



Maja Đurinović

Dancing in Croatia

Croatian dance scene grows timidly in the shadow of historical conflict of the struggle for national independence and the strife to join European culture. A small nation's insecurity in its own values as well as the position on the crossroads of cultures have resulted in a haphazard exchange of *golden époques* with complete abolishment, of international success of certain individuals accompanied by the indifference of society, i.e. scepticism towards them. The after-war (World War II as well as the most recent Homeland War) re-initiations of history, with their brutal *uprooting*, proved to be the most fatal. It is only in recent times that a more systematic approach and an increase in interest on all levels are more noticeable: from culture to politics, and among young and educated audience, which all gives reason for optimism.

Croatia records its professional history of dance as theatre art from 1876, when ballet numbers choreographed by Ivana Freisinger were performed as part of the world premiere of Ivan Zajc's opera *Nikola Šubić Zrinski*. To the best of our knowledge, Freisinger, a primaballerina from Amsterdam, was also the head of the first ballet school.

A new significant beginning in theatre dance took place in 1921, with the appointment of Margarita Froman as head of Zagreb Ballet, which was the echo of the all-European euphoria around the *miracle of Russian ballet*. Apart from introducing renowned world ballet literature, Margarita Froman educated the first generations of local dancers - among them the first Croatian primaballerina Mia Čorak Slavenska - along with creating the national repertoire. Froman's choreography of Krešimir Baranović's *The Gingerbread Heart* is among the most performed and acknowledged Croatian ballets abroad.

The period between two World Wars abounded with new dance schools and powerful dance personalities, who created author's dance programmes. Upon finishing dance studies in Bodenwieser school in Vienna, Alma Jelenska and Fritz Vall continued their dance and pedagogic activities in Zagreb. Vera Milčinović Tashamira dances in Laban's troupe *Tanzbühne* and, later on, pursues her soloist career in the USA; she is at once the first dancer to perform on



American television. Mirjana Janeček-Stropnik, a student of Elisabeth Duncan's, launches her own school and introduces programmes of *live plastics and embodied music*. In 1932, Mercedes Goritz Pavelić establishes and leads *Zagreb Chamber Dance Group*; between 1936 and 1942 she tours several times with a solo programme in theatres and concert halls of Berlin, Prague, Munich and Vienna.

Following a series of dance concerts at home, Mia Čorak Slavenska was recognised at the Dance Olympics in Berlin in 1936 where, together with Mary Wigman and Harald Kreutzberg, she was awarded the First Prize. This marked the beginning of an outstanding career. After the leading role in Jean Benoit-Levy's movie *La Mort du Cygne*, translated in the USA as *Ballerina*, Slavenska becomes a movie star as well; thus Mjasiński's troupe *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo*, while touring

the USA, advertises itself as *the first troupe that introduced Mia Slavenska to the United States*. Slavenska merged the virtuosity of classical ballet with the sensitivity and expressiveness of modern dance. The ballet *Streetcar Named Desire*, performed by Slavenska-Franklin Ballet Company, is considered the turning point in the history of American ballet and the American critics record Slavenska's role of Blanche DuBois as memorable.

Sofija Cvjetičanin and Ana Maletić graduate from Maga Magazinović's Belgrade School of Rhythmics and Plastics, founded on the theory and methodology of Rudolf Laban and Emile Jacques-Dalcroze. In 1932, upon specialising at Laban's Choreography Institute in Paris and Berlin, Ana Maletić establishes her own school in Zagreb.

Laban's concept of dance art took root in Croatia through the National Ballet as well. Laban's Slovenian students Pia and Pino Mlakar staged in Zagreb numerous performances that derived style-wise from dance Expressionism. The most famous performance, the celebrated *Devil in the Village* (Lhotka), premiering in Zurich with immense success in 1935, was staged in Zagreb in 1937 and since then is a regular comeback to the repertoire of Croatian National Theatre. Mlakar's legendary *Devil*, Zagreb artist Oskar Harmoš, later on became the leading dancer in Kurt Joos's troupe and, among other, danced the role of *Death* in *The Green Table* (*Der grüne Tisch*).

