

Sara Gebran

Uddannelsesansvarlig for koreografi, Statens Scenekunstscole, efter 1. januar 2015, fastansat underviser med særligt ansvar for udvikling af koreografiområdet, Den Danske Scenekunstscole.

Af Karen Vedel og Mette Obling Høeg

Interviewet blev efter Sara Gebrans ønske gennemført på engelsk. Det fandt sted på Institut for Kunst og Kulturvidenskab, Københavns Universitet d. 8.9.2014

A number of changes have taken place in the school since 2012 when Sara Gebran was appointed as responsible for choreography. Some of the changes have been instigated by the leadership of the school others have been introduced by Gebran herself. Her reflections on the nature of these changes also address the dynamics and power relations between the different disciplines in the school.

The first changes at the school when I had started, involved the name changing to Statens Scenekunstscole in connection with a re-organisation of our educations, into among other things more collaborative formats. The process has been hard because the modes of work in dance and choreography comparatively with theatre are radically different. It was difficult to feel integrated when everyone was saying 'theatre'. The next thing was, even though the term 'scenekunst' was increasingly being used, in the practical every day-relations, the hierarchy remained the same.

The education of the directors' student is understood as one of the most important in the school. Therefore the tendency has been that they define very much the projects they are involved in. This is more an observation than a critique, because it is one way of doing theatre, which is ok, though different than in dance and choreography. The school is also in the process of developing different types of theatre, more devised and collaborative. The possibility of

more changes to emerge entails a rethinking of how to create new work.

Gebran has introduced different kinds of collaborative approaches to choreography.

A major approach in the choreography education is to work within collaborative structures, but also to experiment with ways to develop ideas and needs from the students' own individual practices. Still, when working in groups, the education insists on the need to work in collaboration, where the student that initiates the process presents the ideas to their collaborating partners, inviting the group into the making. There are different forms of collaboration, which develop different relations, from rhizomatic processes, where everyone is defining the work together, to other forms of collaboration and possibilities of exchange and sharing of interests and responsibilities. I work with the students to practice some of these forms, so that even if directors or choreographers lead the process, they do it from an open platform together with the performers and the involved artists in such a way that no one is at the service of someone else, rather everyone engages in working together in structures that aim for both independency and at the same time dependency.

The students are encouraged to think about choreography as a field of work that can include other disciplines in transversal relations.

We have an approach to the practice of choreography that does not have to be pre-

defined and pre-conceived. For me it is not necessary to move in a specific space with a specific type of movements in order to call it choreography. In this sense our choreographic practice could be for example the practice of reading, or of moving thoughts, and this is a bit new and difficult to defend in the school, but slowly I think I will get there. The idea is not completely defined by me, it is a movement that happen in the 50s in visual art and in the last 20 years happens in experimental dance all over Europe, but also something I have explored in my own practice, before starting at the school. So this is one of the new approaches I am bringing into the school. Though, it is not about not moving or not dancing, it is about the possibility to move more than the physical body, that movement is in every thing and composition as well. By allowing students from any discipline to join the choreography education, they will also be able to influence the way things will resolve. The medium in which we could practice choreography could be any one, an opera, a theatre play, a book, a tv program – or any other format that one could think would relate to the interests of the artists.

Statens Scenekunstscole uses the concepts 'performance', 'performers' and 'performing arts'. Gebran has asked various people in the field coming from different countries - both teachers and practitioners, if they define their practice as 'performance' or 'performing arts'.

Some people really localize their practice in 'performance' and not 'performing arts'. Performance in the sense that they are doing performances in which it is possible to apply any media from text to body and languages, to images to whatever media they wish to relate to. If the project is a presentation through a dinner, then the dinner is what is called performance. Performance takes place in whatever space where there is a bodily encounter with audiences producing certain relations, place in

a contextual relation, built from certain needs and objectives that could be previously traced or not. Among what produces a performance to me, is to apply own tools in another art field - this is called extradisciplinarity by Brian Holmes, the result might not be localized in this or that genre of scenic art, but in between things, maybe undefined or defined by the many.

When art disciplines cross into each other, moving transversally from one field of art to another, it can produce incredibly different, surprising and interesting works, just by working extra-disciplinary by trying own tools in another field. I think choreography is today upfront in the way it has developed the capacity to use open, shared scores, relation between theories-practice, expanded notions of movement, and building new relations that include all possible disciplines.

According to Gebran, in order to prepare the students for this kind of freedom to work across different disciplines, teaching should engage in the binary relation between theory and practice; not in one direction but in a flux so that practice and theory constantly inform each other.

