

TO GET TO KNOW CYPRUS DANCE IN 5 DAYS?

Inta Balode

I had five days and I wanted to get to know Cyprus dance. I wanted to get to know it from people - from talking to them, watching them, listening, seeing, participating and at the only end looking up „contemporary dance in Cyprus” in Google (if really needed, for example, to check spelling of some names and/or titles). To prepare the ground I wrote an e-mail to Natasa Georgiou (executive director of Dance House Lemesos), where I offered something like this: *”I would appreciate if somebody from dance community would have time to meet and talk about how it is to be a dance artist in Cyprus. I would like to be "a shadow" for a day or half a day, i.e., go to classes, rehearsals etc. to see what the dancer's/choreographer's day is (..) And the biggest thing for me as a dance writer is HOW to communicate, WHAT to communicate, how to describe indescribable and how to encourage people to have space in their minds to make their own decisions and discoveries in the arts. That's the only legal way to resist the stream of political and economical propaganda which affects us more and more”* etc. Natasa forwarded the letter to the Cypriot choreographers. As it turned out only one responded – Lia Haraki, some other wanted to respond but, as it happens so often, got dug under everyday jobs. Here is my first conclusion – dance people in Cyprus as it is also in Latvia and many other places are very busy, dance people don't like theoretical things so much, especially theoretical and not very clear things as my letter was in some aspects.

So this is where I stand – I don't know anybody in person; I have five days and only human tools. Basic elements to look for are: *European Dance Festival* (because of the specific model it was the main reason to come to Cyprus in June), education, spaces, financing, aesthetics, criticism, audience, institutions and artists. Bellow you will see what I got to know from people. I consciously choose to mix it all together and not to name who said what. In small countries sometimes it is better not to be too precise (though nobody asked me to be discreet). Also when seeing statement without an author it looks different. So all the information bellow is the combination of what I got to know from Natasa Georgiou, choreographer Lia Haraki and her dancers, dancer and choreographer Demmie da Costa, Greek choreographer Konstantinos Mihos, Gesine Daniels (dancer in K.Mihos work „Bull”), Jacqueline Owen (executive director of Cyprusdance) and some other people I don't know names of. To compare two similar in size and

population but not at all in geographical location countries each paragraph has parallels to the situation in Latvia. Latvian context is given in the similar fast way and the choices about what to talk about are made according to Cyprus story. It is obvious that given rules of the game cannot give objective insight, and it was not my aim. I was curious about how simple, sometimes very informal stories sound when put together in more formal frame. How much truth lies in 5 days experience, does short time make things look better or worse, how comparison to my own country changes the story about Cyprus?

After I came back another Latvian went to residency in Cyprus – choreographer Kristīne Vismane spent almost a full month working with local children and developing her choreographic ideas. So I asked her to add something from her experience as well. Broadly speaking her answer after reading my text was that I have said so much already that she doesn't have anything to add. Still some very interesting ideas came up. Here is Kristīne's story about what she did as opposed to my "get to know" (some other quotes will come later): *"During my time in Cyprus I spent most of my energy on choreographic research which was initiated from my subjective view of the surroundings, local people, way they think and behave and my being there. I was less interested in the contemporary dance activities and context more in conditions and people in general. My investigation was more based on subjective notions and feelings than on the facts. I locked myself into my creative research."*

EUROPEAN DANCE FESTIVAL

The specific model of the European Dance Festival was the main reason for me to come to Cyprus in June. In Latvia where contemporary dance is still often seen as something peripheral the festival which is organized by the Ministry of Culture and Education and the embassies seems something incredible and makes to think that contemporary dance in Cyprus has even superior position among other arts forms. The festival for me like an outsider looks as a strong political act, where ministry approaches embassies to ask them to propose contemporary dance artists for the festival. Then embassies look for the artists, invite them and report back to the Ministry of Education and Culture in Cyprus. For us it sounds as completely opposite

direction, because the most common way is artists knocking at the heavens door with hope that somebody will open, will support, will give chance to travel etc.

