



Promoting Participation, Bolstering Identification

The Renaissance of Dance Cities

By Gabriele Wittmann

“Is dance the ‘negro’ of the arts?” someone asked at the first Dance Congress 2006 during a panel on postcolonial studies. It was heatedly debated whether such binary concepts merely reproduce and thus re-establish colonial thought instead of seeking to criticise and question them with methods of gender and post-colonial studies. But in 2013, as well, dance – there is no way around it – is still at the bottom end of the hierarchy of artistic and social values. Even though it enlivens the cities – if only it were more visible.

Is dance included in urban development concepts? And if so, how? Under which conditions do choreographers work for municipalities? In its artistic function, dance reflects current themes of society. Yet artists increasingly perform social, pedagogical and therapeutic tasks of the municipalities as well. Does all this reach public awareness? These were the questions raised at the third Dance Congress by politicians and artistic directors in a panel discussion on ‘The Renaissance of Dance Cities’.

From the theatre into the city

Today, the genre of dance accomplishes a lot of social work outside of the permanent venues, something that quickly became clear during the discussion. The deputy ballet director Sabrina Sadowska gave an account from Western Pomerania stating that alongside the now customary school projects, she also offers a summer dance project for children who can’t go on holidays. It is financed by the prevention department of the city. “We have shown the city what we can do,” said Sabrina Sadowska. The Senator of Cultural Affairs in Hamburg, Barbara Kisseler, also sees progress: After all, the years in which culture was the first to be sacrificed are over. Many people have contributed to this. For example, that culture “has gone out of the theatre spaces and into the city.” And: “The theatre directors have become bolder.” And in Hamburg, too, people have noticed that culture has meanwhile become a “cross-sectional task” that has also spread to dance.

At the Theater und Orchester Heidelberg, cooperation with the independent scene has now been established in the view of the director Holger Schultze. Everyone is familiar with dance in Heidelberg. When he asks a colleague whether he has already seen a piece, he waves his hand dismissively: “No – but you hear good things about it.” His conclusion: “If that’s the case, a lot has been achieved.”

Bolstering identification on location

Barbara Kisseler reports that there has been “huge progress” in Hamburg in the past years in breaking down the barriers between the independent and institutional scene. It cost great effort to make it clear to politicians that culture means more than locations such as venues for musicals, the Reeperbahn and the port, as they are advertised by city marketing. Entirely different things are taking place, and it is about the ordinary citizen and about inclusion. “That is much cheaper than any budget for social affairs,” and the governing mayor has now also realised that. “Politicians live in election periods. If it becomes clear to them that with little effort a lot of results can be achieved, then they give their consent.” And: “It must be made clear to them: cuts in spending hurt much longer.”

Hans-Bernhard Nordhoff agrees with her. As the former head of Frankfurt's culture department, he recalls his early days: Twenty years ago, dance was invented as a soft location factor, although it is actually a hard location factor for the creativity it engenders. His demand: Structures must be established for independent choreographers so that they have a place and the same possibilities as at the permanent venues. Like at the Mousonturm in Frankfurt. "Tourists then also notice that the real life in Frankfurt and Hamburg takes place at locations other than those announced in glossy brochures." In any case, it is important to be in the centre of the city so that no long distances have to be travelled, Anna Vita, the ballet director of Theater Würzburg, points out.

Holger Schultze recommends: "It is about identification with the audience on location, and that can only be done on location, only then can enthusiasm be aroused." He was at first unfamiliar with dance himself, but then visited productions in many countries and discovered the richness of this form of art. Dance centres should be established in the individual states to enable production. And where one "can convince the wife of the mayor," because: "Many people are simply not familiar with dance."

Participation does not fall into one's lap

What will be important in the future? Barbara Kisseler recommends, first, to create identifiable spaces that alongside the permanent venues explicitly stand for dance. Second, to become firmly anchored in the city through a network of friends, supporters and the audience. In Hamburg, this works, as the numerous protest letters that upright citizens sent to the governing mayor to prevent cutbacks from affecting ballet have shown. These kinds of networks and alliances will be needed much more in the future. Third, the media should be bolstered: "It would help if the media also reported on the socially stabilising art form of dance," Kisseler pointedly stated, the expertise is currently "negligible". Theatre criticism, for example, is always placed in a social context, dance criticism must finally go along with that.

"What is additionally lacking is the profession of the dance pedagogue who also mediates," opined the Heidelberger theatre director Holger Schultze. Jörg Mannes also wishes for more support in Hannover: "The company additionally takes care of dance-pedagogical work. We are presently experimenting where our limits lie." But is that desirable? "As an artist, one has to prove that one is socially compatible," Kisseler stressed. More cross-financing should also become conceivable for this work, from departments such as that of the schools secretary or the offices for urban planning and social affairs. This task will be difficult, because the expenditures for social welfare and education are constantly increasing. However, says Kisseler, "one cannot demand a knowledge society and increased participation and then expect that to fall into one's lap."

In the end, it is always individual persons who promote, Hans-Bernhard Nordhoff calls to mind. "It is of absolutely no use, if something is printed in a finance plan." Because people implement it – or they do not. Based on his experience in Aachen and Frankfurt, he says that with a distinct profile one has better chances. The one who does it just as good as the others tends to be dropped.

Dance must be included in the statute of the theatre

What has to change? Sabrina Sadowska relates that after assuming her post as ballet director in Greifswald, she first read the statute of the theatre and established that the word "dance" was not included in it. "It would be a first step for the citizens if 'dance' stood in the statute of the theatre in all cities." Holger Schultze would like to turn around the complaints and recognise the "wonderful structures" in Germany: "Someone gives money and what we artists do with it is up to us. These are great structures, maybe they just have to be utilised in a better way." The concept of the "municipal theatre" is currently changing, and more communication would be a benefit.

How can one achieve that city councillors no longer apply prejudices like "dance is not a proper profession" or "they are those who eat nothing"? asks Anna Vita from Würzburg. And Barbara Kisseler responds: "One encounters a lot of stupidity in life. And it is a permanent task to counter

stupidity." It would be important to situate dance "a storey higher". In the case of the initiative 'Kultur macht stark' of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, for example, money was spent that "hardly reached anyone in the cultural sector". Barbara Kisseler finds that annoying. Could the state and federal governments have intervened here? Yes. But: authorities have to practice cooperating much more. "In this discipline, one has to brace oneself for a marathon. Short sprints are to no avail."