

Where does love take us and what does knowledge mean to the act of creation?

Video: repertory

Introduction:

I have been working as a Choreographer for 27 years, touring and working in more than 30 countries, making performances, films, TV-productions and events of all kind. Through all these years, I have been collaborating with 13 composers, producing original music for my work. In the video you overheard fragments from at least five of them.

Composing a life, dance or music, demands the same tools. It demands an approach to life, to politics, ethics, aesthetics, skills... and it demands a great amount of will. In this talk I will present my thoughts on this. I am very honoured to be part of your conference and I hope that my experience as a choreographer will be of relevance to you as composers.

I set limits to the moment in order to keep my focus trained on it. I put up boundaries around the time I want to defend and break down others that surround what I am attracted to. I stretch things out, reject them, blow them up and resist them – I resist my own existence as well. But I also manage to find those moments that are capable of containing eternity, passion and the splendour that inspires that obstinate grubbing my search involves. Somewhere I will find my way. It's just a question of composition.

What is it that turns movement into dance? Sound into music? It is not what one does, but why one does what one does. A matter of will. This will has then to be given substance in form, provided with a space, to find its proper proportions of time (rhythm) and energy. The process of composition consists of this kind of searching for contexts and it is unceasing. It is necessary to dare to give it an “ego”.

All the sore spots to do with being human are clothed in words by means of what we call language, writing, literature, definitions - rules. But beneath all this superficial apparatus it is movement - the intuitive and the composed - that resounds. People radiate with varying degrees of brilliance depending on their ability to listen. Movement sounds: whispering -crying - howling. We caress, we grab and we strike. It is the ability to be present while all this is going on that is of significance. Obviously words have a value for me as well. Like the words we use in writing, like the words we read in a book, like the words that daze us with the explosive power of poetry, like the words I hear myself speaking. But where is there balance at the level of language? The tolerance?

What I am looking for is the linguistic dimension of movement, to eavesdrop on it... and to look for the links between this process and the way the rest of the world views “language”. How do we use movement? I look around and there is movement everywhere. I take hold - test out - reject and fit my choices into a context.

To work is to make your self available. To expose your vulnerability, and with your skin removed, to expose your nakedness to experience. It is a particularly painful process in which the great danger lies in the risk of falling. I am keeping my balance on a boundary to one side of which lie a mass of received safety factors (like confirmed “truths”, codes, more or less

trendy patterns) while on the other there is only bottomless darkness.

In order to keep my balance, I have to mobilise all my skills: I train my body in order to master the technical ability that gives me freedom, I work with compositional techniques so as to be able to select what is important. Refraining from doing something is a particular problem. To refrain from what may feel seductive but is not necessary. To say No.

Life is not comprehensible. What we lack creates an everlasting hunger within us and a silence without. The mind as the place we inhabit leaves the body behind and at a loss. A heavy burden. The mists of what has been, rise from the ground. The deads are taking a rest. Being able to lean on all they have said and done is a good thing. But what is it I have to do? It is the HERE and NOW I have at my disposal.

Time only exists when someone defines it. All movement requires time. To experience time, there has to be movement. There also has to be something that is still, static, in order for movement to be perceived a space. Are there other ways of relating to time than those that can be measured? The time of a movement is always the key factor in determining its expression. I reach out my hand towards you. Is this the start of a caress or a blow? In dance time is relative. In order for my extended hand to be comprehensible, my intention, my will must be perceptible. What is the speed with which I reach out my hand to you, how much force, is it straight at you or from below or?

Movement communicates from a ground of intention, conscious or unconscious. The body is permanently active in its address, but a grammar of language is impossible since its variables are infinite and interpretations always dependent on cultural, social as well as purely physical factors. So what is that communicates, an intention or a desire? All movement has a time, energy, and a spatial sequence. It is through studying these parameters and developing our skills in their use and composition, that a conscious attitude to what is communicative is made possible.