Ana Roje and Oskar Harmoš, year-long ballet partners, combined their leading positions in local ballet with the international career. Ana Roje was also an outstanding pedagogue. Upon graduating from Nikolaj Legat's school, she becomes the assistant of the old master (who was the teacher of Pavlova, Nijinski and Fokin). In the post-war Yugoslavia

with its strong international status, Roje and Harmoš twice initiated and led the International Ballet Summer School - once in Kaštel Kambelovac and the second time in Primošten - which obtained numerous international awards; yet this was insufficient to gain a steady support of local authorities and to be established on a permanent base.



▶▶ Ana Maletić *Criminal Connections*

Photo | Duro Slako

World War II divided not only people but, unfortunately, art as well; victory on the one side meant unsuitability and guilt of those who were involved in any way on the other side. Today's School for Classical Ballet, based on the methods of Russian school, was founded as an independent institution in 1949, but of all mentioned artists of contemporary dance expression who were active in Zagreb between two wars, only Ana Maletić survived the change of political power and

system. Her School for Rhythmics and Dance became a state institution in 1954. This school, later named by its founder *Ana Maletić School for Contemporary Dance*, bred the majority of Croatian choreographers and dancers of contemporary dance.

From its very beginning, the school was envisaged as an institution on college level, with a number of theoretical subjects organised in A, B and C programme: departments of art, pedagogy and therapy, meant for furthering theoretical build-up and historical competence. This programme, however, has never been approved by higher cultural instances; thus dance was kept on the level of artisan skill while the title of dancer, in spite of an 8-year education programme (both for ballet and contemporary dance), is equal with high school degree.

Consequently, dance as performing art has been utterly marginalised and there was a constant lack of a highly educated cadre that would properly defend the profession and potentially bring changes.



Photo: Aleksandar Novković

Members of all other performing arts have the academic background, which makes them socially more competent in regard to dance creations and that opens another great problem: dance critique.

Meanwhile, a new generation of dancers has matured in the National Ballet. Yugoslav borders being opened, they decided to try out their talents abroad. Between 1954 and 1957, twenty six (!) dancers left Zagreb Ballet and went abroad and, looking from this almost half-a-century „after“ position, all of them have had successful careers: as dancers or choreographers, as pedagogues or Ballet directors. (Nenad Lhotka, Petar and Ljubinka Dobrijević, Frane Jelinčić, Ivica and Vlado Sertić, Zlatko Voženilek, Marijan Jaguš, Žarko Prebil, Irena Milovan, Zvonimir Podkovac, Vjera Marković, Mila Naranča, Milena Buterin, Anita Baković, Drago Boldin, Veselko Sulić, Miljenko Banović...)

An outstanding figure in this group is most certainly Milko Šparemblek, a still fresh and active artist of Bèjart's generation, with an international CV so impressive that I wouldn't even dare to evoke it here. Curious enough as a classical dancer to delve into the worlds of Martha Graham and José Limon, Šparemblek conceives as choreographer a specific kind of highly reflexive theatre (e.g. *Songs of Love and Death* /Mahler/, *The Seven Deadly Sins* /Brecht-Weil/, *Symphony of Psalms* /Stravinsky/, *Johannes Faust Passion* /J.S.Bach, anonymous Medieval authors/). As is always the case with prophets in their own country, Šparemblek is insufficiently present on the local scene; yet, with his periodical presence, he has essentially influenced the changes in perception of contemporary ballet theatre. He remains to this day an undisputable authority and bond between classical ballet and contemporary dance.

Ballet obtains its independence within Croatian National Theatre in 1965, and the first nominated director is Sonja Kastl, ballet soloist and choreographer. While Croatian ballet dancers were becoming

