When the bodies speak

Trauma and memory work in dance performance *Feathers*

Olga Nikolaeva

Abstract

The article explores the material interrelation in the dance performance *Feathers*, created by the small, independent theatre Upsala Circus located in Saint Petersburg. The socio-cultural circus project is led by Larisa Afanasyeva and refers to itself as a "Circus of Hooligans". For more than two decades, it has been working with children that come from dysfunctional and marginalized families or have special needs. The performance is a memory work that uses a tightly woven canvas of bodies, props, and sounds to encourage the spectator to reflect on their own past. Relying on the concepts of scenographic materiality and kinaesthetic empathy, the article analyses how the dance performance strives to communicate what potentially lies beyond representation – trauma of others. The dance performance explores the possibility of the language of bodies, human and non-human, in exploration of the past, often forgotten, hidden, or suppressed. The article examines how different means of communication available to the dance performance influence affective and meaning-making processes in the experience of the spectator.

Key words: dance, scenography, trauma, memory, Upsala Circus, materiality, kinaesthetic empathy

Olga Nikolaeva
E-mail: olganikolaeva86@gmail.com
ORCiD: 0009-0004-2737-3437

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> "To learn about oneself is the toughest among the challenges of learning." Alexander Etkind, "Warped Mourning"
>
> "Even at the best of times, the processes of reflexivity about the innermost are not easy." Tatiana Voronina, "Pomnit po-naschemu"

Miriam Haughton (2018:207) poignantly observes that "in a post-truth and revisionist historical moment, creating the conditions for analytical engagement, critical thinking, creative inspiration, and personal and collective intimacy and affect is a significant, and increasingly rare, act." This article examines one of those acts – the dance-circus performance *Feathers* staged by the independent, socio-cultural project Upsala Circus in Sant Petersburg, Russia.[1] It explores *Feathers* as an instance of a conversation between dance, staging, and society through spectators, addressing the pressing issue of acknowledging what role does trauma play in one's past and present.

In the dance performance *Feathers*, the past emerges from a complex

1. Feathers was created by director Larisa Afanasyeva, choreographers Yaroslava Mitrofanova and Yelena Rusina, scenographer Nikolay Khamov, and composer Daniil Koronkevich.

choreography of bodies and materials, tangible and ephemeral, which attempts to embody the weaving of the country's traumatic history and the personal memories that go with it. Primarily, it addresses the history of the Great Terror, where victim and perpetrators are bound together through generations as a result of the regime's atrocious acts. The article explores how moving/dancing bodies and their relations with the scenographic materiality of the performance build a space for empathic engagement from the audience, thus creating a potential for communicating the complex meaning of the unrepresentable – trauma.

This article is framing the performance in a socio-cultural context and explores the complexity of the dancers' physical labour in relation to the message the performance aims to convey and how it connects to the spectator's body. It seeks an answer to the question: how can dancing bodies communicate the ungraspable and traumatic experience of others? Furthermore, in order to answer this question, the article looks at dancing bodies as a critical element of the performance scenography, connecting to scenographic materiality, to the meaning of the performance and to the spectator's experience and empathic engagement.

The complexity of the performance lies in the constant negotiation that the dancers' bodies need to go through. They are required to represent and communicate the experience of others, a traumatic experience, that according to Cathy Caruth (1996) resides not in the physical body but in the mind. Yet, negotiating happens by means of physical bodies. Starting from the premisses that trauma does not possess its own language and, according to Sergey Oushakine (2009), even personal traumatic experience is in fundamental discord with available speech facilities, the analysis of *Feathers* explores the possibility of finding a new language, a channel for communicating the experience of others, to grasp that unimaginable, and share it with the spectator.