When talking to Cypriot dance community my dream story didn't seem so dreamy anymore. As I understood in the beginning (festival took place for 15th time already) the point was to use dance to strengthen collaboration among countries and also to bring artists with money coming from other countries. Now money comes mainly from ministry and not everybody is very happy with the program and people are little skeptical about the festival in general. People say that the festival lacks curator and common vision, even if there are three people in the committee deciding which of three proposed from each country will be invited, still sometimes completely different artists come (most likely because of money but could be also personal contacts). So one more problem – nobody knows what really happens in the embassy's who are the three artists offered, how they get picked and what they represent. It all depends on the embassies, of how much they want to work, of what they want to show. In case they want to show out, some very established, old and provocative at all companies come and then it's a question – whether it is still contemporary dance?

On the other hand it is obvious that festival attracts audience, and not only regular one but judging from the languages heard also tourists and foreigners living in Cyprus (it was interesting to see that main media support was from Russian media). For Carolyn Carlson dance company (France) the Rialto Theater was almost full, and many spoke French. There were less people for Greek performance (choreographer: Konstantinos Mihos) – it made me ask two questions: Greeks talking about topical questions, about crisis bring in much less people than never-ending search for abstract poetic beauty? Greek company seems almost like local that's why less people come?

EDUCATION

There are over 100 private ballet schools, one municipal ballet school in Limassol and few contemporary dance schools (I know one, which is run by Natasa Georgiou). As in Latvia we have one State Ballet School (Riga Choreography School) we wouldn't give this for us strong name "ballet schools" to those structures, we would most likely call them - „dance studios". I

doubt anybody has counted how many we have in Latvia – there are several for ballet, many modern and contemporary, many gymnastic-like and very many which don't know what exactly they are teaching and, of course, hundreds of folk dance groups.

People said it is good to learn ballet basics in Cyprus, other people said that there are several Cypriot dancers working at world known ballet companies in Europe, so it must be true that schools are good. In Latvia some graduates of Riga Choreography School are very strong and competitive dancers, as regards private sector ballet there remains mainly on amateur level. The situation in contemporary dance in this aspect is better – current professionals in the field has started dancing in both Riga Choreography School and some of the many dance schools and studios.

There is a Bachelor of Arts program in Dance in University of Nicosia. Still many people go to study abroad – mainly to Greece or United Kingdom. In Latvia we have 3 schools to study dance. Latvian Academy of Culture has program in Contemporary Dance Choreography (students are accepted every 4 years), Latvian Academy of Music has program in Choreography (used to be strong for stage folk dance choreographers, is supposed to be stronger for ballet but currently is not, seems to be searching for the right way of working). Riga Pedagogical University has program for dance teachers (the level of education seems to be working only to teach dance in schools or studios without professional ambitions; also recently international committee suggested to close the program). The discussions about how many schools are needed and how they programs should looks gets on the table time to time.

SPACES

The most important space (both in physical and emotional sense) for contemporary dance in Cyprus is Dance House Lemesos, which has one beautiful studio, office and open air terrace where gatherings and performances are held. Artists in residence get opportunity to use studio at Dance House Lemesos. Other studios should be rented but as there are many schools it's not a problem to find one and it is also possible to negotiate good deals. In Latvia there is no Dance house, nobody has his own rehearsal space, there are no organizations offering them for free, all studio space is rented or smart ways are found (for example, working for some dance studio,

school etc.and catching moments to use the space in between the official work). The lack of common center, shared space is significantly felt in the dance community. When I visited Dance House Lemesos I realized more clearly than ever – how important it is and that seemingly so little matters so much.