Meaning comes into being in the eye of the beholder. In your eye. We all carry with us previous experiences, abilities and memories. These are the only tools we have for interpreting what is going on, whether it is a performance, a concert or an everyday meeting in an everyday room. In my work as an artist I “paint” with all the components that affect what you see, what you feel and think in your encounter with the work. Choreography is dealing with movement in space. Choreographic composition is a tool for achieving what I am after. A way of bringing order to chaos and of stretching the boundaries of what is possible. A way of activating space.

As an artist I am engaged in reshaping so-called reality, creating it anew, so that it corresponds better to my desires and my needs. What I have to make happen is what would otherwise not occur, I have to create the images that would otherwise not be seen, make space for what would otherwise not find room. In dance the kind of knowledge that is not considered acceptable elsewhere, becomes important. Our physical memories emerge as events of significance. Events that take place in rooms, in spaces. Scents, tastes, movements, feelings, thoughts... The unarticulated. Every day we tread the paths of memory and wander around in the tracks of what has been. In dance I make use of exterior space in order for the interior to become visible.

The body is our dwelling-place.

(I close my eyes and put my hands over my ears. There is a booming in my head. Through my eyelids I can see dark red and black. The space within is unbelievable large. Endless. My skin becomes a thin membrane between here and there. Fragile.

I am standing on the Arctic ice where the space is an unending white nothingness. Beneath me are three thousand metres of ocean. An inconceivable depth. The ice becomes a thin boundary between light and dark. Or - I am standing on the stage at Dansens hus in Stockholm and the interplay between stage and auditorium is contained by red brick walls.

The space I find myself in is my stage for that part of life that is taking shape right this minute. Right here and now. You who are looking at me and listening to what I have got to say (or what I chose not to put into words) – are listening to what you want to hear and seeing what you want to see. Part of your interpretation is determined by this room, this space.)

There are no movements left to discover. The human body and its movement have been thoroughly analysed from kinetic, medical, social and anthropological perspectives – indeed, from any conceivable viewpoint. What remains as an inexhaustible source to be explored is the linguistic perspective and how this relates to dance as an art form. I put myself through what I want to have tested. I create experiments inside my own body. This helps my ideas to form. My experience is stored in my memory. What happens on the outside corresponds to its equivalent on the inside. The work consists of repetition. Over and over again. Desire and aversion. Happiness and anxiety. All the opposites, in fact, that provide both life and work with their dynamism.

Sound moves...

Listening to the everyday is like deciphering an unknown code. Slowly I put the puzzle together out of all the impressions I receive and some kind of meaning is revealed. Sounds, movements and smells transport me through time and space. I construct my own reality. Movement is the key and sound comes with it.

In my work to create a kind of meaning new contexts are formed. I listen to movement. The movements of the body possess their own tonality: long, short, hard, soft... I see music as an extension of movement. If choreography is the composing of movements, providing the tumbling fragments with a form, then music is its counterpart in terms of sound. Form is the foundation for everything that creates meaning.

I have always looked for the music when a new work is going to take shape. I have come across many different composers as part of marvellous collaborative efforts, but the one who occupies a special position in relation to my work is the Swedish composer Tommy Zwedberg. Tommy and I have been working together on or off for twenty years.

Tommy's music reveals to me a keen ear, sensitive to sound of every kind. He draws out of the moment its own particular sound and makes use of it in a form of musical creation that is profoundly personal and with an entirely distinctive character. He makes me hear what I have never heard before and listen to what is going on with expectation. His music reflects

something profoundly existential that has to do with the very process of being alive. That sensitivity is unique.

Together we have been able to explore the process of composition on the basis of movement and different sound sources and our different ways of listening to what is going on. Tommy has worked with electro-acoustic music in the main, although in our collaborative efforts we have worked both with orchestras, ensembles and soloists of various kinds. Nevertheless we frequently return to the fantastic opportunities provided by electro-acoustic music to explore sound-worlds and to invent new spaces. The reality we create only becomes a whole when all our senses are made use of, when the image becomes complete.