The analysis of the performance is especially relevant in present-day Russia, where political institutions exercise a repressive policy of censorship and revisionist history.[2] Denial of the country's traumatic past and persecution of those who still try to uncover that past, however dangerous and damaging it can be, leads to a total amnesia in society, which allows people to forget the crucial lessons of the history of the twentieth century. *Feathers* is an instance of engaging with the past in times and spaces when that past and its traumas become appropriated by the autocratic regime and are taken from the domain of individual memory into the domain of political agenda. The performance addresses the difficult past through means beyond words, that is of bodies, human and non-human, to create a possibility to draw connections between past and present. A possibility to learn and, which is the main message of the performance, to free oneself from the burdens of the past and to have an opportunity to change without forgetting where one came from.[3]

2. One of the major cases is the closing down of Memorial, an international human rights organization and Nobel Peace Prize winner that studies and examines human rights violations during the Soviet Period, especially focusing on identifying and commemorating victims of the Great Terror. Source: https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-60557468 (last accessed 5 March 2024).

3. The term difficult past defines a historical period or an event "that does not create a clear consensus in the society it addresses. It is often entangled in the discrepancy between how that past is seen in personal narratives and represented in the official discourse" (Nikolaeva 2024:72).

Past and present of Upsala Circus

Upsala Circus is in so many ways a unique, multifaceted project.[4] It is a non-profit, socio-cultural project that works with often neglected social groups, such as children and teenagers who come from dysfunctional and marginalized families, were convicted of crime at an early age, were homeless, or even children with special needs. The circus was first imagined by theatre director Larisa Afanasyeva in 2000. Together with German actress Astrid Shorn, Afanasyeva decided to help teenagers from a so-called *risk group* to change the deplorable predictability of their lives in Russia and break with the stigma of marginalization. As the circus took shape, it was no longer about only learning the basic tricks such as juggling but rather about merging elements of dance, parkour, acrobatics, and theatre. As a result, the Circus of Hooligans, as it often refers to itself, grew and took part in festivals across the country and abroad, for instance, participating in the legendary, multidisciplinary art event Fringe Festival.

All through its more than two-decade existence, the circus has adopted a strong stand against becoming a state theatre or accepting financial support from the State, even during tough times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As Afanasyeva explained in one of her recent interviews, that while at first the sociocultural initiatives like Upsala Circus seemed simply uninteresting to the authorities, later, especially after the year 2014, it became clear that her project and the State have completely different values (Rosh 2022). She emphasizes that the language the circus uses to speak to its audience about serious issues is often built on a language that is inconvenient to authorities (Rosh 2022). Already in 2017, the project started to develop beyond Saint Petersburg, and part of the circus' team went to work in the small city of Zeitz, Germany. The city is infamously considered an immigrant ghetto with low-income communities. The Circus began its work with a summer residence "Rebels for Peace", working primarily with children and teenage refugees from Syria and Afghanistan. Nowadays, the circus has an official branch in Zeitz, where it continues its work, now also with refugees from Ukraine. Its work in Saint Petersburg, however, did not stop.

On February 26, 2022 Upsala Circus sent out an email to its spectators and supporters, expressing their resistance against war and choosing culture and education instead of it. Along with the statement, they granted free online access to their dance performance *Feathers*. The email explained that the value of the performance is in its attempt to understand where the people connected by the country and its past are coming from and what weight of fear and repressions they carry to the present-day Russia. It stresses the importance of leaving behind the burden of past trauma when the present requires a radical change in the face of new crimes and violence perpetrated on innocent people. Cautious as it was, the sincere message that Upsala Circus sent and their continued work cannot be underestimated in the rapidly changing, repressive political climate in Russia, with new decrees on censorship and control produced every day.[5] In an interview after the immigration to Germany, Afanasyeva admits that, even while living

4. The name of the theatre project, Upsala, comes from the exclamation упс (ups, eng. oops) used in Russian language when something unexpected happens. For example, when someone drops something or has done something wrong with a clear knowledge of it being wrong. The name emphasizes the playfulness of the theatre's approach to their work where there is a space for small, innocent mistakes, annoyances, and mishaps.

