

The Group of Dancers, an Expressive Element in Contemporary Performance

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Abstract: *Just like an orchestra, where every instrument has its importance, the group of dancers is made up of different individuals who contribute, through their own qualities, to the success of the choreographic moment. The synergy of the group comes from the exploitation of the expressive resources of each of its members, and from their harmonization with the rhythm, expressivity and experimental choreographic accumulations of the other group partners. In the interdependence relationship established within the group, the number of dancers and their choreographic interactions, the stage positioning and shape of the ensemble, rhythm, the usage of unison or canon all represent means of achieving expressivity. The choreographer is in charge of finding means to support and combine the creativity of the dancers, to exploit and harmonize their diverse qualitative, expressive and emotional resources.*

Key-words: *group; dance; expressivity; synergy; creativity; dancers; rhythm*

1. Introduction

„A group of bodies is an instrument as varied and colorful as an orchestra; it offers the composer a material that is as rich for accomplishing the totality of her/his vision”² Doris Humphrey.

This work is inspired by the need to deepen the various work methods for the group of dancers. Working mechanisms are described for the contemporary dance group viewed in the form of a collective creation lab, in which the choreographer supports the creativity of the dancers through a relationship of collaboration and unity.

Contemporary dance is a genre of performance that took off in the middle of the twentieth century, later becoming one of the dominant genres for trained dancers around the world. It originally borrowed features from the classical, modern, and jazz styles, but nowadays it also incorporates elements of non-Western dance cultures, such as African dance, or Japanese Butoh dance, elements of somatic techniques and methods (Bartenieff, Alexander, Feldenkrais, Ideokinesis, Franklin), various postmodern dance techniques (Contact Improvisation, Cunningham Technique, release techniques such as Sullivan’s etc.), and other non-dance body practices such as Pilates, yoga, martial arts, tai-chi and others. Among the basic characteristics of contemporary dance are improvisation, floor work, unpredictable changes in speed, rhythm and direction, different actions performed simultaneously, the use of text, computer technologies, and last but not least, creative freedom.

In contemporary performance, the choreographer is the one who makes the creative decisions, including whether the piece will be abstract or narrative. Usually, the dancers are selected according to their abilities and training. For group choreography moments, the role of the choreographer is to highlight the expressive and qualitative resources of the dancers, to

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² I. Ginot, M. Michel. 2011. *Dansul în secolul XX*. Bucharest: Editura Art, p. 118

challenge them to discover ways to achieve harmonization between them, and to choose the most appropriate movements. The choreographer also supports the relational dynamics of the group, while at the same time facilitating the conveying of the expressive particularities of each performer. The dancers' bodies have the ability to render meanings which depend on the dancer's talent, but also on the artistic experimental accumulations of the spectator, as well as the latter's intellectual and emotional abilities. The choreographer's organization and coordination of the group in time and space contribute to an improvement of the meanings of the dance and to the obtaining of an interesting visual experience.

2. Group Dance

Group creation requires increased attention to certain aspects that influence the outcome of the collaboration, such as: rhythm, number of performers, location of the group in space, design of movements in space, ways of using choreographic material in time and space.



Fig. 1. *Interferences (Dance Gala)*

a. The Rhythm

Numerous evidences shed light to the fact that since ancient times, dance was accompanied by music and that thus, the rhythm was the one that led the movements. The shapes and movements of the dancers are arranged rhythmically, on a sound background or on the contrary in its absence in order to increase spectacularity. In any case, rhythm is an indispensable and powerful element of dance, even if the technique, style, or dramaturgy of the performance are often more appreciated.

By extension, when we talk about rhythm when it comes to dance, we do not only refer to movements that respect a certain harmony or speed of execution, but also to the rhythm of the choreographic creation. No work of art has a constant rhythm, since it contains strong parts (with aesthetic autonomy, whereby it can exist independently, such as, for example, including a detail from a work of plastic arts or an aria from an opera), and weak parts (more broken, meant to introduce a state of silence or introspection for the receiver, so that they may later be subjected to new states of tension).



