

An attempt at verbalising and interpreting bodies, movements, words, and images

Springdance Dialogue 2008

by Jochem Naafs

“To speak for others is to first silence those in whose name we speak” (Michel Callon).¹

After a preliminary sightseeing boat trip around the canals of Utrecht for Springdance participants and staff on Sunday, Springdance Dialogue 2008 had a heavy start on Monday. Three days packed with presentations and discussions on a wide variety of subjects from ten in the morning until half past five in the afternoon.

Curator Gabriel Smeets had asked the twelve participants from three different countries to present themselves and their work in terms of the themes of position and context. Smeets' questions challenged them to address the questions and points of reference their work is based on, the position they appropriate for themselves, and the context in which they work. The different ways in which the artists dealt with these questions and their different ways of presenting themselves demonstrated the range of artists that Springdance had invited to participate in this Dialogue.

For this Dialogue, Springdance collaborated with Dance4 from Nottingham (UK) and Centrul National al Dansului - Bucuresti (CNDB) from Bucharest (Romania). Nicky Molloy (Dance4), Mihai Mihalcea (CNDB) and Gabriel Smeets (Springdance) were responsible for selecting the Springdance Dialogue participants. Representing the Netherlands were Pere Faura, Bruno Listopad, Boukje Schweigman and Andrea Bozic. The UK participants were Michael Pinchbeck, Henrietta Hale, Matthias Sperling and Colette Sadler. From Romania Ion Dumitrescu, Mădălina Dan, Florin Flueraş and Maria Baroncea had come over.

This year's Springdance Dialogue was organised differently from earlier editions. In addition to three days of presentations and discussions, two days had been reserved for work sessions. During the second week all Springdance Dialogue participants' performances were shown at Theater Kikker. The first three days were scheduled for presentations. Each participant had an hour and a half to tell the

¹ Callon, Michel. “Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St. Brieux Bay”. *Power, Action and Belief. A New Sociology of Knowledge?* Ed. Law, John. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986. 196-229, p 216.

others about his or her work, sources of inspiration, context and methods, and to discuss them. During these days, professor of theatre studies Maaïke Bleeker (University of Utrecht) and choreographer Ibrahim Quraishi acted as the participants' mentors.

After three days spent inside, we decided on the fourth day to leave the hot dance studio to go Amsterdam, where we would be able to broaden the discussion using the city's architecture and space, and each other. To do so, we visited the rapidly developing North of Amsterdam with its abandoned buildings, its cultural institutions and container houses. We spent the last day back in the dance studio, continuing the discussion using various videos and film clips. After this busy week the participants were looking forward to seeing each other's work.

The dialogue in themes and quotes

By making a selection from the themes and quotes that have come up I will attempt to outline the subjects we discussed during the five days of the Springdance Dialogue. For this report, I have decided to raise those themes that tie in with the performances that were shown during the second week. I will also be quoting some of the participants in this report. I will be linking these quotes to the ideas of other participants in order to give insight into the various participants' work and work processes. This approach will clarify the relationships between the artists, enabling me to go more deeply into the differences and similarities between them.

The here and now of the theatre

One of the most identifying characteristics of live performance is the simultaneous presence of the artist and the spectator in the same space. This will often be one of the reasons why artists choose to create drama, dance, or performance. During Springdance Dialogue 2008 Boukje Schweigman testified to her love of this characteristic of the theatre:

"I love the fact that we, performer and audience, are both bodily present"
(Boukje Schweigman).

Schweigman wants to create a space in her performances where artists and spectators can be together. She seeks to establish contact with her audience in performances such as *Ruim*, *Dreef* and *Dooier* and makes the audience aware of

their presence in *Wervel* and *Benen*. She forces herself to take her audience into consideration during her creative process. Schweigman will think about what the audience will wear, what they will be allowed to do, and the way they will enter the space. The latter has also been a consideration for Michael Pinchbeck, as becomes clear at the start of *The post show party show*; upon entry every spectator is offered a drink.