5. In July 2022, a so-called "Group for the investigation of anti-Russian activities in the field of culture" was organized by different representatives of cultural sectors in Russia. This group is called to investigate and censor any expressions in the cultural sphere that can in any way undermine or criticize the political regime, the invasion of Ukraine, or discredit the army. A new "Cultural Front of Russia" was created in November 2022 by State Duma. The new committee also created a "code of honor" of cultural workers.

abroad, she and other members of the circus' team have to be cautious about what they say, to not harm those who still carry on their work in Russia (Rosh 2022). Those who stay continue to help those who need it most – those about whom the State did not care in the best of times, and nowadays are at risk of becoming part of the State's militaristic ideology.[6]

Feathers: Past, Present and Memory In-Between

Feathers, which premiered in October, 2020, is the first performance by Upsala Circus that focuses on the genre of the documentary theatre, all the while using the same, familiar technique of physical practice of contemporary dance and complex acrobatics.[7] Staged by the professional troupe of the circus' former students, *Feathers* is an intricate patchwork of the performers' personal childhood memories and the traumatic history of the country throughout the twentieth century explored by means of interrelations between the dancers' intense physical work, scenographic materials, low frequency techno music, and folklore songs from the Pskov region. Throughout the performance, these personal memories are shared by pre-recorded monologues that become part of the flow of the soundtrack. These stories are intended to create a common ground of a familiar, relatable space of curiosity, confidence, and cautious hope of childhood. They are a homage to the individual memory that is often deemed unimportant and too personal to have any significance in the grander scale of things. These stories are tentative explorations of the world that surrounds us and speak of summers in the countryside, childish games, and hidden secrets of long corridors in communal living apartments.

In contrast, allusive reminiscences of twentieth century trauma come without words. They transpire through changed intensities of the performers' physical labour and affective atmosphere created by the collaboration between the materialities of the performance. An abrupt transition in the movement's rhythm, swift alteration of the sound's tempo and mood, misplacement of the objects on stage, a playful competition turning into a hunt, summer swimming transforming into torture, a travel to the country turning into transportation into exile.

In preparation for the performance, Upsala Circus met with an anthropological research group "Proppovskiy Centre." The centre conducts research of traditional cultures, preservation, and study of the cultural and social heritage of Russia and how it is connected to the present-day life. The performers engaged in learning how ancient practices – bodily, ritualistic, decorative – are being transformed and mirrored in contemporary environments. The engagement with ancient practices was meant to help the performers understand themselves not as separate individuals but as a continuation of their families, generation after generation, as carriers of a sometimes uneasy and traumatic past influenced by the terrifying history of the twentieth century.[8] Addressing the past through this kind of learning

6. One of the recent governmental initiatives is a program for the re-education of difficult teenagers from Lugansk and Donetsk regions in the Chechnya. This program is explained as a "preventive work in favor of military-patriotic education." Source: https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5669017 (last accessed 17 November 2022).

7. The documentary theatre in this case is understood in words of Carol Martin as a theatre created from "a specific body of archived materials: interviews, documents, hearings, records, video, film, photographs"(Martin 2006:9).

8. Information about the collaboration between the circus and the anthropology center is retrieved from the Upsala Circus official webpage. http://peria.tilda.ws/ (last accessed 8 August 2023).

technique also worked as a therapeutic practice, painful but necessary, as Afanasyeva underlines in her interview (Ugarova, 2021).

In the same interview, Afanasyeva explains why the performance is called *Feathers*. She described that when birds are sick or removed from their flock, they start a self-destructive process and tear out their feathers. She continued that, in the present-day Russia, people can be seen as these kinds of caged birds because they are not allowed or do not want to connect to the difficult past: war, repressions, GULAG, famine, poverty, injustice. Afanasyeva emphasizes that the traumatic memory of people is either completely erased by outside forces or willingly distorted by their own wish not to remember. Despite the performance's premise, starting from and linking to individual stories, it shows connection to complex and hidden sides of the history that are crucial to uncover and explore (Ugarova, 2021). *Feathers* was performed for the last time in April, 2022.

Dancing trauma: theoretical framework and approach

Crucial in the exploration of trauma in a performative context is the ambiguity of the attempts to represent something that essentially lies beyond representation. Griselda Pollock (2009:40) underlines that representation "can potentially *structure* trauma, which will *mute* its *perpetually haunting force*." At the same time, she indicates that exactly the signification through representation enables one to find "the threshold between the overwhelming, undigested thingness of traumatic presence and the perpetual present of its unsignified presence" (2009:41). This duality lies at the heart of how one can approach trauma in performance, whether as a creator or as a spectator.

