

The Choreographer's View

Birgitte Bauer-Nielsen

ABSTRACT

In 2016, I published a book in Danish 'Koreografens blik – En performativ koreografisk metode til skabelse af en interkulturel forestilling'. This article is a short presentation of this book. The book qualifies the choreographer's view, that is, it examines and articulates the choreographic process from idea to product. Because of my dual role as choreographer and scholar, my analysis takes practice-based research and artistic research as its points of departure. On the basis of courtship dances, I have created an intercultural dance performance entitled 'Sommerfuglen' ('The Butterfly'). The performers are dancers and musicians from Tanzania, Vietnam and Denmark. Courtship dances have a ritual status in all three cultures. I analyse the translocal process of the development of an intercultural dance performance in which local Tanzanian courtship dance features are analysed. The focal point of the translocal analysis are artistic and social practices that support the dance performance. What changes occur from translocal practice and/or dialogue? How can they be used in a global dialogue? The theories and methods used to analyse performative choreographic practice have their origins in performative anthropology, performance studies and theories of performativity.

Keywords: Intercultural, artistic research, performative product, dance and choreography.

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Performative choreographic practice and strategy as a method in the creation of an intercultural performance

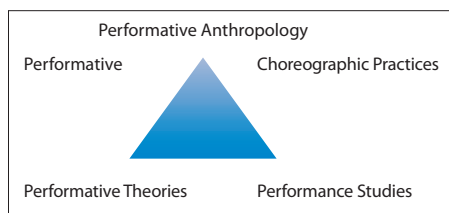
I will examine and articulate part of the choreographic process from the idea to the product in the intercultural dance performance 'The Butterfly' using courtship dances. I am the choreographer. I employ practice-based research as well as artistic research in arts (Borgdorff 2006) as my points of departure.

I examine not the choreographic process as a product in itself, but the choreographic process as a step within a more encompassing research process. I play the dual role of choreographer and scholar. The research project situates itself between traditional academic and choreographic expertise as far as practice, method and theory are concerned. The person to conduct the research has to be an artist and a researcher at the same time because artistic research examines both the artistic process and its results. For the artist-researcher, scientific theory and the articulation of knowledge must go hand in hand with artistic experience in a critical and reflexive process.

Hypothesis: *Performative choreographic practice will promote articulation of, and give added visibility to, artistic and social practice and can therefore be expected to qualify and renew choreography as a discipline.*

Artistic research is one way of going beyond the **mystique** of the creative process and points towards democratic processes that are at work in the creation of this dance piece. At the same time, an articulation of the process introduces a pedagogic element.

This examination offered various challenges regarding the choice of both method and theory. The theories and methods I ended up using to analyse performative choreographic practice have their origins in performative anthropology, performance studies and theories of performativity. I summarise the methodological and theoretical model I have developed as follows:



From **performative anthropology**, I have used fieldwork—participation/observation, interviews and video.

From **performance studies**, I have used the artistic process from idea to product—Richard Schechner's notions of proto-p (before the performance), performance and the aftermath.

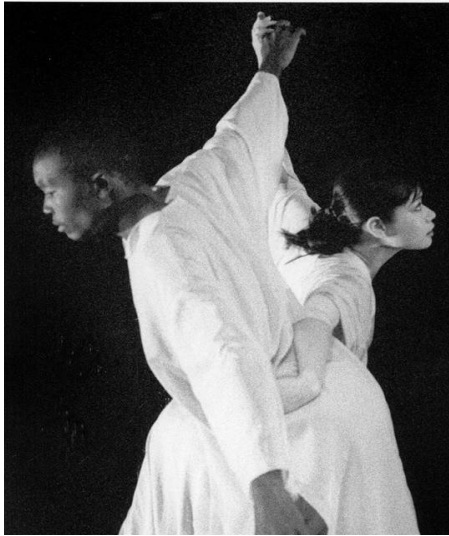
From **the theory of performativity**, I have adopted a focus on the performative as a practice for individual and social action.