We need theories of critical thinking in our education, philosophy, gender studies, anthropology and performance studies and to create a reading practice where the borders between theory and art making are blurry. We may use theory as a performance, produce theory from performance, make performance of theories activating its performative potential and all other possibilities. A practice without referential coordinates produces a privatization of public space, the performance site, in which the possibility to relate to others (the spectator) is reduced to pure aesthetics without content. This is where I see the problem of performance producing in Denmark: we borrow content from the issues going on in politics, without being political ourselves in terms of HOW do

we do things. Political art lies in the conditions of the work and in how we include them and develop them into our art practice.

Instead of constantly producing performances, Gebran envisions a process with more continuity moving from smaller projects or exercises and presentations that leads the students towards a final presentation at the end of the two years.

The focus is on content and ideas, but also on relations. What kinds of relations are established, what are the conditions under which these relations are created, how do these conditions shape our work. What kinds of practices might the students develop - of doing/making, of reading, of being in relation to others, of creating and observing. How do we make choices, where do the choices come from...? The focus is also on giving enough time for post presentation, post-reflection, post production, the time that you actually reflect on things and while doing so ongoingly produce unexpected new relations and work. Reflection in the sense of building a practice of reflection, a dissection of one's own thoughts which arises along the way at surprising times, on taking the time to notice how thoughts arise and how they can lead to other thoughts and forms of artistic creation, of building an artistic and active archive, how we could bring forth material that is sometimes hidden during our past practice, of things that were never realized, etc.. Those thoughts, interest, desires, ideas that didn't have the space for appearance in our presentation, either because they were supporting the needs, or have not appeared because we haven't put focus on them, or did not have time to develop them, but they lay there dormant and only need us to have time to look back and reflect on them.

This kind of education requires an institution that is able to update itself all the time, that introduces ways of working with practice and theory, that encourages students to work in

various modes of collaboration, where the relation of hierarchy between students and teachers is less authoritarian and less gender divided, where experimentation and work process is valorised over products.

There must be several MA-programs to meet the needs of students who wish to educate themselves in other less experimental ways. My interest right now is to define one particular Master program in choreography and performance with those students who choose it, who want to try that.

The research dimension is perceived by Gebran as an integrated and continually on-going aspect of the work.

Research is also what I have been talking about here, it is to practice theory and theorize our practice, to learn to pose questions, which may or not be solved. It is the way or the conditions in which we do the artistic works. It is to bring contextual references to our practice, of being attentive all the way, observing what questions arise from the practice, how the work develops and what new conditions of work are in place. It also means to accept the impossibility of knowing what the end would be or to even arrive at any answers or end. This is if we are talking about artistic research, which has nothing to do with scientific research, as this last is about measurement, quantification, goals, and clarity. To me a true artistic research is allowing to develop unknown and maybe even unwanted material - that which looks weird because it is so different from what we know...

I am also interested in the documentation that allows a continuum in our art practices, as the possibility to remediate, from performance to writing, drawing, theory making, more performances, etc., using documentation to practice new ways of knowledge production rather than static archive of performances. Documentation as a tool for documenting and reflecting on our current artistic choreographic

practice, as to increase our awareness of what this is made from, how we do what we do with our artistic resources, knowledge and the tools they require.

Asked about collaborations with institutions and individuals outside Statens Scenekunstscole as well as about the physical spaces needed for the envisioned education, Gebran answers:

In terms of collaborations, I relate to teachers and works in the Arts Academy, more specifically the departments of Sculpture and Media Art, because of the way they approach artistic works, using practices related to theoretical references outside their craft, also because of the performative tendency, which produces other types of related performances.

In terms of spatial facilities, I love studios. I love black boxes and white boxes, although the problem of white box spaces as galleries is the lack of technical support for whatever may be the need of the work. Galleries and museums are not built historically to support performance works coming from scenic arts, therefore they lack the culture for supporting and installing performances. I think this has to do with the false idea that performances are ephemeral, their lives are too short and therefore not worth being preserved.

We also need to find out how to work in 'other' spaces with much less resources, to move outside our comfort zone and to find out what we can do when limitations come from the space, to start the work from the conditions given, as well as the conditions in which people/artists meet. The students in dance and choreography are already trained in adapting to these types of limitations.

Basically I think it is interesting what happens with this joining of institutions [Den Danske Scenekunstscole] and I think it could bring positive changes. Changes produce fear and instability for what is not known. So there is a lot of this going on in this institution [Statens Scenekunstscole].