Fig. 2 *Medeea* (rehearsal *Dance Gala*)

If the dance is not accompanied by music or another rhythmic sound background, a subtle mutual listening is required of the dancers in the group, the rhythm being based, especially on their breathing. When using or being guided by breathing, it is essential for the dancers of the group to acquire the ability to correlate movement and breathing, and to achieve common rhythmic breathing. In fact, as far back as antiquity, there is evidence that breathing exercises performed in various positions were the first physical exercises performed by man. Modern choreographers such as Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham have based their techniques on breathing. In postmodernism, at the Judson Dance Theater³, the breath merged with the movements and sounds. In Butoh contemporary Japanese dance, breathing is violent. Numerous other contemporary performers use breathing as part of their performances.

b. Space

Space is an important partner to the choreographer and dancers. Therefore, taking into account the basic idea of the choreographic moment, the creator together with the dancers of the group can decide together how to use the space. Space modeling is tied to the paths of movements in space, and the distance or space between group members.

Also, the space between two groups on stage can become a living element of choreography. It is preferable that the distance between two groups should not be too great because the public cannot follow both groups in motion. (But there are also choreographers who prefer to use simultaneous actions precisely in order to allow viewers to watch what they want on stage. Among these, we find Pina Bausch, Merce Cunningham, to name but a few.)

³Judson Dance Theatre (1960-1970), a group of plastic artists, musicians and dancers who will make a contribution to the development of the foundations of postmodernism through experimental workshops and performance shows, leaving room for the development of new languages of artistic expression within dance.

The nature of the space between the two groups is highlighted by the content of the movement and the concentration of the dancers, but it can also link the two groups, by creating an expressive void. This placement also exposes patterns in space, which, in the context of the choreographic idea, should be varied as much as possible so that the dance becomes an attractive visual experience for the viewer.

i. The number of dancers and group positioning

In *Dance Composition* (2010), Jacqueline Smith-Autard draws attention to the connotations that the number of dancers can give to the choreographic creation. For example: a trio may suggest a 2 to 1 relationship, or on the contrary, a harmonious relationship, just as an odd number of dancers may suggest a conflict or isolation, but an even number of dancers in a group may suggest symmetry.

Also, the same J. S.- Autard draws attention to another essential aspect of the expressiveness of a group, namely the form in which the group is placed - a crowded mass of dancers or scattered dancers; a square group opposite a group of scattered dancers; a square group opposite a round group; two groups of the same size facing each other; a circle with a dancer in the center; a group in various forms; a group with a single separate dancer; a group linked by physical contact.

Going further, the placement of the group on stage also has its meanings. For example, an outward-facing, non-contact circle between the dancers may suggest a lack of unity, and if the dancers come into contact, it may suggest some unity, while at the same time an external interest; and an inward-facing circle suggests a common interest. But we must not lose sight of the fact that the expressiveness offered by the placement of the group and the number of dancers is not enough to render all of the meanings of the dance, given that the content of the movements completes the needs of a group choreography.

Viewing a moving group confronts us with a significance of the visual design offered by moving bodies. Through the lines and shapes created in space and on the floor, one may create relationships that are contrasting (angular movements in contrast to round, curved movements) or symmetrical to other dancers in space and that offer the viewer a particular visual image.

Choreographies produce images that can be transient in nature, or can turn into moments of pause, which also provide a visual design. When still, the group of dancers offers the spectator the stopped relationship of the dancers. Moreover, stillness (sometimes correlated with silence) can be a communicator of great constructive significances and a force that brings together strong meanings and energies as well as inner monologues. Composer Arvo Pärt⁴ stated in an interview that out of silence “we have to collect some tiny glass beads, which may not even be visible there at first sight. But we have to find them.”⁵ In addition, these significations with their aesthetic, psychological or cognitive functions are transferred to the public, thus creating a close communion between the two entities (sender and receiver).

⁴ Arvo Pärt (n. 1935) is a contemporary Estonian composer, representative of minimalism.