In practice, the three theories overlap and merge. My project was an experiment in exploring how this could work. This discussion draws on the performative turn in the arts, and the focus is on performance as a process of 'doing' instead of something that *is* 'being'. In this paper, I understand 'process' to mean the artistic, individual and social changes that took place while the performance was

in the process of being created as well as during and after the performance.

Performative choreographic practice for the intercultural performance 'The Butterfly'

The **concept** for the performance was developed



Aloyce and Le in 'The Butterfly'

from courtship dances. These dances are understood as a particular culture's ideal image of the behaviour shown by a man and a woman who have the desire to be together. However, it does not represent the only emotions that a man and woman can feel towards one another or the only feelings they can express within that culture. It merely means that culture presents an ideal image. The dances can uncover feelings that we all have, either by seeing or participating in a dance originating from another culture, and anyone, regardless of his or her cultural background and nationality, can feel it.

Based on my fieldwork on different courtship dances from Tanzania, the *sindimba* was chosen. The wedding waltz from Denmark was chosen, and

a traditional courtship dance from Vietnam was chosen.

The Danish **wedding waltz** originates from August Bournonville's ballet 'A Folk Tale', which premiered March 20, 1854. It appears in the third act, picture 4 (score 20). Dancing the wedding waltz are Hilde and Junker Ove; the music is by Niels W. Gade. One-hundred sixty-two years after Bournonville created 'A Folk Tale', the wedding waltz is still being danced at weddings in a version that still retains traces of Bournonville's choreography. The music is still by Niels W. Gade.

The courtship *sindimba* is shown as a ritual, traditional and performance dance in Tanzania by the Makonde ethnic group. I conducted a comparative analysis of the dances. The *sindimba* is a very expressive dance. It requires the use of the hips, the shaking of the shoulders and various isolations of the torso. It is a group dance and illustrates the attraction that a man and a woman have towards each other.

The courtship dance from Vietnam is performed by different ethnic groups from the northern part of the country. The dance illustrates how the man and woman meet by engaging in long-distance courtship; they have a dialogue with the gods because it is seen as destiny, and the arranged marriage represents the decision as to whether they will meet. The dance has very elegant movements, using beautiful finger and wrist movements as well as meditative torso and leg movements. We can observe these movements from Thai Chi. The concept is not only developed according to the exchange of courtship dances but also follows the development that can be discerned when a man and woman fall in love as well as during encounters with other cultures.

As Finn Thorbjørn Hansen (Hansen 2001, 54-61; 83-94) describes, four different elements play a role in the individual when he or she encounters a different culture. These four elements are as follows:

- The anticipation that is experienced when one is about to embark on a journey;
- Excitement at the encounter with something exotic, like a tourist would experience it;
- Resignation against the new environment;
- Active participation in the other culture.

These elements are used in the dramaturgy of the dance performance.

‘The Butterfly’ is a dance performance consisting of three acts:

The first **act**: The dancers move like a chrysalis, a metaphor for the meeting between a man and a woman and for the beginning of a process of transformation (a process: as to become butterflies).

The second **act**: The different feelings the man and woman experience are depicted as misunderstanding, shock, grief and anger.

The third **act**: The beginning of a new season is shown by awakening, belief, hope and love whereby the man and woman again try to collaborate by creating a new vocabulary of movements.

Translocal collaboration as an artistic matter

How is performative choreographic practice developed in the translocal collaboration? The complex work situation that emerges within this translocal cultural exchange propels the dancers to develop a dialogue around work forms and matters of collaboration. The points of departure for my study were that the dancers had to be able to speak the same language, had to possess a similar level of education and had to command an artistic language similar to the one employed in modern dance, in addition to mastering their courtship dance from their culture. This meant

that the dancers had a common meeting point. The central subject of study were the exchanges that took place during the process of learning the various courtship dances. A number of elements were chosen to examine this complex collaborative process:

Experience of the different qualities of the movements

- Experience of different uses of the body
- Execution of improvised actions
- Execution of choreographed actions
- Experience of different musical forms
- Experience of the audience
- Experience of different expressions of modern dance

The investigation revealed several dynamics:

Movements: The movement of the hips and their isolation in the polyrhythm of the sindimba gave the Vietnamese dancers new skills and experiences because they had never before used the shaking of the hips. Likewise, the movements in the wedding waltz means that the Tanzanian dancers had a new learning experience because they had never tried the fluent flow of a waltz.