(The organic sound in a body or in an object is listened to and is changed into a new form in which silence too has its allotted place. A silence exists. A silence that is overheard in empty rooms, in timeless intervals of the one who is absent.)

I may have heard the sound a thousand times without my mind picking up on it. And then it becomes accentuated and made conscious. It is placed in a new context. Music. The music makes demands both on my thoughts and feelings. And so we come together in working with dance. The dance and music conduct their dialogue and the context becomes clear. The work takes shape in the space that exists between what was and what will be. It is there, in the space in between that everything is played out and new insights created.

Seeing the everyday as the very essence of life is a challenge. To see the moments follow one another in a succession of possibilities. What is actually real? There is space in the everyday for all the peculiarities, and much of the mystery, life has to offer. Secret rooms open up with new insights, and an unexpected meeting can suddenly provide exactly what was needed to make progress with an idea or something that has not yet been articulated. We take what we have experienced - together with our expectations - into that space where anything can happen. In the work of art there is space for dreams and desires, for recognition and questioning, for the construction of identity and affirmation of the self.

As artists, we are often solitary. We are used to working alone, to being vulnerable and exposed. Experience has taught me that what I need in my desire for more extensive, more profound, working processes is the presence of others, their insights and thoughts about what is going on. Working collaboratively with composers, for example, generates much that is positive as well as a great deal of confusion and resistance. All the things that force me to strive for greater clarity in terms of what I want to achieve.

I am a critical listener. I think that much of the contemporary art music I hear is crap. Saturated for too long with too much. So often just a demonstration of what is technically possible with one flourish coming after another like one big exclamation of "Look what I can do!" How dreary. But then I get to hear something that is just so stimulating and challenging or enjoyable that all the crap is wiped from my memory. It's the same with dance.

There is often space in what is simple for the clarity of an urgent address. Meaning is created when form can be made use of in an assured way. Music can challenge me intellectually, seduce my body and transport me to that unique space in between. I leave behind all that has been just to be with and in the music, until it is time to move on.

The collaboration between choreographer and composer has to be grounded in a shared understanding of the goal and meaning of the work. I consider original music for dance as an

essential part of the coming into being of the work and also as part of what defines the space in which it evolves – composition.

This is a way of looking at a work, as a rediscovered context, which will give us space for everything which exists beyond words. As that which makes visible the very pulse and rhythm of life.

Video: the end of For Better, For Worse

As audience, as listeners, we all become co-creators of meaning, of significance. We assign value, we give opinions, we think and we look at what happens in different ways. We create different meanings and assign different values to various goals. In this way we become more clearly defined to each other and can go on to reach a dialogue. New processes come into being. We go forward, leaving a performance or a concert – changed. The dream abolishes the validity of linear time, like the scenic moment. What is being staged is the human condition. It is you who give art its meaning. It is in the encounter with you that art comes into being.

Time cannot be partitioned off. NOW - is what we feel, we have to find the place we want to be. Life consists of so many sore spots... It is will that is needed to make life bearable. The only peace to be found in this search is that to be discovered in those moments when we become one with the eternal. When we abandon “control” and give ourselves over to what is happening. This is the proper place for art. Sometimes I conceive of the body as a strange hiding-place for various memories and experiences. Like I child I can be thrilled and triumphant about the things I find. The revelations. Other times it all stays hidden - well concealed (in the dark). Sometimes it can be so tempting just to step into the darkness and remain there. To let go, to give up, be looked after... Doubts.

