

'I give you violence, sensuality and care'

by Kristina Kegljen

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One of the most prominent European dancers and choreographers, Isabelle Schad, talks about the body and its power.

In collaboration with the dramaturge and theatre director Saša Božić, the dancer and choreographer Isabelle Schad presented *A Double Portrait*, which is a solo for two dancers, at the new pop-up Dance Inn Festival in Zagreb, Croatia. Isabelle Schad was born in Germany, studied classical dance in Stuttgart and built a flourishing dance career. Her works constantly invoke physicality and the politics deriving from it.

For example, in her choreography *Collective Jumps* Schad worked with a group of dancers who investigated the notion of collectivity, resistance and freedom, inspired by the work of Hannah Arendt. In *Der Bau – Gruppe* a group of dancers is interwoven with packed bags, creating pyramids and other more or less recognizable shapes. Schad's performances are extremely musical, inspired by the rhythm and enjoyment of the present moment.

I was very curious to ask Isabelle about her transition from the rigidity of classical ballet to contemporary dance, which allows more freedom to a dancer.

'When I began to question the hierarchical system imposed on a classical dancer, which begins with the stiffness of a certain attitude and extends towards the hierarchy of the dancers' line-up, I started to look for different forms of expression and other ways of being together on stage. I realised how much the style or the form of a movement is defined by the process and by the "working method" that brings to its creation.

'I have been always interested in the expression that can derive from movement as such – once brought into visuality – as much as in the observation of our reality. This way of working and reflecting on life was much closer to me than what I believed in before, in political terms as well. I left my ballet shoes behind when I was 26 years old! That's a bit late,' Isabelle explains. As a form of expression, dance does not apply the same narrative logic as somewhat more classical theatre. Due to this fact, the audience for dance performances is smaller in number than the theatre audience. However, Isabelle Schad further complicates the situation – she destroys and questions the notion of recognizable. This is done with the purpose of shifting the spectator's boundaries of perception, as she wants to encourage new ways of looking. She once said that as soon as the image becomes the same for each observer she has to change it, only to escape into the unknown again and

find the abstraction at a higher level. I wondered what political decision was behind this intention?

‘This is a question of recognition. If every spectator sees the same thing in an image that I create, I immediately get the urge to change it. It becomes too recognizable. The possibility to see the same thing from many different perspectives is extremely important in my work, as is the questioning of the imposition of what the spectator should or should not see/recognise. That’s how the mass media work, and in the times of smartphones and the internet it’s something that becomes even more powerful. For me this is a way of developing resistance, even if it happens on a small scale in comparison to the big picture.’ I completely agree with Isabelle – it is all about attention, direction and the focus of our eyes. Since her work has been highly engaged in both collective and individual resistance, I was curious about the differences between the potential that a group of dancers on stage can create and the potential of a single dancer. Is it possible to represent social resistance with only one body on stage?

‘Recently I’ve been very concerned with topics such as collectivity and subjectivity, and I wonder how these two could come together on stage, as in a sort of utopian model of society. Not a totalitarian system where all dancers do the same thing in the same rhythm, but something that’s neither entirely individual nor strictly imposed. All the dancers in my group performances deal with materiality, dance figures and movement in their own way and at their own rhythm, which means that dance experience is a personal matter, even though the form is defined,’ Isabelle replies.

So when we talk about the political potential of both the individual and collective, where is the power of the collective or the power of an individual?

‘A group of individuals on stage can be very powerful but also very frightening. It always depends on what you do and how you build the togetherness that is at the same time divisible – it can belong to everyone and no one equally. The togetherness that I create needs to be something referable and something that mirrors towards the spectator, who is then invited to set on their own journey and create personal impressions and unique experiences.

‘Over the past few years I have been exploring the relationship between the “self” and the world – not through a psychological prism but rather through the physiological one. I’m interested in the relationship that can emerge from the communion between body–mind–spirit,’ Isabelle explains, and I come to realise that the body is very important to her. And not only because of the fact that she finds the body to be both an instrument and the objective of her work, but also because of the social and artistic potential that physicality implies. Isabelle explains that everyone has a body and deals with it in a certain way, but this body often fails to be perceived in our everyday lives as the only and important bearer of our self and all our intellectual, emotional and spiritual aspects.

‘Once I decided to tackle the body in every possible sense, it became clear to me that I simultaneously also manifested something with it – something about myself and the others, something about the reality that involves societal, political or philosophical problems. Very often I find the body to be both familiar and unfamiliar to me, but it’s always the body that reveals the potential of connecting with something different, that has its own strength, energy and effects,’ Isabelle claims, adding that she has always been dealing with bodily processes at the internal level and the way in which cellular processes result in structures or forms.

In many ways this could explain the meticulousness of body movements that are often hardly noticeable on stage even though a lot of professional effort and strength has been invested to achieve them. These methods have brought her towards the theory of the five elements, that is, of the interdependence of the elements (water, wood, fire, earth and metal) in various daily, annual or seasonal cycles. At the same time this links her to society and the world. She loves reading Foucault and Deleuze, and she connects them with the knowledge of Zen. ‘Zen requires presence and concentration on a daily basis. It can be fascinating when your movement exercises and Zen-related practices enrich your rhythm of life. The path is a long one, but it is worthwhile. It can change one’s perspective on things, at least those that matter.’

A Double Portrait, the piece that Isabelle Schad presented together with Saša Božić at the Dance Inn Festival, is actually based on various aspects of Francis Bacon’s painting. This performance is a solo for two dancers that asks about violence and sensuality, time and timelessness, relationships between the self and the other as well as the entire world. ‘Each dancer listens to their own body, movement and personal rhythm, and the space we share defines oneself and the other dancer. At the same time it talks about intimacy and care, about violence ... A network of interconnections is thus created,’ Isabelle explains, and to me it seems that she has already said a lot about things that are difficult to grasp if one has not seen the performance. Yet no matter how impenetrable dance may be, performances like the one created by Isabelle Schad can provide an experience of the passion, creativity and beauty of dance.

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