In this performance, which he developed especially for Springdance, Michael Pinchbeck very clearly plays with the here and now. He mentions his own presence and his father's as actors, as well as the audience's presence. He combines this layer in the performance with an attempt at re-enacting *The Sound of Music* and the post show party of the amateur performance of the same play in which his parents participated. He keeps jumping backwards and forwards in time and place. Pinchbeck deliberately plays with the location and dislocation of the events (in the here-and-now as well as in the there-and-then), clearly making the audience a part of the goings-on. Sometimes the spectators are the audience in the here-and-now, and at other times the audience in the past.

However, it seems that the presence of an audience in the same space and at the same time is not the main factor for every artist, as the following quote from Florin Flueraş proves:

"I'm interested in creating a real-time experience for myself on stage" (Florin Flueraş).

Flueraş' main concern in the theatre is what he is doing himself, it would seem. But his presentation shows that his real-time experience makes him create a particular real-time experience for his audience too. By mainly focusing on himself he wants to bring about a shift in his own attention, to exhibit it, and in doing so, to cause the same shift in his audience. Maria Baroncea, like Flueraş, does not approach dance as a fixed product, but always as a surprise. Unfortunately, the video she presented at Springdance Dialogue did not make her point very clear. The performance *The Map of Thoughts* showed Baroncea in a world of her own. Inside her own head, the movements start in the moment itself, she claimed in the discussion afterwards.

In her performance *Draai*, Boukje Schweigman, too, searches for a 'being in the moment'. *Draai* is based on *Wervel*, but in this new form Schweigman focuses more on improvisation, seeking the accompaniment of Karim Eharryen's live

improvised music on the ud. The question that was raised: why can a performer not be 'in the moment' when following a choreography? A dancer who does this is also present in the here and now. Aside from this, Henrietta Hale points out that improvisations, too, depend on taking decisions. When improvising, a dancer also decides what he/she is going to do beforehand, Hale claims, even if the decision is taken much shorter in advance than in choreography.

Colette Sadler's presentation showed that she, too, is concerned with the boundaries between choreography and improvisation. In her performance *dDumY another myself* Sadler dances with a chair. One of the identifying characteristics of *dDumY another myself* is the alternation between falling and recovering. A fall cannot be written down, it will always be different, Sadler argues. Despite the fact that the fall as a whole is part of the choreography, the interpretation of the fall is an improvisation following on from the interaction between Sadler and the chair. The control of the fall partly lies with the chair. This is why the fall can only be executed over and over again in the here and now; at the precise moment when, aside from the dancer and the chair, the audience is present as well.

The 'here-and-now' is an inevitability in the theatre; however, there are differences in the ways artists deal with it. Some of the participants actively use the presence of the spectators. Others use the opportunity to improvise again and again during a performance. Doing so makes each performance different from another, because of the influence of the audience or because of the different choices the artist makes.

Material: personal and samples

The struggle with the personal, such as Baroncea brings to the fore, can also be seen in the presentations and performances of the other artists. Some of them seize outside material in order to express themselves, such as Matthias Sperling in *Riff*. In this performance he samples pieces from three choreographies and without adding any movements attempts to create a choreography of his own. In this regard he said the following at Springdance Dialogue:

"As soon as I give the material a new context by selecting it and performing it with my body, it changes massively" (Matthias Sperling).

The performance is to be understood as a work that changes from a demonstration into an original piece. Sperling chose this form partly because he did not know how to create a choreography out of improvisation. By seeking a deep understanding of samples of other people's work and dissecting them to the minutest detail he was able to leave his mark upon the work.

In *Still life with man and woman* Andrea Bozic does something similar. The performance is based on four minutes from Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blowup*. Bozic stretches these four minutes out, repeating and mixing the movements. She shows several perspectives on the same event. This allows the spectator to see different things than they would see in the four minutes alone. In addition, she creates, as she puts it herself, a suspended expectation, a yearning in the audience.

