

Dance Dramaturgy

By Heike Albrecht

The logo for 'TANZ KONGRESS' is a purple circle with a vertical yellow line passing through its center. The words 'TANZ' and 'KONGRESS' are written in yellow, uppercase, sans-serif font, stacked vertically on either side of the line.

'Choreographic Methods' was one of the seven subjects of the Dance Congress 2013 that were brought to the fore of the debate. It was prompted by current artistic strategies that address the working methods employed in an artistic process and often regard them as just as or even more important than the choreographic work itself. In the context of this shift in attention from the work to the process, dramaturgy as a profession is also increasingly brought to the focus: What characterises the work of a dramaturge in dance? What distinguishes the dramaturge from a mentor or coach? In the following, five events of the Congress dedicated to the theme of dance dramaturgy will be summarised.

I. Show Doctor, or Accomplice from the Start?

The lab 'Show Doctor, or Accomplice from the Start?' was dedicated to discussion approaches and criteria for production dramaturgy in dance. The lab was initiated by Anne Kersting (freelance curator and dramaturge in the independent dance scene, graduate of art history in Bochum and applied theatre studies in Gießen) and developed in collaboration with Amelie Mallmann (freelance dramaturge and theatre pedagogue with experience in municipal theatres, graduate of dramaturgy at the Bayerische Theaterakademie): two different perspectives and approaches to deal with the methods of production dramaturgy.

At the beginning of their exchange, Kersting collected questions and statements from the invited experts (the Belgian dramaturge Guy Cools, the dramaturge at tanzhaus nrw Düsseldorf Henrike Kollmar, the choreographer Martin Nachbar, the dance scholar Constanze Schellow, and Freya Vass-Rhee, dramaturge with the Forsythe Company). This established a set of questions that outlined the professional field of the dramaturge as an alleged all-rounder:

What is expected of a dramaturge – what does he or she produce?

"Dance dramaturgy is able to produce a lot but it needs the dialogue. On his own the dramaturge is a lost figure."

"Dance dramaturgy produces nothing and as a result it can go in any territory – movement, text, music, scenography, ... – it needs to go."

"What does dramaturgy produce? – In a nutshell, though, I'd say (or hope): a more informed performance. However, who is informed and what sort of information is involved will vary according to choreographer, ensemble and individual work."

"Honestly, I am not sure what *dramaturgy produces*. I only know that choreography and dramaturgy go hand in hand when it comes down to researching or producing dance. The two tend to problematize each other's ideas and thoughts in their respective medium. While choreography tests thought in action, dramaturgy puts questions and problems before creative ideas. Thus choreography and dramaturgy are accomplices that challenge each other continuously. Often they are personified in a choreographer and a dramaturge. But you can also find them in just one person or in a whole group of people."

"The dramaturge is not responsible for the quality of a production."

"Dance dramaturgy is a speculative practice between institutions, choreographers and spectators."

"Dance dramaturgy produces the act of re-membering."

"Dramaturgy has to be reactive instead of active."

"Dramaturges are artists."

"The best production is when no dramaturge is needed."

The focus was predominantly on fundamental questions related to the collaboration and dialogue between choreographer and dramaturge, which are influenced by the artistic process and personal experiences.

Martin Nachbar, for example, has been working with the dramaturge Jeroen Peeters for ten years and he describes this collaboration as a close relationship based on both the experiences from their artistic practice and their joint teaching, in which they convey their version of the dialogue between dramaturgy and choreography under the title 'Backtracking'. "You share your practice," says Nachbar, and he relies on the descriptions or surprising questions of Peeters. This trustful process then spreads to the others involved in the work process: "If the material is *right*, everyone feels it. If the dramaturge has a question, everyone knows it." But Nachbar points out that he makes the artistic decisions.

Constanze Schellow is also of the opinion that the decision on bringing the artistic material into a specific form should lie with the artist. In her view, the dramaturge is not an artist. Asked: "You intervene?" Constanze Schellow responded with a counter question: For which artist? In which process? Because intervening depends on many factors: the format, timeframe, time of participation etc. One must first find out what is necessary in order to adequately support the process. What she finds interesting is the difference between the methods of a mentor, an expert, a supervisor or coach and those of a dramaturge. As both a fragile and luxurious situation is how she describes the observation that young artists in training are granted mentor hours and thus learn from the start to involve someone with more experience in the work process.

