

On Technique, Performing and Collaborating

Maayan Danoch | Yael Schnell | Jörg Schiebe

MAAYAN DANOCH:

In the context of the 5th Dance Education Biennale on the theme Feedback and Reflection, you held a practical workshop on the relationship between performance and training.

Could you tell me about how the idea for this workshop materialized and its relation to the theme of the 5th Dance Education Biennale?

Yael Schnell:

I was asked to propose a workshop related to Gaga, the movement language developed by the choreographer Ohad Naharin that should offer ways, in which a technical class can become a base for creation. In relation to the theme of this Biennale, I thought that working with a format of being both a performer and an observer alternately, and exchanging observations on what is interesting from these two perspectives, would allow the participants to gain an awareness of how an action someone does is read from the outside. We highlighted the overlap of these two perspectives; things that were interesting for the performer to do and the observer to see. It was important for us to create a safe environment, in which the participants would be able to try out things without being judged or criticised, and learn about their own performative choices from an observer perspective.

Jörg Schiebe:

A significant part of the workshop focused on how to give feedback. We wanted to avoid feedback that relies mainly on taste. Therefore, we encouraged the observers to describe rather than evaluate elements of the performance. I experienced that giving a positive or negative feedback, in the manner of what I like/dislike, often doesn't support the performers to explore further his or her subjects of interest. Also a positive feedback mainly produces pressure on the performer, who might think; what I did was so successful, I better just repeat that. I believe it's more effective to figure out what are the personal motives of the performer through dialogue with alternating observers and varying tasks.

MAAYAN DANOCH:

How did you structure the workshop and work with gaga within the format you described?

Yael Schnell:

The day started with Gaga training. In the second part of the day, we used elements from Gaga, textures of moving as a core material, and added further tasks to work with, i.e. playing with distance, speed, focus, stopping and going, etc. The tasks were held very simple so both, the performer and the observer could realize what impact each performative decision had. By that, they gathered information and tools they could use for the continuative work.

MAAYAN DANOCH:

Do these tasks come more from a theater context?

Jörg Schiebe:

I would say yes, but they are very easy adaptable to different contexts. Even non-dancers or non-actors can join and find their entrance into these tasks because they are so simple. Everyone can go up and down or play with distance between body parts. These tasks at first can come across as boring but they can also be understood as a provocation. They remind you that improvising and dancing is about you; your process, your consciousness, your awareness, your decisions, and not about a certain technique you're trying to fulfill.

MAAYAN DANOCH:

So is this your main intention in this workshop?

Jörg Schiebe:

I believe learning a technique can be an interesting process and enriching experience. But sometimes technique becomes a sacred thing. In the beginning of your career, you might feel that you need to hold on to something concrete so you try to fit into a technique. Later, you see yourself representing a technique or acting in the name of it. It is important to remember that whatever you practice will influence you. A technique should support you but it should not define you. It is important to be aware of that.

— Yael Schnell:
For us, to perform is first of all the awareness that each expression, physical and emotional, has a reading, from the moment you enter the stage to the moment you exit. The more conscious you are about the choices you make and the readings these choices have, the more you are able to create what you want to create. Understanding that you create the performance with your choices and accumulating trust in them are our underlying intentions. Even when I perform a set choreography, when I work with music and counts, I still have a lot of space for decision making and I do make decisions all the time. We want to encourage performers to become aware that they are making a performance interesting and exciting.

MAAYAN DANOCH:
If we return to Gaga, can you describe what practicing this technique gave you beyond the physicality it enhances?

— Yael Schnell:
Gaga provides me a space where I listen, where I look into the way I engage with a task or an image, the way I connect with my movement and feeling of it, with my imagination. This search is guided and becomes defined through instructions. However, each individual owns his or her understanding of it and the ways it manifests in his or her body. I find Gaga encouraging one to discover his or her own expression.

MAAYAN DANOCH:
I noticed that in the Gaga class you move and improvise with the tasks, while giving the verbal instructions. How do you balance both inputs to avoid imitation?

— Yael Schnell:
I build up the vocabulary step by step, through giving precise instructions. For example: 'Let's take one arm, imagine that your wrist is in water. Let your wrist float. Allow it to climb to your elbow and let the elbow float. Let it go to your shoulder, your chest, your other arm... This we call floating.' I also create continuity between classes, in a way that I

start the class with an element we worked on in the previous class. When I guide, I notice when people do not understand what I mean by the instruction. I see if they are able to experience it in the moment or if they are distant from the task. Then I stop and go back, break down the instructions again. Not every moment can be clarified, but I choose every day a focus point to elaborate on. Then they can get closer to finding their own expression and way of engaging with the task.

MAAYAN DANOCH:
Is there anything in your past, something that you trained, that you thought of as an obstacle at a later point in your life?

— Yael Schnell:
I don't look at life like this. When I was growing up, I did volleyball twice a week, I went dancing twice a week. I went to a normal high school and not to an arts high school. Only when I was 17, I felt I would like to dance more. Then I enrolled at Bat Dor, a big dance school in Tel Aviv. I came there at a point that I was excited about dancing. Even though I had less knowledge in dance than the rest of the students, everything was fun to learn and try out. When I came to Bat Sheva, I wasn't busy with whether ballet disturbed me to get Ohad. I simply tried to get Ohad. Whenever I find myself in a new situation, I try to look forward. I don't look backwards. When I came to Berlin, I faced again a new situation. Working in the freelance scene in Berlin was very different than working in a company like Bat Sheva. Of course, I recognize differences but generally I see how past experiences help me. They are who I am now and that will also change. I was definitely in situations where I felt I don't have the tools to follow certain type of work. But I didn't feel like I wanted to throw away the set of tools I had. These moments were also exciting because then I had the chance to learn something new.