In his presentation Pere Faura indicates that to him, there is a distinction between personal, private, and autobiographical. In his graduation performance he combined autobiographical elements, "everything I ever did", with samples from musicals. Faura uses these samples to say something about himself. Where Sperling and Bozic master the samples, the samples in Faura's *This is a picture of a person I don't know* turn the performance into a personal story. This is how he tries to escape nostalgia and memory.

Memory, nostalgia, and the personal also play an important role in Michael Pinchbeck's work. In *The long and winding road* and *Sit with me for a moment and remember* he invites visitors to come sit with him in a car or on a bench, respectively. Then he has a talk with his visitor about things gone by and about the reasons for inviting them to accompany him. In *The post show party show* Pinchbeck returns to the past once more. Pinchbeck combines the here and now with the there and then. During, or rather, just after the post show party of *The Sound of Music* his parents got to know each other better, but also, one of the actors died. Pinchbeck uses these events to create this performance. He says of his work:

"I look for stories that are related to me, but are not about me" (Michael Pinchbeck)

In his performances he does not tell a story about himself or voice his opinion about a subject; he tries to recount what has happened and how he relates to these events.

This seems to apply to many of the participants in Springdance Dialogue. They use material that is connected to them in a certain way without being strictly autobiographical or private. In doing so they try to leave a personal mark on the work and to distinguish themselves from others. The work is new because they have created it.

Authorship and collaboration

This brings me to another interesting dialogue subject. The thing that many of the participants keep trying to make clear is that they are not the only creators. They collaborate with others; they offer their audience the opportunity to invest something personal in the performance or play with the notion of authorship in yet other ways.

In his work Ion Dumitrescu likes to let others pull the strings. He has for example let Florin Flueraş perform in his name, and Manuel Pelmus was once interviewed for Romanian radio in his name. They were given complete freedom to act in Dumitrescu's name. Of course Pelmus was obliged to some extent to give the answers that would fit in with Dumitrescu as a person, but at times he took the liberty of voicing his own opinion. Dumitrescu said the following about handing over his authorship:

“I am in a process of agreeing to anything someone does in my name” (Ion Dumitrescu).

In *The way things might go* he allows his spectators to become actors in and authors of his performance. He has individual spectators describe his naked body in a dark space. When this spectator then proceeds to the next room, it turns out he has been filmed during their description. The spectator himself was watched by others and has actually become a performer in the show. Dumitrescu himself really is no more than a piece of scenery, a doll, a sheet of paper.

Dumitrescu talks of a shared responsibility for the work. He parts with part of the responsibility as it were, giving away his power as he does so. He destabilises his own position of power, challenging the context and conventions of the theatre. Dumitrescu argues that spectators will be more interested if they themselves are performers. His response to the question if this allows spectators to remain themselves is to say that the spectator's acceptance of his manipulation by the artist

is also part of who the spectator is. The spectator can refuse to cooperate, but so far this has not happened in *The way things might go*.

In some of her performances, Boukje Schweigman, too, gives her spectators a great deal of responsibility. In *Ruim* and *Dooier* she expects a certain physical activity from her audience members to help the performance's progress. She does not question her authorship, but wants to stress the simultaneous presence of the artist and the spectator. During *This is a picture of a person I don't know* and *Striptease*, Pere Faura keeps filming one or several spectators and projecting the image, demonstrating the presence of the spectator once again. He stresses the spectator's 'gaze'. The spectator is shown as a viewer to the spectator himself. What is interesting about this is that it shows the act of watching as a part of the creative process. Faura creates a self-awareness in his audience of the spectator as a co-author of the performance.

The ways in which Schweigman, Dumitrescu, Faura and others stress the physical and/or mental activity of the spectator can be seen as ways of appointing the spectator as co-author. The theatre is first and foremost a place where people come together. The artists point this fact out to their spectators. Without the spectator there is no theatre, no performance.

The authorship question is also raised with regard to collaboration. Bruno Listopad struggles with hierarchy in his work and in the way he works. According to his own description his working method is not architectural, but process-driven; he creates while working. Listopad does not set out a course beforehand but works process-based, with others, on a performance. The composer, the set-designer and the actors are co-authors of Listopad's performances. He welcomes friction in the creative process.