Henrike Kollmar offers a programme for young choreographers at the tanzhaus nrw, in the frame of which she invites dramaturges to work with each other. Choreographers can apply to work together. But for this offer she chooses the term coaching instead of dramaturgy, since what is mainly at issue in the working relationship is to give stimuli and feedback during the short time available. The tanzhaus nrw offers its support only after considering the constellations and possibilities arising within the artistic project work.

Guy Cools offers artists so-called tools to develop an artistic language and structures. These tools often serve to reflect upon one's own process, to transform it and change the emerging product. He supports choreographers in every respect and tries to criticise the material as little as possible. For Cools, the basis of collaboration is formed by a close personal and/or professional relationship. Asked whether dramaturgy can be taught, he responded with a quote by Marianne van Kerkhoven: "Dramaturgy is this huge backpack with bits of useful and unuseful information." And he referred to the possibility of further conveying researched strategies.

Freya Vass-Rhee also stressed: "Different directors demand different collaborations." Yet not all dramaturges seem to share this view. It came to an argument with a dramaturge who in 2011 addressed Vass-Rhee after a performance and questioned her about her presence at the rehearsals. He criticised her constant presence that made it impossible to perceive the task as an "outside eye" and Vass-Rhee responded: "Outside eye – how far do we mean?"

II. Dance Dramaturgy as a Creative and Somatic Practice

In the workshop 'Dance Dramaturgy as a Creative and Somatic Practice', Guy Cools spoke about his experiences and insights gained as a dance dramaturge. His professional career is closely connected to the Belgian theatre and dance landscape in the 1980s. He began writing on dance as a critic, not to judge, but to learn more: "How are they doing it?" His motivation to deal with dance was therefore to come as close as possible to the creative process. He describes himself as a "physical dramaturge", who would like to spend as much time as possible with the process of rehearsal to listen and find out what dancers are examining in their physical process. If possible, he himself would like to be forgotten: "Very much present in the beginning, I go away in the middle and come back in the end."

He acts as a “sleepy dramaturge”, a silent witness and observer who reminds the artists instead of judging them, who takes no notes but becomes involved as a dialogue partner of the choreographer (not the team) or as a moderator.

Over the years, Cools has developed a workshop model for choreographers, “tools to reflect the creative process”, which he presented in three practical exercises. Here a brief outline of the first exercise that also stands for the others: Based on Yoga Nidra (Sleepy Yoga), a sleep meditation of Yoga aiming at total relaxation with a clear consciousness, he seeks to conceptualise the four elements of Earth, Water, Fire and Air through conscious inhaling and exhaling and to evoke memories of the previous week. The autobiographical material generated in this way is then articulated. According to Cools, the artistic process is mainly about experiencing and then designating intuitive knowledge: “How to find your own articulation?” To support this process, he developed the following schema, among others:

	Air	
	Intuition	
Water		Fire
Perception		Articulation
	Earth	
	Experience	

III. Talks on Dramaturgy: Freya Vass-Rhee, William Forsythe and David Kern

‘Talks on Dramaturgy’ also took place between choreographers and their dramaturges. Freya Vass-Rhee, William Forsythe and the dancer David Kern talked about the dramaturgical ensemble practice of the Forsythe Company. Vass-Rhee would have liked to invite the entire company with a six-hour demonstration to elucidate the work approach of the “ensembles of 18 dramaturges”. For a characteristic feature of the work in the Forsythe Company is a decentralised practice, the permanent emergence and sharing of new forms, ideas or structures stimulated by the different styles, reactions and thoughts of the highly committed company members.

“I have a group of comedians, who can dance,” says Forsythe. They normally laugh 80% of the time about the varied contributions, offers and discussions that to a great degree give rise to the work. The moment he finds interesting is when an idea mingles with the work of the company and undergoes a complete change, when something different is developed from it. “My version of what it is, is maybe not so interesting.” He finds the collective mixing of ideas important. Kern intervenes: “He is the boss. I have to find out how to do what he says, even if I know that he doesn’t want that.” He explains how that is achieved with a quote by Jean-Luc Godard: “Connection has to be distant, but right.”

