

An Interview with Choreographer Eleonora Siarava

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Hello, my name is Milica Tančić and I'm a project assistant at the International Theatre Institute, Germany. Today I'm excited to be sitting here at Kunstquartier Bethanien with Eleonora Siarava, who will be working as a residency artist at Studio 2 from September 23rd to 29th, 2024, as part of the cooperation project ITI ♥ MOTION BANK. This project is a cooperation developed and implemented in collaboration with Motion Bank, and its team as part of the program "Kulturerbe Tanz". Part of the project is an artistic residency at STUDIO2, where Eleonora will be conducting open-ended artistic research using Motion Bank's Post Annotator, a video annotation tool. Additionally, this research will contribute to the experimental integration of the Post Annotator into the Media Library for Dance and Theatre, enabling in-video annotation for future users. Today I'm looking forward to learning more about your creative process and your artistic research, Eleonora, thank you for joining me. To begin, could you please introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your work?

First of all, thank you for the invitation. I'm so excited to be here as a resident choreographer. I'm Eleonora Siarava, I'm a Greek choreographer. At the moment, my base is in Greece, but I have been working between Greece and Germany since 2016.

So, the first question would be about your choreographic approach, and the term "expanded choreography" could be used to describe your way of composing the many elements on stage, which are not only dancing bodies, but also concepts and objects. Can you walk us through your creative process, from the concept to performance, and how all these elements then interact?

Very interesting question. That is my approach when I'm creating a piece - it's not only about dancing or moving bodies, but I'm trying to create more like a scenic experience that combines more elements than dancing bodies, which I usually face also as performers. There is a German philosopher, Gernot Böhme, that has introduced the idea of affective atmospheres, and this concept has had a huge impact in my work. So, Gernot Böhme refers to the sense and the experience generated by the interaction of human and non-human elements in space, more abstract entities, and I was fascinated by that and how I could transfer this idea to my creative process. And there is a metaphor that I like to use, that [it] is a kind of fog that expands and covers the space and the audience and the dancers. That is the feeling that I want my performances to have.

In relation again to the expanded choreography, I'm also influenced by the notion of choreographic object by William Forsythe, who uses a system of bodies, things, phenomena, agents, events that are structured in some way. I'm inspired by these approaches and I'm trying to bring them in my own work, following my own approach. That is how I imagine creating a dramaturgy in my work, which is more abstract, more minimalistic, and what would dramaturgy mean in this kind of work. I think it comes from the combination of all these elements that I face as performers.

Your work also encompasses interdisciplinary approaches, and also includes digital technologies. Could you talk about any specific ones that you worked with in your process? Also, what inspired you to start working with digitality in the first place?

Talking about my work in general, I would start from that point. I'm interested in creating enigmatic, multi-layered works. It's not about the concept or a topic. Of course, there is a central idea in each work, in each performance. But, as I said, I want to create a certain atmosphere with multiple layers of meanings and interpretations. For that, I experiment with aesthetic forms, the notion of overlapping temporalities, real and imaginary spaces, perception. In that context, comes digital technology, and I'm using it in order to create hybrid in-between spaces. I used to name it "whispers of technology" because when I use technology, I use it in a way that serves the dramaturgy of the piece. It's not about the medium or the tool per se.

My first big-scale work that I used technology was "The Body and the Other" and it premiered at Tanzhaus NRW in 2020. In that piece, the idea was to approach the coexistence of the physical body, the digital body and the hybrid body. I used video, real-time video recording, projection mapping and motion tracking technologies. Again, a core idea in that piece was **time**. I wanted to break this linear sense of time and create some temporal blendings of past, present and future. What we did was that we recorded the action on stage, the dance, live through a video. Then, through certain digital algorithmic prototypes, there was a projection of the actual dancing in space, but in different timings. So, what the audience would see was the actual performance and then the projection of the performance that happened 15 seconds ago, 30 seconds ago. We set some time parameters, and the actual performance was trying to bring different timings of the performance on stage.

Relating to that performance, I had the impression that the dancers were dancing and had this relation between themselves that were there on stage, and their past selves, but also their future selves. Somehow, at the same time, it seemed like such an intricate structure. I was really curious how it was to choreograph that, because for example, the dancers start moving in physical space and with the recording, doing the same thing. But then they start veering in different directions. It was so entrancing also to see a lot of traces from various timings. I imagine it's quite challenging to put all those elements together.

There was a structure in the movement material, it was structured to a certain extent. Then the dancers were following some scores in order to react with their dancing bodies on the screens. We tried to augment and extend the sense of the body in the three-dimensional world. There was, as I said, this core structure movement material that would give some safety on stage. But then the interaction with the virtual bodies had a fresh sense, because it was happening everything in real time also for them. I think it's also important for that piece to say that the movement language that I said before was based on the idea of the technology of the movement, what are the semantics of the technology of the movement and the body technologies. I tried to bring this idea of technology not just to the technical part, but also what this would mean for embodiment and corporeality and performativity. What was also important is that there was scenography - the screens that were the projection of the video were made out of soft, flexible material. Later on, we used a fan. We wanted these screens to be moving themselves. The idea behind that was that I wanted to create a kind of

autonomous choreographic dramaturgy. Also, the material, the objects that were moving, were part of the choreographic universe in a way that was not pre-described. When you have this air effect from the fan, you cannot really predict how the screens would move and how the projection would be affected by that. What I tried to do was to bring different layers into the work.