To analyse how *Feathers* addresses the traumatic history and experience of others, this article explores the interrelations between the dancers' physical bodies, scenographic materials, such as plexiglass surfaces, water, and sound, and the spectator's bodily and emotional engagement. Thus, the analysis traces what role these interrelations with human bodies, dancers and spectators, play in the transmission of affect and meaning in the performance's space. Framing these interrelations in the context of the performance's scenography, the analysis operates on the understanding of scenography, in the words of Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer (2017:2), as "a mode of encounter and exchange founded on spatial and material relations between bodies, objects and environments." Scenography, in the way it is approached in this analysis, strives to support the communication of the meaning when words are either not formed or failed, as it is often when it comes to representation of the traumatic experience of others. Scenography, as pointed out, "tends to generate understanding that is founded in sensual, emotional and aesthetic responses on the part of the viewer" (McKinney & Palmer 2017:11).

Scenographer Nikolay Khamov explained that the performance was inspired by the work of the French artist Cristian Boltanski.[9] His life-long work with memory and remembrance as an elusive concept, something that we all seem to understand but not always acknowledge, sits at the heart of the approach taken up by Khamov in the construction of the performance's environment. Much like Boltanski's artworks, with help of human and non-human bodies the performance offers insight into subjects of personal and collective history, existential choices, beliefs, fate and loss, and attempts to uncover the unspoken or forgotten of the collective memory.

In this instance, material qualities of all elements, human and non-human, take a central role in the assembling of the performance's environment. Scenographic materialism (McKinney 2019) primarily addresses the vitality of the materials which lies in their agentic capacity, which Jane Bennett refers to as thing-power. With the accent on the materials' *thing-power*, Bennett emphasizes the minimalization of the "difference between subject and object" and instead promotes "the shared materiality of all things" (Bennett 2010:13). Thus, all matter engaged in the representation of trauma starts to be of a consequence. The agentic capacity of performance materials implicates their active role in the construction of the affective atmospheres. Hence, the materials with their agentic capacities are seen as parts of the *assemblages* in which the vitality of distinct elements adds to effective agency of them as a group. Therefore, the analysis addresses how the dancers' bodies negotiate their physical abilities alongside objects of scenography and how these negotiations influence the communication of the performance's meaning to the spectator.

Emphasizing the role of scenographic materials, the analysis acknowledges the environment of material networks that are created to engage the dancers' bodies to these of the spectators', who now become "integral parts of multisensory durational encounter" (von Rosen 2021:31). Thus, to connect the complex process interactions between the dancers' bodies and objects on stage to the spectator's experience, this exploration addresses the concept of kinaesthetic empathy. Understanding of kinaesthetic empathy in relation to the spectator's experience of watching the dancer's body is directly linked to mirror neurons that allows one "to share emotions and sensations with others" (Reynolds & Reason 2012:18) connected to inner mimicry in relation to dance movements, which involves "movement memory, anticipation and associated changes in psychological state" (Reynolds & Reason 2012:19). Kinaesthetic empathy leads to what Dee Reynolds (2012:124) calls "the spectator's corporeal engagement", which lies on the border between what "the subject experiences as 'outside' and 'inside' the body," allowing for movements and actions to be experienced as "a movement sensation." This, in its turn, allows to the process of exchange to become empathic. Thus, the performance's environment, actors' bodies, and the message the performance communicates activate emotional and even physical engagement from the audience that now can be understood as part of the scenography.