Regarding performance spaces in Cyprus – Rialto Theater in Limmasol is the place where dance performances are programmed and once the work is included in the prpgram of the venue the artist doesn't have to pay rent. Theater has around 500 seats. Other spaces are rented – average price per night is around 700-1400 EUR. In Latvia all performance spaces are rented – price range is from very similar, but sometimes it's complicated to get certain dates because most of the spaces used are institutional repertoire theaters, so only “bad dates” go for rent.

Both in Latvia and Cyprus site-specific performances are also an issue and through them new locations are found. In Cyprus situation is more organized there is even site-specific festival and the works got commissioned for that. In Latvia site-specific locations are chosen for artistic but also often because of the lack of appropriate performance spaces and space availability.



RIALTO Theater in Limassol

FINANCING

In Cyprus there are several programs managed by the Ministry of Culture and Education and Dance House Lemesos where artists can apply for project based funding. In many cases the financing wouldn't be much more than 50% of expenses (earlier it was 50 %, now it is 1/3). In Latvia funding is also project based and comes mainly from State Culture Capital Foundation, it almost impossible to predict the proportion which will be funded (it can range from around 20% till 100% for smaller projects).

Neither in Cyprus nor in Latvia there are permanently subsidized companies. In Cyprus there is no ballet company (though there is one neoclassical troupe called *Cyprusballet* aiming to get permanent company's status and with that funding), in Latvia there is National Ballet company at the Latvian National Opera, which is the only place where a dancer can get full salary and social security (there is no freelance status in Latvia yet) . In Cyprus by saying „company” usually 1-3 choreographers working together are understood. They hire dancers for separate projects. In Latvia by saying “company” we would think of permanent group of people working together for longer period of time.

In Cyprus during last years the Pilot project was started – it means giving larger grant (26000 EUR) from Ministry of Culture and Education to 3 choreographers each year to develop whatever project they want to (for year 2012 one of them is Lia Haraki, I was lucky to be in couple rehearsals). Another good option to produce work is to get commissioned by a festival (Site-specific dance festival, Cyprus dance platform etc). In Latvia it is possible to get some yearly support next to projects through the program Support for non-governmental theater organizations (run by State Culture Capital Foundation and Ministry of Culture). The grant is meant to sustain company, but the numbers are very small (last year the largest was not even 7000 EUR). In Cyprus minimal salary is 950 EUR, an average dancers makes 1200 EUR per month. In Latvia minimal salary is 285 EUR, a dancer just with being contemporary dance is one or several projects in average will not earn more than 150 EUR, so will need to teach, to dance for TV shows etc. to somehow make living. A dancer in the National Ballet company makes around 700 EUR.

In Cyprus total financing from the Ministry of Culture for dance per year is around 600000 EUR, which is around 10 times less as for theater where funding is also organized

differently, i.e. companies get yearly subsidy. What is the budget for dance in Latvia? I don't know where to find statistics, but it wouldn't also help much because if the Ballet budget is included it would look large and wouldn't give any common impression about dance funding. So for me funding for dance in Cyprus looks very good, on the other hand people related to ballet said it is not good all, people linked to contemporary dance were little less pessimistic, still they were also not very happy. Of course, it can never be good enough or it is good for one side, not so good for another. And truth lies in between.

AESTHETICS

From everything said before it is possible to see already that contemporary dance in Cyprus seems to be more developed, thought about and also funded than ballet. In Latvia as it was in Soviet time's ballet is still "the king" both in funding and audience number and attitudes, i.e., thinking that ballet is professional dance all the rest is amateur. Next to it the vast amateur field of stage folk dance, "real" folk dance and different dance styles exist. Contemporary dance has proven that it is also professional dance, that it is arts, so it has gained chance to get funded.

