

Olga Žitluhina Dance Company

presents

“Dances of the Lost”

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Abstract

The forest is. The forest does not do what you want, and the sea does not roll when we need it. It’s all about what we leave behind us and what stays behind. About what we can give and what we do give away. About what is taken without asking. About the forsaken, the gifted, the strange, the most precious, the thickness of air, wind, breath, warmth. About our differences and similarities. About the fact that we come and go, but the forest IS.

Two bodies, but one brush in the serenity of the forest. Two become one; two is always one, because only the second can give balance to the first. And the first starts moving initiated by the thoughts about the other. Being in the thick space erases blanks in between, as if the other did not exist. Responsibility for our actions, for the shade that is climbing and getting wet in attempts to reach you. Is it possible to measure and summarise the traces of our corporeal existence in time and space? Everything comes together in the end. In the end, there is nothing. There is only one move forward—to the place, from which you arrived.

Shift of the focus, relations and indifference of the centre and margins. Dances of the lost. It’s impossible to say who is leaving traces in whom. I don’t even know if the trace of the boot on my back is not my own.

Here they are—programme notes for the contemporary dance performance, taking on journeys, then kicking off the initiated routes, taking up new directions, telling the truth, lying and misleading and above all trying not to say too much.

There are two kinds of tourists. Some study maps and brochures before the trip, look for the locations they recognise and feel disappointed if they differ from the book or if the journey takes four hours of climbing over the hill instead of the promised half an hour of easy walk on the beach. There are travellers who love everything off the maps, look into weird backyards instead of going to a big cathedral, and dissolve time into moments, which occur to them unexpectedly. The second group is the contemporary dance audience; the first group deserves to see swans and hear Tchaikovsky if the performance is labelled “Swan Lake”.

According to the proposed tourist theory, contemporary dance, if it really wants to follow its name, should always be fresh, topical, ever changing, unpredictable; it should be the experience in every possible way. It should combine two things: deal with questions which are founded in social, economic, or political processes and use fresh and hence unknown, undescribed, non-established forms to convey the message. In his performance *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*, one of the leading conceptual dance artists Jerome Bel says, “If the artist knows what the result of his/her research will be, he/she is not a contemporary artist”. The results of marginal movements performed by contemporary artists do not suit the interests of large audiences. Contemporary dance communicates central issues, using peripheral methods, including the peripheral location of the art of dance, which is often thought as a dumb art form dealing only with the moving surfaces of reality, i.e., in many cases dance subjects are untouched by western thinking processes. And this is good for METAMIND.

The peripheral form and difficulties with transparency kept contemporary dance from being officially recognized as Soviet art. During the Soviet period, the only troupe who managed to exist and work with movement in a specific way was *Ansis Rūtentāls Movement Theatre* (founded in 1978). Ansis Rūtentāls (1949–2000) started as a pantomime actor, while in his own work he used a more abstract and polysemous way of expression. He directed and choreographed works which were cutting edge and were probably incomprehensible for censors. In a piece called *Reflections* (1984), dance with cardboard shadows could be seen as a strong reference to Soviet communist control and manipulation. On the other hand, shortly before passing away Ansis Rūtentāls said, “A shadow is a proof of my existence”. He wanted to devote his next work to this idea. He never did and for a while nobody did. *Dances of the Lost* (2008), which are so different in shape and dance training, may have brought to life the idea once cherished by Ansis Rūtentāls.

The chance for movement arts to develop opened up in the mid-nineties when a small number of enthusiastic practitioners criss-crossed Europe, taking classes to catch up with other countries. Latvia had to go through the evolutionary stages of dance history at super-speed. One of the most enthusiastic choreographers has been Olga Žitluhina, a graduate of St. Petersburg's Culture Institute and the Latvian Academy of Music, who founded the Modern Dance Choreography programme at the Latvian Academy of Culture in 1999, which became the basis for the professional development of the genre. Founded in 1996, the *Olga Žitluhina Dance Company* was the first professional contemporary dance company in Latvia and is still among the most active groups.

Here again the contradiction between the centre and the periphery plays an important role. In order to establish infrastructure for previously non-existing arts one must justify its existence. That's easy to do—one needs to address and research contemporary issues. What is not easy is for contemporary dance is to remain contemporary and to remain outside the mainstream. For the human being reality is first and foremost body itself; however, movement is the most difficult thing to perceive in a rational narrative-dominated space. If something is not translatable into text, it is worthless. If the complicated net of perceptions is activated, translation into the language of signs and symbols should be immediate; otherwise the work of art is worthless or dangerous. Institutions, critics, and researchers have always deprived dance of its main characteristic—ideally, they should let the movement speak for itself. This is another good reason for a contemporary dance piece to be part of the arts research project METAMIND.