Corporeality and the **body**: The Tanzanian dancers used a flat foot and a curve in the hips, while the Vietnamese had control of their long fingers and wrist. This posed a challenge in performing one another’s courtship dances.

Relations: It was a new experience for the Vietnamese dancers to have direct eye contact and to roll the tongue with an open mouth, as in sindimba. For the dancers from Tanzania, it was new to hold each other’s hand on stage in the way in which it is done in the wedding waltz.

Improvisation: The dancers from Tanzania were not used to developing emotional expressions of grief or anger but were instead used to developing dance sequences from a rhythmical pattern. This presented challenges during the exercises.

Choreography: The Vietnamese dancers knew exactly how many movements they wanted to execute in the courtship dance. Conversely, the dancers from Tanzania were not used to remembering the exact patterns of movement through to the next day. This was also a challenge during the working process.

Musical forms: Counting musical time was also new for the dancers from Tanzania. They were used to a one-person whistle on a flute, which signalled a change in the movement pattern.

Audience reaction: People were shouting and laughing at the Opera in Hanoi, Vietnam, when the dancers from Tanzania moved their hips.

The dancers' **different expressions of modern dance:** In the Vietnamese modern dance, meditative movements are used and are characterised by flow and elegant movements of the fingers and wrist. These movements can be found in Tai Chi and traditional Vietnamese dances. In the Tanzanian modern dance, isolation of different body parts, such as the hips, is employed, partly inspired by traditional dancing in rural districts. The Danish dancers' performance of modern dance has a direct link to the different styles of Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Lester Horton, etc. The Danish dancers were therefore challenged by the traditional forms from Vietnam and Tanzania, including the elegant finger and wrist movements from Vietnam and the isolation of the different body parts from Tanzania. For the Danish dancers, this was not the first time they had worked with these movements, but they had to work a great deal to master them. They were very inspired by the cultural differences in the courtship dances as well as the expressive movements.

Performative choreographic strategies as a social matter

Performative choreographic strategy is used to address inter-human ethical forms of action, an element that

is connected with social practice for the choreographer as well as for the performers and the audience. I will give some examples of the manner in which the ethnic forms constitute part of the performative choreographic practice (the artistic matters), though with an influence on social issues for the participants.

What kinds of responses can the silent language employed in the ritualisations of a performative character elicit in a human being? I am thinking especially of courtship dances here.

Maureen (Tanzania) says: I experience a feeling of being in love, of happiness, when I dance the waltz.

This example shows that aesthetic ritualisation can alter the consciousness of the dancers as well as that of the audience by means of a translocal process, a process made apparent to the individual by means of non-verbal communication.

I will address **interpretative strategies**, here regarded as the competences that the dancers have and develop during their translocal collaboration (Götrick 2006: 76). This translocal collaboration gave them the opportunity to develop each other's interpretative strategies. It turned out that the process of learning and creating was very sensitive because the dancers had to open up and tell each other about the circumstances that meant a lot to them so that they could collaborate. Very often, the question was: why do you do this? The inter-human relations were involved in showing each one's weak and strong sides and meant that the dancers were very aware of each other. Their strategies in the translocal process offered them tools to translate cultural codes, which manifested themselves artistically as well as socially. An example was **being a woman and a man**.

Phuong is gay but kept his sexuality secret because homosexuality is taboo in Vietnam.

However, as time went by and he realised that the Danish dancers were also homosexual, he slowly started to speak about it for the first time. Through his collaboration with the dancers, Phuong's attitude changed, making him more sure of himself after he started to talk about the subject. This means that intercultural collaboration can have social consequences when sexual relationships are danced, visualised and discussed within the context of embodiment and corporeality.