⁵ „Familia Ortodoxă” Magazine, *Acum voi merge acasă și voi plânge...* No.9/ 2017, Bucharest, p. 56



Fig. 3 *Medeea* (rehearsal *Dance Gala*)

c. Time

As far as time is concerned, the unison and the canon come to the aid of the group choreographic construction. Unison is the choreography in which all the dancers perform the same movements at the same time. It may undergo several variations: with complementary movements (when certain parts of the group perform different movements, but at the same time); with contrasting movements (when several of the group's dancers perform contrasting movements at the same time); in the background and foreground (when part of the group has the main role, and the rest of the group has a supporting role, as a background). The group of dancers can also overlap identically on the choreographic material of the soloists, thus acting as their shadows.

Conversely, the canon is a choreography taken over by one or more dancers. In *Dance Composition* (2010), Jacqueline Smith-Autard talks about the canon with identical movements, the canon with complementary movements (question-answer), the canon with contrasting movements (when contrasting movements overlap or the motif is taken in turn), the canon with background and foreground movements (when the background movement accentuates the foreground).

Nonetheless, the group of dancers can also be seen differently than as a multiple entity, as an ensemble, or as a counterweight of the soloist. The movements can be related directly to the group, leaving aside the attention placed on individual bodies.

3. Questions about the practical dimension

The idea of this paper arose after practical experimentation with groups of various students. Thus, the following questions were born:

How can dancers from a heterogeneous group coexist, when its members have different training, different biological rhythms, different individual experiences, different ages, and genders?

How can a collective expressive movement be obtained in such a group?

In what ways can the choreographer / teacher achieve a productive collaboration with the group's dancers?

What are the tools needed to obtain a productive collaboration within the group?

Despite all the internal differences, the impediments (including the limited time), and the various aesthetic directions, our goal (mine and my students') was to work actively together. In the realm of creative freedom, by joining together the performers' abilities, we attempted to build a solid foundation, in which sensory receptivity, concentration, interdependence, energy and common rhythm worked together.

We chose a set of exercises and games (most of which involved improvisation) that would challenge the members of the group to come out of their state of discomfort through interactions that would lead them to personal revelations of what exists within each of them, and we later put all of that into collective actions. The target group consisted of 12 students, who worked together as a lab for two and a half months. The final goal was the creation of three group choreographic moments presented in the Dance Gala broadcast online in April 2021, during the "Spring of Arts" Festival within the Faculty of Arts of the Ovidius University of Constanța.

Objectives pursued:

- Opening dancers up to new forms of movement (experiencing comfort / discomfort in movement);
- acquiring the ability to listen and pay attention to partner bodies;
- development of sensorial perception at group level;
- acquiring a continuous presence in the ongoing action (here and now);
- experiencing group work (as a single body, but keeping their own particularities);
- acquiring the habit of using intuition while working;
- acquiring a common rhythm;
- rapid adaptation to changes of pace;
- synchronization with group partners.

4. Exercises

I. Rhythmic breathing (Geta, Răvdan Huncanu, *Corporalitatea actorului între teorie și practică*, Editura Muzicală, Bucharest, 2019)

The exercise can be performed sitting, standing, or lying on the back:

- With eyes closed, *inhale* through the nose and *exhale* through the mouth for a few minutes, long enough for participants to feel relaxed.

- Deep *breathing in*, retention of air in the lungs (apnea) for a count of 8 in the rhythm of their heartbeat, and very slowly *breathing out*. (Over time, breathing will become rhythmic, and all dancers will synchronize their breathing).

- Breathing in the rhythm of music: *breathe in* for a count of 4 beats of the music, apnea for a count of 4, *breathe out* for a count of 4. Thus, various rhythmic breaths can be used depending on the musical background or the coordinator's suggestions.

II. Letters / Numbers - adapted exercise (Grigore, George, V., *Arta improvizației scenice*, Proxima Publishing House, Bucharest, 2009)

While moving freely through the space, one of the dancers says the vowel *a*. The other colleagues will take random turns to complete the alphabet without two of them saying the same letter at the same time. If they do, the exercise is resumed from the beginning.