— Jörg Schiebe:
To any situation, I come with my expectations, my frames, my images and limitations. I often ask myself: Am I open for certain propositions?

In order to answer that question, one needs to know what he or she is interested in. When you are able to answer that question, you are ready to work together and synchronize with others. A productive working dynamic is a result of a cooperative working structure rather than a hierarchical one, and curious individuals, who are able to articulate and follow their interests, create that.

MAAYAN DANOCH:
How do you deal with lack of openness to a proposition in a class situation?

— Yael Schnell:
I think in this Biennale in all workshops, there were students that felt uninterested in the propositions and they stopped coming. From my point of view, we live one life so don't waste your time. If you are not interested in a proposition and feel there's nothing you can learn or take from it, better don't be there. This correlates with what we teach in class. You make your own decisions.

— Jörg Schiebe:
There is always the probability that conflicts will arise as you can't predict in advance the problems you might be facing throughout the process, even with yourself. Therefore, I think commitment cannot be taken for granted or demanded from each other. It is something you have to rebuild constantly.

From my own experience, I know what it takes to admit that collaboration doesn't work. It is hard but it is also necessary to be courageous and articulate disagreements. Otherwise, ignoring problems and keeping silent open the door for hidden cynicism among colleagues. And as a consequence, one might try to control the others. I believe these issues should also be addressed while teaching. They should be exposed and embraced, be part of the learning process.

MAAYAN DANOCH:
The Biennale hosts various dance education programs of different teaching approaches and even visions of dance. Students from the various institutions

also attended your workshop. How did you work with such a diverse group and what was the result?

— Jörg Schiebe:
While watching the presentations of the different dance schools on the first two days of the Biennale, I became busy with my own background and relationship to movement. Many of the performances demonstrated classical approaches towards dance. It made me question how relevant my experience of dance and movement might be for these students, as I don't have a formal dance education. I studied acting at the University of Arts in Berlin, in which dance and movement took a large part of the curriculum. Back then, I was already passionate about experiencing physical forms of expression. In my career as an actor, I participated in several dance pieces and enjoyed it a lot. As much as I love to get wild on the dance floor, I never saw myself as a dancer as much as my colleagues with dance background would see themselves. I wondered if my different background would become an issue while working. However, from the beginning of the workshop the students were very dedicated to the work. Some were asking if we could strengthen topics they found more interesting or relevant for them. That encouraged us to keep adapting the content of our workshop to the specific needs of the group. We felt rewarded by the opportunity to share individual approaches towards the practical tasks to the extent that the students' diverse backgrounds didn't become an obstacle but, in fact, made the process richer.

— Yael Schnell:
On the first day, we worked in couples and with each task we changed the couples. By the end of that day everybody danced in front of each other and talked with each other. We became a group very fast, without formal ways of introducing each other. We felt that the students listened to one another when talking and improvising together. They became connected and they really went for it. They were very open and they were not scared of arriving into foreign places, even if they might look stupid or someone might laugh at them. We managed all together to create a non-judgmental and free environment, despite the

differences in education and backgrounds. It was very touching for me. The elements and tasks created a common ground, something we all shared. In the last day I felt the students were able to fly with their own imagination, go a step further while working with the elements and tasks. They found the door to endless possibilities becoming available, when one continues reinventing for oneself the rules as she or he improvises. The students said they were able to do so because they observed how others were dealing with the same tasks.

— JÖRG SCHIEBE:

I tried to encourage the students to stay simple and clear with their performative ideas. That was a big challenge for some of them, regardless of the dance education they had before. But then, everybody could experience what's essential for developing an idea; making your decisions understandable for yourself. When I watch someone and feel his or her choices are random or I perceive uncertainties within them, I get quickly distracted. We kept the improvisations rather short in order to prevent an overload of material, to keep them fresh in the memory so we could feedback each other. Supported by this structure, the students could access materials relatively easy and use each other as source of inspiration. I remember that one student got so excited while watching a couple on stage, just standing next to each other, almost not moving for quite a long time that he could not wait to try out something similar in his next improvisation. As the workshop progressed, the students became more and more fascinated by such simple appearances on stage, rather than demonstrating their technical abilities, attempting to impress their colleagues. During the workshop it became evident to me that no technique can teach you to stay excited towards your individual development as a performer. Only you can make that happen. This is the most uncomfortable and the most amazing realization about performing on stage, at least for me. Witness students discovering. That gives me great motivation for teaching.

MAAYAN DANOCH:

How do you feel about and deal with teaching this workshop together?

— YAEL SCHNELL:

Jörg and I have been working together several times in projects, as performers and also as director/choreographer for each other. Thereby, we know each other's qualities, strengths and weaknesses. I felt quite confident to ask Jörg to co-teach the workshop with me, even though we never taught together before. As many of the ideas and tasks we worked with also come from theater, I imagined that having both of our perspectives would be very interesting and could work very well. Jörg and I are very different. We have different timings, different inputs. We say things differently. We work from different places. But we try to give space to one another, to negotiate our differences as we go and find meeting points. I find it beneficial for the students to have these two points of view, as they gain a wider perspective on working with an idea.

— JÖRG SCHIEBE:

Yael was very clear with how she would like to structure the classes and she kept the overview of the group dynamic. My part was more to explore single aspects of the tasks we prepared for the workshop and to develop them in detail. Thereby, our 'oppositional' approaches complemented each other. In fact this cooperation was a matter of real trust.