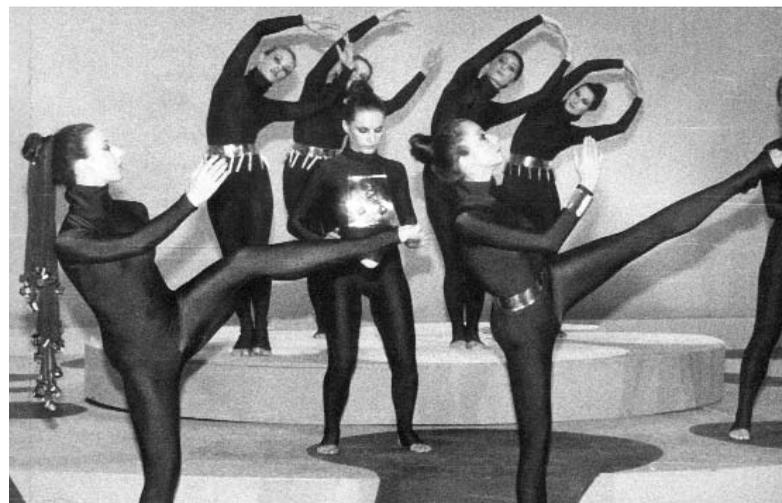
members of foreign dance companies and theatres (throughout Europe and both Americas), Limon and his group visited Zagreb at the end of 50s; a few years later, it was Martha Graham; and the Music Biennial in 1965 opens new perspectives through the works of John Cage and Anne Halprin.

Contemporary dance ensembles finally hit the stage in the 60s. Ana Maletić and her daughter Vera established Contemporary Dance Studio with the aim of implementing and furthering their school programme. Ana Maletić dealt to a great deal and with tremendous expertise with dance folklore, studying motives and archetypes of traditional dances. She staged numerous remarkable choreographies inspired by Yugoslav ethnographic heritage. As an author, Vera Maletić showed greater interest in experiment, contemporary Croatian music and film. Her dance engagement was increasingly oriented towards scientific work, which will lead her to Laban's Center in London and, subsequently, to a Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Studies at Ohio State University, where she remained as lecturer.

Parallel with the Studio, but referring to the experience of international music and dance avant-garde, Milana Broš founds Chamber Free Dance Ensemble (KASP), which she leads through three generations of dancers, firmly devoted to her creative *credo*. A programme for the French experimental television and the award at the international competition for young choreographers in Théâtre d'essai de la danse (1968) created the possibility for further performances in Paris but have not essentially changed the group's marginal status at home. It is worth mentioning that, during the jubilee 20th Zagreb dance festival - Dance Week Festival - there was a revival of KASP repertoire conducted by Milana Broš herself. The programme stunned the audience with conceptual firmness and its resistance to cheap appeal and schemes of recognisable techniques - which, judging by the foreign troupes

present at the festival, turns out to be one of the major problems of contemporary dance.

Somewhat later, in 1970, a third ensemble appeared in what turned out to be a long-standing *triumvirate*: Zagreb Dance Ensemble (ZPA),



►► ZPA Lela Gluhak Buneta *Sonorno*

led by Lela Gluhak Buneta, whose choreographic style arose out of Maletić school, with emphasis on folklore elements.

The change of leadership of the Studio brings stylistic changes as well: Tihana Škrinjarčić brings jazz dance from the United States, which coincided both with the occurrence of domestic musicals in Zagreb theatre Comedy and the requirements of television entertainment programmes. Škrinjarčić will be followed by Zaga Živković, who also had

an inclination towards the Graham technique, while Mirjana Preis, Desanka Virant and Suzana Sliva develop their autonomous choreographic vocabulary; the latter founds in 1998 Absolute Movement Ensemble. Probably the most devoted to the Zagreb school, ZPA opens the doors to the next generation of choreographers.



Photo: Rade Saraden

▶▶ HNK, Zagreb, M. Šparemblek *Johannes Faust Passion*

Those are Jasminka Neufeld, Nives Šimatović, Katja Šimunić, Ksenija Zec, Mare Sesardić and Ljiljana Zagorac, who also develops a unique soloist style.

Dancers begin to gather around projects of new domestic authors. Mare Sesardić launches *Studio Mare*, Rajko Pavlič *Liberdance*, Vesna Mimica *Vem*, and the group *Gesta* derives out of the third generation

of KASP (with choreographic personalities such as Jasmina Zagrajski, Jasna Čižmek Tarbuk, Jasna Frankić Brkljačić and Ljiljana Mikulčić). Dance Week Festival, initiated and led from 1983 on by Mirna Žagar, with the later foundation of MAPAZ (Moving Academy for Performing Arts Zagreb), tore down the fences of the local dance ghetto and opened up new perspectives for the involvement of young artists in international projects and their education in prominent dance schools. The „returnees“ bring new experiences, schools, rules; a number of small research programmes appear; the dance scene becomes a living organism; dancers fluctuate and gather around author projects.