Intercultural performance in a hypercomplex society

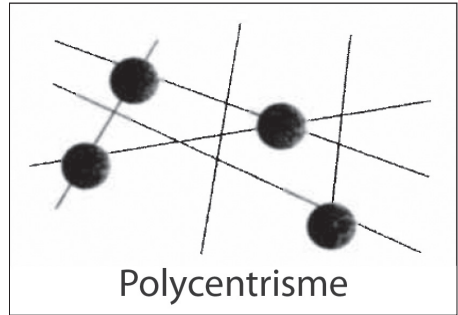
In the global society, new forms of social systems are being developed, which can be defined as 'the hypercomplex society'.



Dancers Phuong and Maureen at rehearsal.

An important characteristic of the hypercomplex society is that the individual observes many social systems and acts in relation to them.

In the hypercomplex society, polycentrism is the rule, which means that society is regarded as a social system in which it is important to communicate. The complexity of the communicative situation constitutes a challenge, and managing this complexity can become a goal in its own right. In the hypercomplex society, communities are flexible.



They are often created in little time and last only for very short periods of time. Within this framework, the dancers investigated community through action/movements and via dialogue. This is to say that, as a method, performative choreographic practices and strategies offer a framework for the creation of communities and inter-human meetings in a global dialogue.

Within the framework of the performance, the dancers become a new cultural unit; by investigating a community, a new hybrid is created within society. Local and translocal performative practices and strategies can generate new knowledge. Translocal collaboration within the context of artistic and social practice creates a new hybrid within the hypercomplex society. This means that the translocal encounter can result in transformation. The intercultural performance 'The Butterfly' is an example of this very phenomenon. The performative choreographic strategy employed reveals, among other things, that the participants experience this meeting of cultures as transformative.

Final comments

My intention was to articulate and communicate the process of creating 'The Butterfly' so that the intercultural work could be made accessible to others. The element of collaboration changed the dancers' ways of being together, both artistically and socially speaking. Bodily experience and knowledge were also leading elements in the analysis. These aspects of

the process contained elements of artistic and social practice. Rituals, here courtship dances, were used in order to develop a concept, to rehearse and to create exchanges. These elements are made with artistic forms from other cultures, which initiate new artistic and social processes.

Taking the devising process as the main tool in creating the performance enabled the development of artistic and social practice during the course of local and translocal interaction. Articulating and highlighting processes gave insight into the complex work situation that is inherent to the creation of an intercultural performance. This means that the use of performative chorographic strategies in cultural meetings by means of an inter-human exchange, based on respect and equality in artistic and social practice, has been successful, at least in so far as it enabled the development of new global dialogical forms.

The analysis indicates that the development of intercultural space—a performance—contributes to the creation of a frame and articulates a dialogue for a community: a translocal temporal space. This means that frames are created during the course of the process. In other words, the frame changes with the contemporary community it defines. As a method, choreographic practice and strategy helps to create the framework of a community that becomes an inter-human meeting in a global dialogue.

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BIOGRAPHY

Birgitte Bauer-Nilsen, Ph.D., Associate Professor in Dance in the Department of Music and Dance, the University of Stavanger, Norway, teaches choreography, artistic research, dance anthropology/society and dance analysis. As a choreographer and researcher, her focus is on translocal meeting in dance performances. Her dance ensemble is called Yggdrasil Dance and is situated in Copenhagen. Her latest choreography is 'Siku Aappoq/Melting Ice'—a performative intercultural installation in a meeting between Scandinavian and Greenlandic artists, which was shown in Greenland and Nordic countries. 'Siku Aappoq' is about climate change. Another dance performance is 'Footprint', an intercultural dance performance with dancers and musicians from Denmark and India, showed at

Tivoli Concert Hall in Denmark and on tour in India 2016. 'Footprint' is about Siddhartha's journey to becoming Buddha. In artistic research, Bauer-Nilsen has published a book in Danish 'Koreografens blik – En performativ koreografisk metode til skabelse af en interkulturel forestilling' (2016), and this article is a short presentation of the book. She has participated in different working groups about artistic research. The artistic vision of the Yggdrasil dance ensemble has to do with Nordic mythology. Here, there is a world tree named Yggdrasil, which symbolises the centre of the earth. The many roots of the Yggdrasil symbolise the people of the earth and their different cultures. The different cultures join in the trunk of the tree, and in the branches, new cultures are created.