Shape and contents are given to movement to give a sense of complexity and a multilayered experience of contemporary dance, creating, but, at the same time, seeking to avoid a defined shape and, above all, wishing to avoid narrative. What makes dance work as a united whole? What is it if there is no play, no script, and no text—nothing which exists before the performance and gives directions for time, space and action? In contemporary dance, the sense and message get created simultaneously with the creation of the form or, to put it in another way, the mental and the visual moving images are created as a message, not as a medium for the message. The classical way of finding the right form, the right expression of the idea or story does not work here. Shape and contents are the same. The foot prints space, even if not moved at all, even if held up high towards the ceiling. What if a fly passed by?

The performance *Dances of the Lost* embraces footprints, just as many

dances and other fading artistic experiences do, though not as much as those from Sunset Boulevard but more like the marks which disappear or never even appear. Even the smallest wave can erase the footprints of happy lovers. There is no technology to capture THESE moments dancers experience in studios and never get back to them on the stage. There is the ever-present question: What is behind movement? This question cannot be answered in an easy way, like a dog catching its tail. However, modern dance has invented a tail—the imaginary tail is one of the components needed to start to feel and learn dance techniques well. From time to time, dance cheats with the help of new technologies which could make the tail visible, the space thick and THESE moments recordable. Thermal waves could be seen with an infrared camera. Some movements can be seen with the human eye, some could be seen only when recorded, some get erased when recorded. If the photo is taken in the dark with the shutter open for more than 15 seconds, the person passing by is not visible at all, but the flashlight is seen as a long zigzag line on the person's head. Another example: experts of the Japanese dance style *butoh* move in a way that allows changes in posture to be seen, though the movement itself is not noticeable.

There exist many similar examples, with or without technologies, where something central turns peripheral and, vice versa, where something additional defines the situation. In the performing arts, there are two methods for research: make things visible, describable and measurable with the help of complicated technologies; or work on the concept, concentrate on the peripheral, blurred areas in all the stages of creation and contemporary dance performance and see what happens. With *Dances of the Lost* the *Olga Žitluhina Dance Company* chose the second way.

For three weeks, the company left their dance studio behind and decamped to the Topolovka forests in the Crimea, Ukraine, where the majority of the movement material and all visuals were created. The group chose these forests for their legendary and powerful waters, their pristine natural beauty, and the strong probability that the weather would be favourable. The choreographer Olga Žitluhina was driven by the idea of the forest as a symbol of a living eternity existing next to the people in motion around it. Every footprint left on the stone or sand or in the water gets covered and disappears. Still there is no way of entering real wilderness. Someone must have been there before. What could inspire the dancers and choreographers was the fascinating scenery of an ancient forest, springs and rivers, which were untouched, unprinted for

a while. Then the steps break dry branches and leave their footprints. This virgin environment creates a sense of untouched, unprinted blank spaces into the dance performance. This is not a dance about nature; this is nature that is contemplating dance.

A certain purity of the space is also one of the preconditions to diminish as much as possible the movement patterns of the dancers' bodies and the choreographer's way of choreographing. Completely new steps are an illusion, but it is possible to reduce the predictable taste of the movement, take dancers off the safe road, make them take a route through the brush instead of following the path smartly laid out by a fox. There is no way to lay out pathways in the forest. The next minute they are erased, the next day they are forgotten. The forest has no friendly communication memory. It has scars of violence, like highways and levelled-out hills. Erasing as a normal condition is beneficial in the choreographical process. Preserving doesn't have any value and life in it. The magic of eternity lies in the invisible. So all the duets of the performance were made into solos, where the traces and shadows that people leave, and the images that our body movements project, which are usually imperceptible, suddenly get visible, and the line between one and the other is blurred.

After a longer period of movement research, i.e., movement blurring, which used several techniques to investigate the questions of what is left behind, how these traces change, and the like, the dance piece came out of the forest. It may have preferred staying there but being part of the conference with the set premiere date reminded choreographers and dancers alike of the focused areas of reality. Coming out of the wild brings with it the most complicated task—how to transform the created material into a finalised performance? The task is not to lose the gained sensation and atmosphere of the ancient forest, the impossible human interaction with it, and existence in the experienced time and space, where special attention was paid to how person's actions fluctuate, change, leave traces on the surfaces and inside the experience of another person. To what extent is it a matter of awareness and what is only noticed with the help of repetition, analysis and the outside eye? And what if they are seen only if recorded or in some other way deprived of the natural flow and destiny of disappearing? Do these traces matter at all? Maybe it is just fortuitous tail catching. Or the eternal drive to escape the circumstances in order to prove human superiority... over the being of yesterday.