- The second stage of the exercise consists of adding movements through space, which should not affect the other stage of the exercise. Numbers can also be used instead of letters.

III. Counting in a circle (Ibid)

Standing in a circle, the dancers move at the same time counting from one to eight in their mind, then turn 180° and continue in the opposite direction, counting from one to seven, then turn again to count from one to six, and so on until they count from one to one.

- In the second stage of the exercise, after taking the first eight steps, before turning around, the dancers clap their hands once and they will add a preestablished gesture on each one of the next turns.

IV. Rhythmic exercise with three tennis balls (exercise taken from the stage movement workshops for actors)

The dancers are seated in a circle, facing inwards. Three tennis balls will be used gradually in the exercise. The first ball is in the left hand of the first dancer, from where it is passed to their right hand and then to the left hand of the colleague on their right, who will do the same actions with the ball, for a beat (a quarter note) for each movement. When the ball passes through a full circle (it passes to all participants), the second ball can enter the exercise.

- The second ball is thrown in a high arc by one of the dancers for two beats (one half note). After setting the flow with the two balls, the third ball is introduced.

- The third ball will be rolled for four beats (one full note) with the foot to another dancer who is at an optimal distance. The difficulty of the exercise lies not only in the fluidity of the actions, but also in maintaining a constant rhythm of the group.

V. Accumulation Nation - adapted exercise (Reeve, Justine, „*Dance Improvisations*”, Editura Human Kinetics, Illinois, 2011)

- The dancers are arranged in a circle, facing inwards. One of them is asked to perform two or three movements. Each dancer will copy the movements, in turn, until the first dancer is reached again. This is when discussions can be held about the use of the rhythm, form, and force of those movements by those who have taken over the movement.

- Another dancer performs two or three movements that they will pass on to a dancer in the circle, who this time will copy the movements, but will also add two or three more of their own. Thus, each dancer will add their own movements, and the choreographic material will first become a phrase, and then a succession of phrases.

- Once accustomed to this way of work, one can deepen the creation of these phrases by paying attention to the logical sequence of movements and by tracking impulses (for example, if before there was a balanced movement, then the next movement needs to be a fall).

- The choreographic material thus obtained can be manipulated through various choreographic devices, which can be imposed or chosen and can take place by canon, unison, contact, or journey in order to obtain a choreographic sequence.

VI. Statues and speed (Ibid)

- The dancers are sitting in a circle. They are asked to walk inside the circle, one after the other, in order to create a corporal shape. Each of them actually creates a new statue that completes the gradually forming picture. This step can be repeated by adding requirements related to the use of different levels, finding spaces to fill, contact with another subject or the floor, and the manner in which the shape may be interesting to the public. The theme around which the picture is built can be imposed or chosen by the subjects.

- The dancers can be organized in groups of four or five, in which each of them represents a number from 1 to 4 or 5. They form statues again, but this time the coordinator calls the numbers to enter the circle in random order, thus keeping the dancers' attention active.



Fig. 4. The exercise: *Statues and speed*

- After creating a group picture, they come out of their position when their number is called, then re-evaluate and quickly find a new form to complete the group picture before the next number is called.

- In order for the dancers to have a faster reaction speed, the coordinator shouts the numbers in any order and with various time differences between them.

- In the last stage of the exercise, the group is left to decide when to change the form without any numbers being called out, so that the picture continues to evolve. The dancers are advised to find different ways of entering and exiting the forms, and to maintain fluid movements that give the impression of dancing.

VII. Completion

This is a paired exercise. One of the dancers performs a movement phrase, to which the other responds spontaneously, completing and contrasting, moving through the created spaces, pushing, pulling, jumping, getting up and performing any other movements that can show the permanent relationship with the partner.