So in this sense contemporary dance dominates. Regarding the question about what happens within contemporary dance, none of the people I talked to gave certain description, certain trends etc. It seems that Cyprus dance possesses large variety: from conceptual to movement based (some started out in a conceptual way now going towards movement and I think this really is some general nerve of contemporary dance of today), from burning hearts inspired to just do something. Influences come from British and Greek dance because many choreographers have studied there, but it's logical that dance acquires local specifics as well. In Latvia many choices of how contemporary dance will look were made also from the point of view of proving that it is professional art form and from the point of view of getting to people's hearts. So the quality of dancing has always been important (one should see that the dancer can dance) and also very extreme and conceptual, and provoking work seems to be avoided to give the audience smooth entry into the art form. Latvian dance has influences from Finnish and British dance where dancers and choreographers have studied and took workshops. The main

feature is – the dance work should look decent and professional, that’s why dance people are smart in using space, lighting, creating atmosphere etc.

In Cyprus I heard an expression: “The ballet doesn’t fit Cypriot body”. I have thought about similar things when I was in Faroese islands. Is there something racist in this expression? We all know that that there are excellent ballet dancers of many different nationalities. Does ballet fit more tall and pale Latvian body? Is there “national body” at all? It’s too broad to answer here but I think sometimes we too much ignore old style anthropology, on the other hand sometimes we find too funny excuses.

Kristīne also had time to see some of the performances the Site Specific festival and her comment is pretty direct and simple: *“People dance in the same manner as they do in Latvia, dancers think in a similar manner as Latvians, also the site-specific performances are made in the same way as here. Sometimes I had a feeling that I’m seeing on the Latvian student’s exam works – when the performer’s awareness “I am on the stage” switches on then dancers have this little zombie-like look we know so well. Similar composition of the works, similar movement material, nothing strongly different.”*



A moment from the first rehearsal week of Lia’s Haraki new work

CRITICISM

People say that in Cyprus there are no dance critics. I heard there is one choreographer writing about dance, but people say she is pretty far from the living process and has very certain taste. So critics are awaited for on the one hand on the other people say that Cypriots have trouble in accepting criticism (but who doesn't?), because of Greek mama syndrome according to which the kid is always great and beautiful. In general press in Cyprus is very open and ready to publish texts on dance, but the problem is the lack of writers. Sometimes writers specializing in other arts get talked into writing about some performances, and I heard there writings are very good even if they are not specialists. An important thing stressed was that it is very important for dance critic to travel around, to go to festivals on regular basis, to know what happens, to meet people. Very often producers and festival directors are invited and funded to travel, but there are only few festivals welcoming critics and offering support for that.

In Latvia there are around 3 people writing about dance on a regular basis. I call myself “dance critic” (but who knows if it makes me dance critic), Dita Eglīte calls herself “dance and theater critic”, when we get interviewed about ballet performances we got called “ballet critics”. Others writing about dance are choreographers (usually only when invited), theater critics (there are many in Latvia because there is university program for that but few of them have interest in dance), some bloggers. Trouble accepting criticism is everywhere, I have felt not saying hello, but I also know that I change with time and more and more become advocate of dance in general, i.e., writing softer in some cases just to support artists in what they do in case I see it as serious work. Regarding media, after closing of culture weekly paper and after closing of theater magazine there are few places where texts about dance appear. Daily papers give less space to dance, leading daily paper shows almost no interest in Latvian dance. That's why we started at least websites where texts about appear on regular basis – www.journal.dance.lv, www.ballet.dance.lv. Because of that music magazine “Mūzikas saule” offered space for dance as well. In general, media doesn't show large interest in reviews (more in previews, because there is always some deal in it), also when a writer is needed it is not so easy to find. So there are still many things to work on.

AUDIENCE

It seems that contemporary dance audience in Cyprus is more or less the same as anywhere else: it's not so large, there are many people who know each other, and it's possible to sell one or two nights. Some stories proved how much more people you can get into the theater if you address them directly. Filling up almost 600 seats for the first work is a big deal. Of course, the question remains for how many times you can do that? Probably answer is simple – when people start coming to see your work without personal invitation it means you had chosen the right profession. But if you have never taken people by hand and brought them to see your work, maybe you will never get to know how much you are liked or disliked. Maybe you don't want to know? So two clues to attract audience - how famous you are and how you present work. People say the audience can be bigger as it now. What should be done? How can we work in way that audience feels as welcome as personally invited?

