

Soothing the Soul of Politicians

Drawing a mind map for Funders of Dance

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A historical "First Hour" was scheduled to work on a 'Handbook for Politicians' on the second day of the Tanzkongress. In the course of a 90 minute discussion, a mind map was constructed, documenting threads that may link two seemingly unrelated key words: "dance" and "politician". The participants of the discussion were well aware that dance is always affected first when a politician has to cut down budgets. As such, it is pertinent to address a politician directly. To locate the discussion called "mind map" closer to the reality of the politician, Arnd Wesemann, journalist and editor of the journal "tanz" who moderated the discussion with guests from the world of politics and dance, took over the role of the "Bauernstadtrat", (council member representing the farmers), mediating with the politician. It works like this: The product the farmers bring to the consumer is a pack of milk. To the politician, the price of milk would have to be realistic, if his voters were to be kept happy. To keep the prices realistic the politician will have to allocate funds to the Farmer's Association. The analogy seemed plausible. Those engaged in dance in delimited spaces (city, state, permanent theatre and independent scene) are the farmers. The final dance performance becomes the product: the carton of milk, available for consumption.

"Sustainability" as a key word

Key words that might show the possible paths linking "dance" to the "politician" appeared on the screen. The initial round of discussion revealed that, when it comes to funding, politicians have their own vocabulary, such as "sustainability" (Nachhaltigkeit), or "Sichtbarkeit", which should make the process and the expenditure "visible". Next, the reasons for misunderstandings between politics and dance were spelled out: The local politician is seldom aware what takes place behind the scenes in the city theater he allocates money to. And even within the theatre, there seems to be little empathy: The administration is often ignorant of the life styles of the dancers, and dancers in turn are often unaware of the members of the chorus, which isolates dancers in a world of their own. Many dancers lead a nomadic life, travel from city to city and cross national borders. Often they are not even able to converse with other colleagues in the theatre, due to language barriers. Only when the production is staged does it occur that a consciousness keeps growing from the outside world, reflecting on what happened over months of rehearsing and years of planning. Finally, the dancer is visible, vulnerable in the hands of the feuilletonist or journalist. A damning review in the media wakes up the sleeping tax payer. And the box office statistics may later convince the politician that the theater is "sustainable" in spite of malicious critique.

Dance does not yet belong to the cultural heritage of Germany, unlike works of Lesing, Goethe, Beethoven, or paintings of the expressionists. In addition, Contemporary Dance, which is a new product in the range of the performing arts, has to face competition with the repertoires of "Sprechtheater" and "Ballet" – genres familiar to the funders in politics or the corporate sector. But the discussion also revealed that, in order to engage with Contemporary Dance, one does not need a bourgeois cultural background. "Emotional openness" is the key to making sense.

Branding an anti-bourgeois performance art

In the 1970s, Contemporary Dance popped up as a medium of protest against modes of expression seen in Classical Ballet and Modern Dance, both which had become part and parcel of bourgeoisie entrainment, like opera and boulevard theatre. And the new form soon appropriated improvised spaces such as the "Fabrik" (factory) and "Werkstatt" (workshop, studio). What channels could be addressed to make the politician sensitive to dance that had such subversive roots? Could dance also be branded through names like Zadek, Ostermaier, Schlingensief, or Forsythe, Malakoff, Cranko?

But is name-branding not short termed, whereas becoming a myth of a city – like Pina Bausch in Wuppertal – is more sustainable? Further problems were brought to mind: Politicians think in figures. How does the money invested return by the sale of tickets? Can the emotional experience that dance is believed to evoke be evaluated in figures? Networking at the "green table", lobbying through umbrella organizations, branding through cultural managers were mentioned. They surely are not alternative channels to all those gathered.

Interweaving Contemporary Dance

From my perspective – coming from Sri Lanka –, farmers producing milk have it easier. The product milk is essential to a consumer, but dance is not. The sudden hike of the price of a loaf of bread in the 1950s toppled the ruling government in Sri Lanka. Pina Bausch's guest performance of her 'Sacre' did not look like ballet to us, way back in the 1970s. All the same, her 'Sacre' was able to convey "something" that I was not able to articulate. After the performance, the audience was silent for a while. In the decades to follow, the bombarding with Contemporary Dance continued. Susanne Linke, Sasha Waltz and Helena Waldmann have also showcased their works, shaking the Sri Lankan audience from the comfort zone of being entertained. Lately, the conservative audience in Colombo was truly shocked with Helena Waldmann's 'Burka Bondage'. The Goethe Institute has now become synonymous with the avant-garde of Contemporary Dance Made in Germany.

Maybe only a happy few of an audience is able to appreciate the "cultural interweaving" in the Indian subcontinent, where collaborations and mentoring between choreographers and dancers blossom to memorable dance productions. The politician in Germany will demand that the collaboration is to be a success. But how can success of such a production then be assessed? During the second session of afternoon tea time talks 'Interweaving Dance Cultures' moderated by Gabriele Brandstetter, a different utopia emerged: When "mediating between two conflicting groups", "risk taking" in a "process that does not promise success" seemed to be important. When the audience was allowed to respond to the discussion, one heard that Contemporary Dance is not only aesthetic but also is political, with a further risk factor of not always reaching the audience. Contemporary Dance breaks away from norms and is subversive. This inherent character of Contemporary Dance may render the politician a bit clueless, when having to decide "who gets in?" and "who stays out?" when it comes to funding.

The discussion 'Mind Map' in turn aimed at a different angle – at proving to the pragmatic politician that dance is an inevitable cultural factor. Towards the end of the ninety minutes of a very invigorating session, the energy seemed to fizz out, stating that dance is a "luxury". A luxury that a city or Federal State or the Federal Republic of Germany should afford, even if the politician may not be able to relate to dance "emotionally", or come to terms with the feeling that radiates from the performer's body. At any rate: The process to entice him or her will have to begin before it is too late.