Ailey A.D.C. in NY. In 2008 she received an MA in choreography from Fontys University in Holland. She has worked in dance and performance productions in major theatres in Reykjavík and been nominated and awarded for her works.

In 2004 Sveinbjörg co-founded Panic Productions, which emphasised on collaboration with artists with diverse competences. She co-founded Reykjavík Dance Festival and the Association of Dance House that runs the Reykjavík Dance Atelier. Sveinbjörg is a lector and programme director of contemporary dance at the Department of Performing Arts at IAA. She has collaborated with Steinunn Ketilsdóttir since 2011.

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