The hindrance posed by having to keep things within bounds, by having to avoid excess, constitutes a major threat to art. When the principle of moderation rules and the utilitarian is applied as a standard to the work of art. What is the use of art, what good does it do? This is how our minds are numbed and turned to popularise and commercialised forms of entertainment whose goals are quite different to those of art. They are adapted to be just right, to fit in with our expectations or to be the means to something else. The human being is rendered passive out of a misguided sense of benevolence and indifference takes over. What is created is an aesthetically pleasing surface whose aim is to mirror the expectations of the public. Art is not possible without the breaking of this polished mirror. We have to be bold enough to see through it. A kind of self-acknowledgement, of the madness within us. An affirmation of both what is ugly within us and what is beautiful, of what is violent, of our passion or of the very particular poetry of stillness. Without this art loses its meaning.

In concrete terms the process would appear to involve attempts in my isolation to try to fathom what can be intercepted in what is going on, to find my way to the boundaries which are necessary to the formulation of an idea, a vision. I improvise and work with movement until I have the basic materials. With these experiences as my foundation I look for collaborators: composers for work with music, visual artists for work with space, etc. Together we work to create the external form which will provide the “framework” for the performance. We lay down the spatial framework and the time the performance will last. After which each of us makes our own way in trying to widen and deepen the theme, we start “sketching”. This process encompasses meeting after meeting in which we talk about what we have done, we try things out, we give and take. It is incredibly stimulating. Only when this process has been established, do I meet with the dancers.

The dancers, circus artists, musicians, singers... The performers are the very heart of the work. It is they who become its face. This means that the selection of the dancers, their personalities, technical skills, ages, gender and personal “baggage” is of crucial importance for what will be expressed in the art. They need to be able to participate in a lengthy process in which it is the degree of motivation which determines the outcome. The work is a struggle, not least because of the provocation which is often necessary if one is to be brave enough to leave behind the seeming safety we are usually so bent on finding in order to cope in our daily lives. What this requires is a great degree of trust and this trust has to be mutual. We choose each other. I want the performers to perform as though it were to be the last thing they ever do...

Mystery is what entices body and mind to go beyond the ordinary. That which cannot be defined and not even timidity can resist. The mysterious would rather be approached with adulation or, in some cases, in torment. Seductively alluring, threatening, terrifying... the feelings, the intellect can become totally engaged with this indefinable something and it needs to be approached with a firm resolve, a keen mind and memory. You have to make an effort but the struggle is well worth the trouble.

Without mystery the environment becomes one-dimensional. Scientists, both men and women, search astutely for what will increase our knowledge and make the world more comprehensible, easier to deal with and more manageable. Mystery is there somewhere as the stimulus that entices, the intangible something that always slips away. I am seduced. I am affected by the sensual aspect of what I experience, by rage and hate during confrontation, by joy in the experience of completeness. Slipping around inside the sphere of mystery invoked by what is intangible in the world involves self-exposure, laying oneself open. Pretty much every one of us tends to wobble around our lives. We step sure-footedly forward, start to lose our balance and then get the jitters.

It is us who define what is called “reality”. It is we who create sets of values and ways of seeing the world. In our efforts to achieve rationality and control we restrict our freedom to live. Through art we can make space available for what cannot be comprehended, space for what cannot be made to conform. Art reflects both our past and our present. The best aspects of creative work in the arts also point our sights forward. We live in a time when the task we face is to reawaken hope. To relight the fire in the many eyes in which it has died. To be allowed to be. We construct our identity in the awareness of cultural belonging. And so way we are all in motion.

Integrity and artistic freedom are one thing - the practicalities of life, another. Those of us who work with dance and music need to affirm one another’s successes in order to gain the respect of the rest of society and to ensure its support for the organisation and financial development we need if we are to go on. Even if we cannot always fly, more of us should be leaving our places of safety, those rigidly policed hidey-holes we get stuck in. Knowledge about the history of dance can be of help when contemporary art is to be analysed and evaluated. The artistic process forms part of a social context. We exist. We work with and among people in a culture that sets its stamp on us all. Art mirrors this present in relation to what was. Darkness, light, cold, heat – love and hate, in a complex weave of experience.