In my latest piece, "BLUE BEYOND", again I worked with technology. That piece was presented in the National Theatre of Northern Greece, and last year at the Frankfurt Lab. In this piece, I worked with sound technology. The topic or the theme has to do with non-linear approach of time and representations and narratives about future. Also, it draws from the science fiction novel "Last and First Man: A Story of the Near and Far Future" written in the beginning of the 20th century by Olaf Stapledon. In that piece, I wanted to create a cosmology through audio-digital/soma technologies - that's how I called it. Not audio technology, but digital-soma technology. Again, it was an interactive piece. How we worked with sound technology was that there were various types of microphones capturing sounds of states created by the movement of the dancer (it was a solo work) - text or spoken words by the dancer. All these elements created a dynamic, interactive sound design in a live time based on real-time processing. The microphones created an installation, we had ground and space microphones, that was part of a wider stage design. We worked with amplification processes, recording within recording techniques in real time. We wanted to create a dynamic sound environment made through the interaction with the dancer.

These are two different examples of how I included technology in my work, but with the concern that this really serves the dramaturgy of the piece. It's not about the medium of technology per se.

Would you say that for these two different technologies and two different approaches, also how the bodies relate to them, you developed a different movement vocabulary for each piece? Or do they have a common ground?

No, it was a different creative process in order to develop and shape the movement material. In the first piece, it was this idea of what kind of technology our body brings. We experimented through improvisational tasks with that, and then we gradually structured the movement language. In the second piece, the "BLUE BEYOND", because the theme of the piece had to do with future representations and teleology in some way, we created the movement language through the use of the word "end". We were improvising using the word "end" in random moments and then, by that, we built gradually again the movement material. Also, we used the same element as a scene in the final performance.

You mentioned that you also worked with improvisation and experimentation regarding the creation of movement language. During the development stage of the piece, how much do you experiment with technology in relation to movement as well? How is it to choreograph or set these things and bodies which also exist in digital and physical spaces?

We start with improvisation, as I said, but while we proceed with that, the movement vocabulary is structured. During the creative process, this happens in development. In each phase of the creative process, step by step, I'm inviting technology to come and give another layer on what is happening in

the studio. I'm trying to merge the two. It's not that the piece is choreographed and then technology comes to augment that spectacle. It's more like an organic merging of the two. I think that how technology enters the piece is based on some kind of scores according to what we really want to achieve as a final sense that I have already had in my mind from the beginning. But I'm trying to make it happen in a more organic way.

We'll come back to scores later, but I just want to ask you one last thing about technology. In your experience, how does merging dance and digitality expand or reshape the boundaries and the relationships between the body, the environment and the experience of time?

I think dance and digitality, this combination, create hybrid spaces - that is really clear in my mind. Also, what technology does is that it places the moving body into mixed reality topologies. This, of course, affects the relation between the body, its environment and the sense of time, it's an augmented sense of space and time. Also, what digital technology does is that it changes the performativity of the dancer and also the perception of bodies and the sensorial impact on the performer and the spectator. I think that's how I see the merging of dance and digitality. There are different aspects that are being affected - some of them you can really predict or guide, but also there are more open spaces where there is a hidden potential there just waiting to be revealed.

Also, it's this idea of the two-dimensional digital and the three-dimensional world, this changes both for dancers/performers and audience what is happening on stage. I think that technology opens up further possibilities in terms of dramaturgy, I'm still interested in what can be dramaturgy in such works and I'm still doing research on that, but I think there is another layer on that.

I think with the new technologies which are constantly coming up, that's a never-ending process. Is there anything that you want to try out that you still haven't in this realm of technologies? Or something that you want to explore further?

I think there are so many new things, new tools all the time. To be honest, I'm not fascinated by this project. For me, it's working the other way around. I have an idea and how this idea could be expanded or have another layer, and technology can help me to achieve that. It's not that there is a new tool now I want to try out and experiment with that and then see what can come out of that.

As the research of this approaching residency will be directed towards the video annotation tool and how it might be useful in artistic work and choreographic processes, I want to ask you about scores that you already mentioned and what role they play in shaping the movement and your work? And what challenges or discoveries may arise when you work with score systems?

Score for me is a way to develop and form a core of movement material that aligns to the concept of the performance. It's a way also to structure improvisational work or create imageries or define the use of space for the performance, pathways or positions and stuff like that. A discovery is that a score is dynamic and while you share it with performers, it can become more and more dynamic every time. This has a hidden potential that can be reactivated in new ways every time - that's magical, I think. A

challenge could be that sometimes scores can be abstract, which is again part of this dynamic character.

Then I guess also working with other people and how they interpret the scores also gets really interesting.

Exactly. I think the most important thing is that using scores helps me to discover the movement language for each piece every time in a new way. Because I'm using keywords or key concepts and sometimes scores are based on these ideas. It's a way to develop, shape new movement material for every piece.

I think I want to ask one last question, which might be a far-fetched one. How have your previous works shaped your approach that you would have for this residency? Do you intend to bring anything that you've worked with so far to this residency?

I don't see how I will not bring some of these things. It's video recording - I have used that in the past but in a different way, that's one thing. I'm going to record my time in the studio where I will experiment with some scores around overlapping temporalities and a new idea that I'm working on, which is about liminal spaces, what these transitional spaces could be. It will be a time for me to have a process with the video and me performing in that. Because usually I'm not performing, I collaborate with dancers. This is a time for me in the studio to see myself performing and how I could choreograph myself or see the creative potential in that - that's a challenge for me – usually I'm the outside eye. I've worked a bit already with the Motion Bank system. There were some new things that were revealed to me about how I would use these features of the system in a more creative way. Especially the diagrams and how I could work with this spatiality, the use of space in a different way. I'm excited, I'm looking forward to it.

We are looking forward to it as well. Thank you for sharing your insight and for taking the time to talk about your creative process. We will also record some more stuff during the residency or your experiences, so stay tuned!