"I allow others to destabilise my work" (Bruno Listopad).

Incidentally, he does not claim that this turns the various contributors into a collective. Basically, he will still have the last say, even though he does always stipulate his ideas through negotiation. Listopad strives for disassembly both in his creative process and in his work, thus trying to strip the work of any form of hierarchy. According to Listopad, hierarchy gets in the way of becoming one with the work.

Andrea Bozic also insists that the work she creates is not solely her creation. *Still life with man and woman* and *Ways to multiply yourself* are attempts at arriving at a combined authorship with video artist Julia Willms and others. Through collaboration they arrive at the final form the performances take on when they are shown.

During Springdance Dialogue Maria Baroncea played a film clip of her latest performance *Ode to the artificial*. In this performance the stage is like a blank page where the dancers try to find their own personal context. The stage's measurements are fixed, but what happens within the lines is open. The performance is not a fixed product but it develops there and then. To achieve this, Baroncea gives her dancers a great deal of freedom, which gives the spectator the freedom to make his own connections between the dancers. The main premise is the personal experience of the body. To achieve this, Baroncea has to allow her dancers the opportunity to become co-creators.

In Colette Sadler's creative process, the non-human dancers play an important role. As stated earlier, in *dDumY another myself* Sadler dances with a chair. In *The making of doubt* Sadler works with dolls, pieces of cardboard, and additional body parts. The behaviour of these non-human dancers has a function in the realisation of a choreography. Sadler does not force these actors to make certain movements, but creates an exchange between the human dancers and the non-human ones.

The use of samples has already proved to be an important element in the discussion on authorship. Giving away one's authorship is connected to this. Artists search for ways of appropriating things. Sometimes the best way to do this is by appointing them to others. This can be done by collaborating with other artists, through audience participation, or, like Dumitrescu does, by conferring as much of the responsibility on someone else as possible.

Body and movement

In Colette Sadler's work the realisation of movement follows on from her working with non-human dancers. She herself does not need to be original in her creation of new movements; the originality lies in her choice to work with a chair or a doll. Mădălina Dan also hides behind dolls so to speak. In her performance as well as during her presentation she wears (part of) an animal costume. Even more so than Sadler, she hides her own body.

Dan uses these tactics to discuss irony and sincerity. She uses irony to find sincerity. In the performance *Dedublarea* the dancers' suits are in contrast with the seriousness of their voices that talk about dance on a meta level. A donkey and a toucan discuss the meaning of movement, posture, and gesture in dance. Like Sadler, Dan does not need to think of new movements; she uses irony to be sincere about the power and beauty of dance, and is able to, or rather, must use well-known postures and gestures to do so.

This approach ties in with a remark Pere Faura made during his presentation about *This is a picture of a person I don't know*.

"I'm a choreographer who doesn't know how to create movement" (Pere Faura).

At the time, having just left the Amsterdam School for New Dance Development (SNDO), he was having trouble creating new movements. This made him decide to create a hectic show combining different dance styles with video. In his later works he brought different dance forms into the theatre. In *Striptease* he explored the movements of strip dancing, and in *Do you have a cigarette (and other ways of approaching)* he used the movements of dancing in a club. In both shows he used dance to discuss the spectator. By using popular dance in the theatre and combining it with language and/or video Faura eventually has created a style of his own in his use of the body.

In his latest work, *erva daninha*, Bruno Listopad uses a combination of silence, and stuttering, staggering bodies, movements, and sounds. By deliberately using a variety of representations he tries to blow up the meaning of things, thus generating new meanings. Listopad uses multiplicity, misunderstandings and accidents to seize the moment, to experience the 'real'. He explores the possibilities of the body, the consciousness and the subconscious by using clichés. The movements and bodies in *erva daninha* cause confusion and incomprehension in his audience. Listopad is looking for an alternative ontology and tries to find it by dismantling the representation and assembly of body and movement and more.