9. Source: http://peria.tilda.ws/ (last accessed 12 December 2023).

In the analysis, the spectator's corporeal engagement is directly linked to affective processes that trigger not only the physical aspect of correlation with the dancers' bodies activated by means of mirror neurons, but by means of affective atmospheres created by complex scenographic interrelations between human and non-human bodies. Each performance is a singular experience, in which temporality dictates the rules of engagement. Thus, this exploration does not intend to describe and interpret every scene. Rather, it chooses to communicate the overall affective experience of the performance's atmosphere, which nevertheless targets deeper knowledge and triggers an emotional engagement with the subject. The analysis places the spectator's body, that is, the author's perceiving body, in relation to the dancers' bodies and atmospheres created by means of scenographic materials, engaging the process of kinaesthetic empathy as a part of experience of the performance. As Gernot Böhme emphasizes, affective atmospheres do not manipulate material conditions per se but make possible the *appearance of a phenomenon* (Böhme 2013:11) by establishing certain conditions within the subjective experience of the spectator.

Much like the troubling and unspoken histories of victims and perpetrators, the performance does not intend to give concrete answers. Instead, it places the viewer into the space of vulnerability where engagement with trauma is possible not through emotional association or direct recognition but through a meeting with *sensation* (Bennett 2005:7) created by means of interactions between the bodies, human and non-human. The experience of the performance is a crossroad of bodily, cognitive, and affective responses in which the spectator is constantly in tune with the action, which, in turn, creates a possibility of engagement with the unimaginable – trauma.

When exploring the relation between scenographic materials, including human bodies on stage and in the audience, I position myself into the place of the spectator and use my experience as a vector. I saw the performance live in October 2021 and negotiate my position simultaneously as a perceiver who engages with the performance and as a researcher who analyses it. With the help of the professional video recording distributed by Upsala Circus, the analysis is a crossing of personal experience, the memory of it, connections to the specific society and culture, and professional knowledge as a researcher.

Due to the drastic and unpredictable changes in Russian legislation that at present targets any form of negative interpretation of past and present politics of the State, curtailing any form of artistic expression that the State considers inappropriate, the author decided not to involve the representatives of the theatre in the analysis of the performance, basing it instead on her own experience and specific theoretical approach. Throughout the article, she relies on number of interviews with Larisa Afanasyeva and the troupe of Upsala Circus published between the performance's premier in 2020 up until early 2022. The interviews and elaborated descriptions of the performance's concept on the theatre's

official webpage contribute to the exploration of the performance but do not put any of the members involved in the position of responsibility for the present analysis. For the same reasons, the author decided to not ask the theatre for official images of the performance and instead suggest the reader watch a short official trailer for the performance available on YouTube to be able to experience a bit of the atmosphere of the performance.[10]

Dancing bodies and scenographic materiality

In the complex interplay between different elements of the performance, the dancers' bodies function as a link. Between themselves, between the act and spectator, between scenes and contexts. All through the performance, the dancers are dressed in plain, grey clothes, jumpsuits or trousers with shirts, sometimes removing a part of the garment but never changing to anything different. Their physical strength allows them to shape their bodies precariously to render possible the representation of trauma by means of human bodies. In the opening scenes, after entering the stage, the dancers one after another fold themselves into a metal frame, laying or sitting on top of each other at awkward angles. Seemingly slack bodies press to one another, interlacing into a solid canvas of limbs and clothes of rough fabric. What one second ago was strong and moving is now turned into a terrifying reminiscence of lifeless bodies piled on top of each other. Without any visible strain, the mass of bodies shifts to the beat of sound in horrifying imitation of the movement of the carriage transferring the dead bodies. The physical strength required for such precise coordination is hidden, the dancers' bodies become one mass of human flesh that is mirrored in the spectator's body through the recognizable physicality of their own flesh and bones. In the next moment, the bodies are strong again, aligning themselves to a row of plexiglass windows with suitcases standing by their legs, moving to a fast beat of music, reminding of an early morning of commuters on their way to work. Each part of the plexiglass functions as a container in which the dancers move rhythmically, almost like robots, to the music, alternately standing sideways as if on the train carriage or bus, or turning to the spectator with hands pressed to their mouths until the scene ends.