There is still some fear from contemporary dance also in Latvia: it's elitist, it's unclear, it's depressing, but more than anything else lately I hear: "I would go but I don't like the feeling that I'm the only person in the theater who is not friend with everyone else". In Latvia the situation is similar – selling two performances in the capital, then several performances in other cities and more or less done. Still it is obvious that the audience is very different depending on the space where work is performed. When the small hall of the Latvian National opera is rented audience is very different from the one in small independent theaters, even if the choreographer or work is the same. This reminds again of the fact how important it is to have space for dance, space that everybody recognize as dance space, space that is run by a curator or director who's taste audience start trusting and recognizing. I believe that contemporary dance is valid also for more conservative people than arts students; it just needs to be smartly communicated.

INSTITUTIONS AND ARTISTS

Statistics very often lie, but still it's the only tool to collect quantitative data. How many choreographers are in Cyprus, and in Latvia? Not so easy to answer, but we can look at the situation through certain events. In 2011 in Cyprus 32 choreographers applied for Cyprus dance platform, 15 got accepted for it (9 were from Limassol, 3 from Nicosia, 1 from Larnaka and 1 from Paphos). It's a very large number for country with around 900 000 inhabitants. In Latvia (populations is more than 2 times bigger than in Cyprus (2,2 million people)) dance platform is linked to the international dance festival "Time to dance", but because of the budget the works are not commissioned, festivals is just a chance to show work to larger audience. Usually around 5-6 works get presented. Would we get over 30 applications in case works would be commissioned? Definitely not in the first years, but with time, with growing prestige of platform, with growing confidence of artists we could get even more. Because already now we have more than 50 locally educated contemporary dance choreographers.

All dancers are very busy or if not very busy then busy with grabbing short moments of rest, this is how I felt during my stay and it was the same during Kristīne's residency: *"I didn't have much chance to meet local dancers, because the ones who were not on the holidays were very busy with the rehearsals for the Site Specific festival. And some things I got to know you have already written."*

People say that in Cyprus there are few good dancers, but there are more good choreographers. They say in Greece it is vice versa. Some people say that Latvian dancers are good, that Latvian dance artists are better performers than creators. It is not so easy to divide, because the ones who are really active do both things, the ones who only dance for other people usually are more linked with other genres not so much with contemporary dance.

In Cyprus there is an institution for dance and not only theoretically and on volunteer basis but a real functioning NGO with its own building and budget, and possibilities to support artists. Dance House Lemesos is there since 2007, the NGO exists since 2005. There is one employee, i.e., two part time employees, others get hired per project. Of course, they work much more but this is the point to start from – one person has certain number of hours per day to work for the good of the dance. In Latvia the organization taking care for dance is Latvian Professional Contemporary Dance Choreographers Association (www.dance.lv). It does a lot but it has only

couple rented square meters as the office space (not anymore since September 2012, because building went under construction and finding another would be pricy, so offices moved back to homes) and couple thousands Euros per year to pay rent and pay for the internet connection. Still everything happens and when I was reporting in the conference in Tallinn on what we have, nobody believed that there are no employed people. Also, nobody has really strongly, permanently, repeatedly asked for regular subsidy. Projects, projects, projects, first prove who you are then ask etc. Philosophies can be different, should somebody from the ministry come and offer the help, should people go and ask? Probably truth is somewhere in between and the main thing for both sides is to know that one side doesn't exist without another and that talking should never end.

And at the very end one more comment from Kristīne: *“In general people in Cyprus were more open, less skeptical; they are definitely enjoying life more than we do. And there are reasons for that: they have sun, more money and support, less little things to worry about and which take so much attention off the full dedication to what you do and what you like to do. Limassol seeded a bohemian place in its lightness and responsiveness.”*



Beautiful terrace of the Dance House Lemosos