VIII. Resonating (Pallant, Cheryl, „*Contact Improvisation: an introduction to a vitalizing dance form*”, Editura McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, North Carolina, 2006)

The exercise is performed with the help of a partner. As both dancers move, one of them imagines that each of the partner's movements is accompanied by sounds. Depending on what the dancer "hears" (growling, buzzing, snoring, moaning, chirping, meowing, barking etc.),

what they feel resonating within from the perspective of tone and rhythm, they use it to provoke a gesture or a quality of movement within them.

- The dancer uses what resonates within to travel through space, while maintaining contact with their partner.

- They locate the vibration of sounds in a certain area of the body. This allows the length or width of sounds to influence their stretches, rolls, twists, sprints, falls, and jumps.

IX. Lane Work - adapted exercise (Bogard, A. și Landau, T., „*The Viewpoints book*”, Editura Theatre Communications Group, New York, 2005)

Between five and seven dancers sit in a parallel line, at an equal distance from each other. The space in front of each dancer is a lane in which each of them will move back and forth, but only inside it. To begin, their attention must be focused on the spatial connection (their lane), on the tempo and duration of the movements.

- The next step is the kinetic response. The movements of each dancer answer to the movement of another colleague from another lane. This requires less focusing on one's own movements, but an active listening to what is happening around.

X. The Relays - adapted exercise (Ibid)

The dancers are divided into two teams (A, B) of four dancers each. Each team is positioned facing point 1 and has the space of a lane that stretches in front of them. The first dancer of each team is number 1, the second person is number 2, and so on. Each team works on their choreographic material in their own lane, without having any connection with the other subjects.

- The dancers with number 1 will perform two choreographic movements, after which they will go to their right and sit in the back of their team's line; then the number 2 dancers will repeat the movements of number 1 and add their own movements. The exercise will continue in the same way for the next dancers.

- When everyone has finished adding the first movements, the dancers with number 2 will be in front of the lane and will add further movements and so on.

- Four of the dancers of one of the teams (team A or B) will sit in a line facing point 1, where they will perform the entire series of movements.

XI. Improvisation exercise

- Set a theme. The coordinator offers a Beginning and an End of a choreography. Each dancer participates with one or more movements to create the Middle choreography together.

- The group adds the vocalization in unison of the rhythm of their breaths to the already conceived choreography.

XII. Improvisation exercise II

- Dancers are offered non-musical rhythms (the sound of wind, waves, fire, the sound of a typewriter, etc.) that they can use as a guide in a group improvisation.

XIII. Development of sensoriality

The dancers (their number will be decided depending on the space) establish on paper the routes on which they will travel. The difficult part of the exercise is for all of them to travel at the same time, blindfolded, without colliding with each other.

- In a second stage, after they have developed their sensoriality enough, they can try the exercise without pre-setting their routes, but by on-the-spot improvisation.

5. Conclusions

The group - resembling an orchestra - is made up of different bodies that are meant to contribute to the harmonization and success of the entire choreographic moment. Creativity exists in each of the dancers, but the result can only be seen after their imaginative involvement.

Within the work lab that underlies this work there were multiple resources of creative talents within the target group, as well as a variety of choreographic manifestations. The bodies were all interdependent and the energy of each body was dosed so as to support the energy of the whole group and to build a solid inner relationship throughout the work period.

The exercises presented were an ideal way to encourage dancers to be aware of each other and of their potential for interaction. Thus, their awareness of the use of space and time increased and they were able to relate to more than themselves; they developed a common sensoriality, which all led to the establishment of a common flow and rhythm. From the creative contact with the members of the group emerged a collective expression, with the help of which the teacher was able to develop the choreographic composition of the group. In the end, after the time allotted to this collective lab was over, choreographic scores were created where the spatial and temporal models, together with the contrasting dynamics, revealed the creative and synergistic potential of each member of the group.

As to the questions that existed at the beginning of this practical approach, they found answers along the way, and the choreographic evolution in the prepared event further confirmed that a group of heterogeneous dancers are able to achieve a successful collaboration if enough time is allocated to building a relationship between dancers, a common rhythm, and the development of active listening. Thus, the differences between the members of the group can become a force and a real asset, rather than an impediment in obtaining the expressiveness of the group.

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