Official cultural policy sets up goals of its own but the responsibility for their implementation seems many times to lie nowhere. Ignorance characterises the decision-making chain of command which relies far too much on “opinions” and it is these opinions that ensure our survival or condemn us.

Words like “normal”, “common sense” and “quality” are normative concepts that reflect received ideas based on the experience of past events. The work of the artist serves as an impassioned refusal to be compared with what we have previously known. Most of the rooms I enter confirm what we take for granted. Four walls, a floor and a roof. Imagine a house.

We are continually voyaging between inner and outer rooms, between mental and physical spatialities. It is in an external space I am meeting you today. We come together as part of an agreement based on the conditions our various professions have established. In what I call my private space I expose my vulnerability to those I know well; it is in my internal space that all that cannot be contained elsewhere takes place while my dreams and premonitions live in my subconscious. I distinguish these spaces and keep them separate through habits, behaviour and qualifications. This is how I maintain order in myself.

A good room has space for the unpredictable. It has clear contours that set limits to the inside-outside dimension. It does not rub expectation up the right way and it isn't “saturated”. It has room for what human beings can bring to it, consciously and intuitively. It has space for encountering others. A good room stimulates movement in both body and soul. A space that is good for creativity is not a predictable one.

I use my eyes and ears differently if a room stimulates my senses. This dynamic is intensified by asymmetry, a brightly lit corner, a staircase, a ceiling... A deeper image is created by eyes that spontaneously look in different directions and levels. Warmth opens up my body, cold closes it down. The room must not be cold. It is hard to think when you are cold and I find it difficult to concentrate when I find the space I am in ugly. Seeing and listening means experiencing with the entire body.

The same sensitivity applies to sound. Music, the noises made by the ventilation system, by appliances, the fans on hard disks, traffic, chatter, wind, the hover or a drill, all affect what I see and experience. Match them to other sounds, sounds as colour, as temperature. Let different rooms have different temperatures and you will become more observant as you travel between them. Inside and out. Coolness opens the brain. All the senses take part in the process of becoming aware. Creativity requires goal-directed work, work that is driven by an aim and fuelled by confidence in intuition. The good room facilitates and stimulates this work.

Contemporary art involves forms of expression grounded within a contemporary description of history, using codes that are intelligible on the basis of one's cultural affinities. The reluctance to accept experience that cannot be predicted means that the ego becomes detached from any potential encounter. This results in boredom, a feeling of discomfort or the total refusal to engage with what the work is offering. There is a refusal to see, a refusal to hear. There is no desire to be aware of the taste, to smell one's way to information. No thank you. In this sense the encounter with art is no different from the meeting with another person or coming to terms with a new environment. Our intentions govern our senses.

I live my reality every day. I re-shape it. I experience, I see and I listen to what goes on around me. A multiplicity of information jostles in my experience of this reality. I interpret it

on the basis of what I have been through before and draw conclusions, which are sometimes revised even before they have been formulated. We are all born with the capacity to live our lives as creative beings, capable of thinking and feeling. The thin shell of the body encompasses an inexhaustible energy and a vast range of possibilities. We have to create ourselves as the people we want to be. But searching to fulfil one's capacities requires an exercise of will. Being a participant has its price and nothing is as pacifying as pleasure. The person who experiences pleasure and harmony often lacks the will to change which is the foundation of creative thinking.

Time exists only when we define it and we all exist somewhere in relation to the concept of space. We re-shape reality by composing it anew. It is as we make our way through the midst of our memories and experiences, that we make a leap and create new ones. Every day we re-master movement and its communicative capacity in telling silences or frenzied howls. It is never dumb. We stand, walk, look, close our eyes, laugh. We reach out a hand. Enjoy touching or find ourselves revolted by an unwanted touch. We are alive. All too soon we will find ourselves among those who are resting. When our bodies will burrow down to decompose in the soil and fall silent within. Until then we have every opportunity to make use of ourselves.

Video: Homeward Bound

Efva Lilja
www.efvalilja.se