Research is a feature with other artists, too. But research is meant in the broadest sense of the word here. It can be research for, through, or of art, but also for, through or of very different areas. As Boukje Schweigman, for example, says:

“To research life I have to work with my body” (Boukje Schweigman).

She has ended up in the theatre indirectly and finds that her own body is an unequalled medium for exploring life. The feeling of your own hand and what it can do can be a strong catalyst. She is searching for a relationship with and the experience of her own body. This research into life through her own body clearly comes to the fore in *Draai*. Indirectly she turns her audience into partners in this research because the spectator, too, gets a sense that his body is turning through kinaesthesia and empathy.

Florin Flueraş’ presentation shows that he, too, uses his body for research. He explores how he can bring about a shift in attention by focusing very intently on his body. He wants to gain insight into human behaviour by raising his awareness of the body’s largely preconditioned movements, focusing on movement and the body instead of on language. Like Schweigman, Flueraş conducts his research by means of his own body. He presents this research as a performance. In a performance context his heightened physical awareness can create a surreal situation for the performer and his audience.

In her work, Henrietta Hale tries to seek out the things she does not understand. For her performance *Man and Fish* she chose to work with two male dancers, precisely because she does not understand them as well as women. These two men discover their own bodies through dance as well as through the movements these bodies can make. With the help of her dancers, Hale attempts to chart their bodies, the relationship between them, and the relationship between the bodies and the space. She does this by giving them a series of impossible tasks during rehearsals. The work is at the same time science and ritual. It is a study of relationships and of the impossibility of charting these relationships.

The physical form of drama that dance ensures that body and movement are important components in the ideas, methods, and eventually the work of the Springdance Dialogue participants. They seize the opportunity to play with these subjects; to hide the body, clarify the movement, or to use the movement and the body to conduct research. The artists explore the relationships between bodies, the relationships between movements, and the representation of the body in the theatre.

Context and position

Gabriel Smeets' assignment to the participants was to present themselves through the themes of context and position. In the above paragraphs I have raised a few of the subjects the participants discussed in order to outline the context in which they work and the position they give themselves. It turned out that in spite of the many differences there are also similarities between the different participants in Springdance Dialogue 2008.

The Springdance Dialogue participants are aware that they are not necessarily doing something new. The innovation lies in the fact that they are doing it: it is their body, their perspective, and their assembly. They keep searching for new ways of working, some of them focusing mainly on themselves in the process, others trying to collaborate in different ways. It has become clear that they still have plenty of room for development, in a positive sense. The participants in Springdance Dialogue keep trying to renew themselves and in doing so hope to secure or hold on to a place within the field of contemporary dance and performance.

The artists who participated in Springdance Dialogue play with presence and absence, improvisation and choreography, the line between performer and spectator, questions of authorship, sampling, collaboration. They explore (the possibilities for) relationships, dance, movements by dancers as well as objects, dismantling and disassembly, representation and consciousness. They work with both form and content, but also with form as content and content as form. They deliberately place themselves in the history and tradition of dance and theatre while at the same time trying to withdraw from these. Rather than distinguishing themselves by placing themselves above or aside from the dance field, they do so by placing themselves in the middle of it, renewing themselves on a personal level and so clarifying the differences and similarities.

During Springdance Dialogue the different artists have shown each other what keeps them occupied, why they create dance, theatre and/ or performance and how they have come to make certain choices. The intensive and probing discussions proved that such a dialogue is of considerable added value for these often young artists. As far as I am able to tell, the artists have been of great help to each other and will be able to use the exchange in their future work. This does not only hold true for the greenest among them, but certainly for the more experienced artists as well. The added value for our participants is obvious. They have been given an opportunity for discussion, but most importantly for reflection. By discussing their

work and their creative process with colleagues they will have learnt from others and even more so from and about themselves.