Iva Nerina Sibila, Katja Šimunić and Ljiljana Zagorac launch an informal group *Ilinkt!*, which deals with very interesting conceptual, often ambiental, projects.

Tamara Curić and Larisa Lipovac establish the Dance Centre TALA and initiate a highly needed Platform of Young Choreographers.

Ana-Maria Bogdanović and Katarina Đurđević lead the Association of Professional Dance Artists *Puls* and are a new bond between the students of Ana Maletić's school and the professional scene.

Led by Goran Sergej Pristaš, BADco. is a strong group both in authorship and production sense. Nikolina Bujas Pristaš and Prvdan Devlahović are new promising choreographic names.

Irma Omerzo, a long-time member of Decouflé Company, founded the group *MARMOT* and attracted significant attention with her original, humorous and engaged works.

We should also mention those Croatian dance artists who have established their careers abroad and occasionally appear on the



domestic dance scene either with a creation of a new project or touring: Aleksandra Janeva, Marija Ščekić, Jasna Vinovrški, Ivana Müller, Nensi Lazić, Selma Banich...

A part of „returnees“ that have decided to try to make a living working in their homeland have united within an open-structure group named *EkS-scena*. It introduced new authors and research projects.

Kelkope Company is active for ten years, away from new tendencies and public focus, nurturing their own dance style, highly energetic and based on jazz ballet.

Croatian National Theatre Ballet has a record of stronger and weaker seasons but maintains a high level of performance. Vesna Butorac has marked as dancer a period of nearly 30 years. In mid-90s, the main soloist roles were overtaken by Almira Osmanović. (Belonging to the same generation, Irena Pasarić has danced most of her career on foreign stages). As to the premieres of new ballet repertoire, apart from Šparemblek's choreographies, few bright moments occurred; such were the overwhelming *Ballads...that Wing Brings* of Vasco Wellenkamp and the youthfully fresh *Don't Step on the Grass...Falling Angels* of Ivan Favier.

In order to stimulate young choreographers and fill in the creative void, HNK Ballet initiated in 1996 Choreographic Workshops for members of the ensemble. Soon, new authors appeared, among which Staša Zurovac excelled with superior quality and specific style. His *Cirkus Primitif Balet* is certainly the most interesting show of the last season (2002/03).

Along with Zagreb Ballet, smaller and more flexible troupes emerged: Croatia, under the artistic leadership of Svebor Sečak, with the main goal of promoting ballet art outside of national theatres, together with

Photo | Saša Novković

promoting young choreographers; and Atelier Chorégraphique, created by Mark Boldin and Staša Zurovac for their own projects.

It is the great merit of Dance Week Festival for attracting attention of teatrologists and new dramatic audience by presenting significant foreign shows, thus revealing to them promising and refreshing possibilities of non-verbal theatre.



Photo | Nino Solić

►► The Studio Contemporary Dance Company *Giselle*

For many a projects and groups it is impossible or at least extremely hard to determine their affiliation as dramatic, physical, mime and dance theatre are increasingly intertwined. Dealing with this *in-between*

stage space, Trafik from Rijeka, Obepyu and Emil Matešić use the movement and body in their own specific way.

Concerning both contemporary dance groups and ballet ensembles, professional dance in Croatia is still to a great extent concentrated in Zagreb as a practically exclusive center. There are ballet ensembles in Split and Rijeka but under much more modest production circumstances. A long-time head of ZPA, Snježana Abramović, launches in 2000 the Summer Festival of Dance and Non-Verbal Theatre in Svetvinčenat (Istria), which grows with success, while new joint projects of artists and organisations from Zagreb, Zadar, Rijeka and Pula gradually contribute to the decentralisation of Croatian dance scene.

Today, contemporary dance scene in Croatia finds itself amidst a new conflict. On the one hand, conservative tendencies that impose old established values of classical ballet repertoire grow increasingly stronger in the main National Theatre; on the other hand, dramaturges and teatrologists have an inclination to validate contemporary dance through the optics of their theories and schemes. Yet, it is also evident that there is a great deal of creative work on researching and investigating the body - although perhaps more its significances than possibilities - and that the most successful young authors erase the divisions and conflicts by winning awards and distinctions abroad as well.