Practically the result of the research process in the environment combines imprints of nature and meeting nature with the ideas and movement found in

the duet-solo exercises. Another important player was waiting for/avoiding the right circumstances: the right light, the right wind direction, shadows on the hill where they look deep and thoughtful, etc. The conclusion that it fits only Hollywood style and money, reminded that being contemporary also means using poor circumstances as a starting point for good ideas. The same as the seemingly unchanging video set design which is just immense in layers and layers of one word—*forest*. The forest is there all the time—tranquil, slightly moving, showing tiny figures of dancers behind and among the trees from time to time. The huge projection screens on two sides are semi-transparent and this creates depth in the space. Editing makes the effect similar to mirrors placed on the opposite sides—something is happening inside the screens and something behind the action, and it could last forever. Images change in an almost unnoticeable way, and there is an impression that in the depth there is a source where information and energy accumulate. It clears up at the so-called *empty moments*, during the pauses which are not sense-extended though just blank. A kind of unexpected arrival in this state of mind and then, as if nothing happened, the call for special skills from the dancers. A pause in time and space which does not have any effect on the forest.

The space of the performance is not organised centrally: the dance stage is laid out like a catwalk and pushed away and down from the viewpoint of the main audience in the balcony. The centre is pushed into the corner of the actual space. Following the traditional proscenium *up and big* is destroyed. The location in the periphery is strengthened by the semi-transparent fabric at ground level—which is another option for watching the performance. Many members of the audience preferred this view, because the blurred image of the performance strengthened the sense of an immense, hazy space of shadows, shades, projected reflections with a dancer carefully approaching the image of herself. At the same time there are moments when the shadow of the tiny human figure could cover a huge area. In this sense the relationship between different and changing scales becomes a metaphor of relativity in terms of size and impact.

In a dance performance two aspects of time play a crucial role—the total length of the piece and the timing of the scenes. Because of the specific task of the performance, where traces and shadows and reflections are investigated and the repetitions and frozen moments are important, the 40-minute material is run four times in turn without marking the beginning and the end. The simplest answer to why the performance has four almost identical cycles is the

relation to the cyclical time of nature, where linear duration does not play a big role. The next step is to show repetition not only as a rehearsal tool and a tool applied to separate scenes, but also to let it happen during the show to remind one on an even larger scale that repetition is impossible, because the person, the space, the audience change every second, they age every second and these traces make pure repetition impossible—only technology can do that or pretend to do so. Thus, both people and nature even if ruled by cyclical nature also remain under the sharp teeth of linear time. Because everything that happens leaves marks on bodies and minds. The use of the format could be a tool to accumulate information in space, imprint it there and also in the minds of dancers and those audience members who ignore the restart moment as a reason to leave.

Even if the reception and perception of the dance work varies dramatically, some common features should be pointed out. Most of the performance could be perceived as a pure movement, an atmospheric experience of the dancer's communication with an invisible partner, which the audience has the privilege to see. It is a very rare case to see more or in this situation to see what is actually not there, what is imagined, felt but does not have any flesh and blood. Only the technology of choreographing made the air around one body possess visible features so much reminding of another body. This is a clear reference to the huge role of the audience in the creation of any contemporary art product.

The title *Dances of the Lost* could give one reason to think about dissolving in the eternal harmony of nature, or on the contrary about desperate people lost in the wildness, or about exile, or suffering of the ones left by lovers or admirers. Whatever the memories of every member of the audience, the performance brought up scars and projections in a psychological sense. Some people experienced meditation and stayed for all four rounds. Some listened to the music. Others felt proud that they remembered how the performance started and left after the first 40 minutes. Friends came for the last round because they wanted to bring flowers. The decision of members of the audience to arrive and leave when they wanted made a complicated network of traces in the space—coming in, climbing up, climbing down the stairs, looking for a good angle, trying to enter quietly, trying not to be disturbed, etc. All these individual routes in combination with a single strict direction of the dance performance created an even more metaphysical atmosphere. Dancers came out from the small opening in the corner where the two screens meet, they followed their

predecessors and when the person in front left and passed the edge of the catwalk, they stayed alone to meet the follower. To enjoy it or escape the moment where they are the ones who are visible... or not? This is the point where even those who do not suffer from looking for signs raise the questions: What is at the end of the walk? What happens when a person steps down it? What happens when a dancer, immersing herself in the round projection on the floor, unfolds from the embryo position, steps down and leaves? Is it as simple as dying?

Some audience members may have answers to the questions; some may say that they simply do not know; others may respond with indifference. As the performance is part of the METAMIND way of thinking, all the answers and viewpoints are equally right. The more options that arise from the artistic event, the more proof we have that everything that dwells somewhere on the margins and in the shades defines our minds more than structures which lie in a straight line from the nose and are always kept in the focused lens.