In this part of my report I have attempted to outline the subjects that have come up during Springdance Dialogue but I can only fail. A dialogue, like dance and drama, is something you have to witness, or rather participate in, to make the most of it. Like my quote from Michel Callon said earlier, it is impossible to simply speak for others. By quoting the participants and departing from these quotes I have tried deliberately not to silence the others and to stay as close to the discussions as possible. However, this is still my interpretation of their words and I am the one making the connections. The participants no longer have a say in the set-up of this report. In spite of all this I hope to have honoured their words, images, movements and sounds in my report.

Reflection and debate as a result of Springdance Dialogue

Springdance Dialogue was an intense and satisfying meeting and dialogue. The participants' presentations and the discussions between the various participants and their mentors were very interesting and offered plenty of insight into the ways the different artists work and what is important to them in their work and their creative processes.

Performances first, then Dialogue week?

I would like to seize this opportunity to underline one remark that kept recurring several times during the week. It was a disadvantage that the participants had not seen each other's performances before giving their presentations. By timing the week of performances after the week of dialogue, certain subjects proved to be difficult to discuss, and getting your ideas across was sometimes tricky. The artists have made the deliberate choice to express themselves through drama, performance or dance. Because they were now forced to discuss their work before the others had seen it, it was often hard to find the right words. A minor advantage was that in this way, at least the discussions were at little risk of getting bogged down in judgments about the work in question.

In spite of this problem Springdance Dialogue is an interesting and relevant set-up for bringing artists into contact with each other. The individual artists, and through them, dance/ the theatre, can indeed benefit greatly from a dialogue with others. Such a dialogue offers an opportunity for reflection *and* for putting this

reflection into words. What have I been doing and making in the past few years? Why have I made certain choices and have I taken certain turns?

Moreover, the discussion offers the opportunity to rethink your choices. Your fellow participants will ask discerning questions and share their insights into your work and your methods. Also, as a listener, someone else's presentation can offer you new insights into your own work. Similarities and differences come to light and the listener can begin to wonder why he uses the same methods, or by contrast, different ones.

Show process instead of product?

This does bring me to another aspect of Springdance Dialogue 2008. This year, many of the works, such as *erva daninha* and *Riff* could be said to be largely finished. The performances may still be developing, but the Dialogue in the preceding week will not have changed them, nor will it change them in the future. Other performance such as *Draai* could only be seen at Springdance and perhaps will not be performed in the future anymore.

It would be exiting if Springdance decided in the context of Springdance Dialogue to show works in progress to the audience and to the artists among each other. Springdance Dialogue could then make a real contribution to the production of shows by facilitating a dialogue between artists. The artists would be allowed to reflect upon their own work and other people's work and the discussion could address the context and the position of the artists and specifically of the work in question.

A critic might ask what the added value would be for a spectator in this context. By not only opening up the works in progress to audiences, but also the dialogue itself, the audience can get involved in the discussion. Aside from this the spectator will gain insight into the creative process of the theatre and dance. This would tie in with the trend in the theatre where artists no longer want to present drama or dance as a product, but rather as a process. The theatre distinguishes itself by staging a performance again and again in the here and now and because of this is able to change continuously. Audiences might gain insight in the process-based approach to dance and drama by attending works in progress and discussions about these.

In Springdance Dialogue's current set-up, the audience rather plays the classic role. It has the opportunity to come and see the performances that were

obviously made by a group of young artists who have participated in a discussion the previous week. Although this may be a comfortable position for less experienced audience members, it does not stress the qualities intrinsic to Springdance Dialogue.

Springdance: for audiences and artists

Through Springdance Dialogue, Springdance could present itself as an innovative and expanding institution that aside from showcasing contemporary dance and performance also promotes the production of contemporary dance and performance. Springdance in its current shape distinguishes itself by uniting the moment of performing and the dialogue and in my opinion it is precisely this combination that makes it a unique and progressive festival. By strengthening the connection even further and by underlining the relationship between the dialogue and the moment of performing, Springdance can be of great significance for the creative process in the theatre, the artists, the performances, the audience, and the performing arts.