These are some of the working principles of the company:

To think in a compositional way on all levels.

The process continues on stage. It consists of permanently collecting and transferring material.

Most shows do not have a fixed structure.

The duration is not determined, but one knows what comes next.

“YouTube is very important and the principle of ping pong.”

Not all dramaturgy can be verbalised, it is often felt and not manifested in language.

It is important to be patient with the work.

A show is changed over the years. It is never more important than the performers themselves. It is not a “thing”, it changes like people change, as a part of life.

As Forsythe formulates it: “Our work is not friction-free.”

IV. Talks on Dramaturgy: Reggie Wilson and Susan Manning

Reggie Wilson’s Fist & Heel Performance Group was founded in 1989 and is seated in Brooklyn. His dance style combines spiritual and secular traditions of the African diaspora with postmodern elements, which he calls “post-African/Neo-HooDoo Modern dance”.

Wilson spoke with the dance scholar Susan Manning, who worked for the first time as a dramaturge for his new production ‘(project) Moseses Project’ (premiere in fall 2013), about their collaboration. Both share an ethnographic work approach, according to which Manning describes Wilson’s chore-

ography as “work is talking back to history” and “cultural work to be able to ask questions”. Wilson’s new production examines and questions relationships between leaders and followers and well as the effects of immigration on faith and habits.

After Manning had researched the relationship between black and white choreographers, she came upon Wilson’s work in 2003, which caused her to have doubts about the separation between African and postmodern dance. Wilson mentions that he often feels constrained by the biased attitude of the audience. Especially the work with black dancers frequently provokes a stereotyped view in the audience that obstructs directly relating to the choreography. He is therefore concerned with the question of how this type of reading (or being read) can be changed. Both are concerned with overcoming stereotyped and outdated definition patterns in dance and enabling new interpretations. Manning’s task as a dramaturge lies in research, compiling material, setting up a research website (that additionally contains rehearsal memos for all project participants) and documenting the project, ending with a publication.

V. About Mentoring

Prior to the Congress, Jonathan Burrows decided to change the theme of his contribution and talk about methods of mentoring. He presented two texts ‘About mentoring’ which he and Chrysa Parkinson originally wrote for a symposium in the frame of the ‘What Matters’ festival in London in April 2013. The themes and questions on the current development of mentoring addressed in these texts formed the basis for conversations in smaller groups, whose topics were then summarised for everyone. The aim of the reading and the discussion was foremost to exchange experiences and ideas and to examine and strengthen the position of the mentor vis-à-vis the artists and his role in the inviting institutions or organisations – for Burrows is of the opinion that the boom of mentoring in dance training is predominantly financially motivated: “Does the artist even want a mentor, or am I just a condition of their funding? Younger artists have become used also to a certain degree of attention, part of the new service economy in education.”

It is therefore important not to accept the relationship between mentor and mentee as a matter of course: “How do we make sure that this delicate exchange remains a privilege and never a professional given?”

A basic definition of the mentor is that of an adviser. Parkinson’s text consequently starts with making reference to the origin of the name: In Greek mythology, Mentor is a friend of Ulysses and adviser of his son Telemachus. Mentorship offers a forum in which specific questions can be raised to enable an exchange which, in turn, allows giving advice. It can produce friction and concentration, deceptions or distractions. It was also stressed what a mentor is not: mascot, brand name, trainer, medium, mirror, psychologist. In the best case, the mentor transforms the work by mediating between expectations from the “outside” and the production results, as well as by supporting the search for forms. But what happens if this positive influence leads to a sort of dependency? How can a mentor draw borders to avoid automatically becoming a guarantee factor? What qualifies someone as a mentor? What qualifies an expert to give advice?

Burrows and Parkinson always pose these questions with the intention of enabling an independent artistic development, of determining emerging alliances themselves and not being co-opted or instrumentalised by them.