These two instances are followed up by a slow, almost meditative dance. A female dancer, now wearing a facemask that suggests associations with a bird's beak, dances inside a transparent construction made of the same plexiglass panels. While doing so, she is manipulating a small, white ball, which will return throughout the performance in different form as multiple, colourful light balls in the hands of other dancers. The plexiglass cage also comes back later but as a violent object – a cage that keeps the dancers inside against their will. As the female dancer continues her routine, other dancers move around the improvised cage in angular, bird-like movements, their arms at sharp angles and their legs moving as if they are stepping over something. The grotesque, bird-like movements are recurring patterns in the performance. They are recognizable and physically possible even if awkward, but also far removed from the physicality of everyday life familiar

10. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hhQ4aLJVNM (last accessed 12 December 2023).

to the spectator's own body.

From the very beginning, the performance's intensity is established by the physical action of the bodies, creating an atmosphere of unpredictable transitions that holds the spectator's attention throughout the performance. The entire performance is a continuous shift between seemingly playful acts, exciting and unruly, and fierce clashes of different sorts of materials as a morbid allusion to violence perpetrated on bodies that inflicts psychological trauma deeper than the physical one. It is an interchange between intense, physically demanding scenes and meditatively slow exploration that gives a fleeting respite from the otherwise overwhelming energy of the performance.

McAuley (1999:90) writes that the performer's body is "the most important agent in all the signifying processes" as it navigates the viewer's encounter with the performance's environment. Bodies move, stay still, fold and unfold, jump high up or crawl under, creating the literal flesh and bone that hold the performance together in its non-linear progression. When the corporeal engagement is activated by the closeness and intensity of the performance, one can experience the performer's movements as one's own movement response. When, in the scene following the birds' dance, the dancers jump on top of the seemingly fragile plexiglass construction like unruly kids on their beds, the movement sensation is transferred to the spectator, both as the joy of such a simple act familiar to many and as a tension because of something potentially breakable and unsteady. The sensation follows the performers' bodies in another scene when the same plexiglass constructions are stacked on top of each other like prison bunks or a carriage rack. On the bottom bunk, the group of dancers is huddling together, noticeably shaking, trying to make themselves small, as the bunks appear to be moving to the soundtrack of rattling train wheels. On the top bunk reclines another dancer. While visibly relaxed, he is dominating the group below, and as the scene progresses, he stands on top of the bunk, stomping his feet to the sound, sending commotion through the bodies on the lower bench. What seizes the attention in this scene is the discomfort of the tension created by the contrast between human bodies as well as between bodies and the seemingly fragile surface of the plexiglass. By transferring meaning through the interrelations between different bodies, the scene operates beyond the verbal, and the sense of fear becomes as tangible as the excitement from the earlier scene.

As the bodies move with high intensity their actions do not allow aesthetic distancing. In the space shared with dancers' bodies, the instantaneous embodied experience of the spectator generates empathic reflexivity, that, as Rose Parekh-Gaihede (2012:179) points out, brings the spectator "closer to the other in a subtle, non-possessive way." The essential intention of how the dancers' bodies are engaging with scenographic materials creates an atmospheric space of engagement with the traumatic experience of others through empathic connections rather than through appropriation of that experience. The performance's intensity and fast action leave no room for

feeling sympathy for a concrete dancer-character or to fully comprehend the situation that unravels in front of the spectator's eyes. It operates on the level of sensation and fleeting recognition, on kinaesthetic connection to the moving body of the other, and through that to transportation of the traumatic experience that the dancers' bodies are meant to represent. After all, the experience of others is never something that can take clear shape or leave a comprehensive impression. By bringing forward affective qualities of the performance's materials in connection to the performers' bodies and as a result to the body of spectator, scenography generates a possibility for an *autopoietic feedback loop* (Fischer-Lichte), which establishes conditions for the emotional involvement that interlinks with "ideas, memories, sensations and emotions" (Fischer-Lichte 2008:142). The spectator can connect to the act through recognition affixed in their own bodies. For instance, jumping on the plexiglass construction like on a bed or swinging on a seesaw until the motion carries one's body into the air. Yet, the recognition, for instance, of the slack bodies built on top of each other or shaking bodies huddled together at the bottom of the prison bunks, and the tension it brings comes from much deeper spaces that can only be discovered through an empathic relation to the body of the other. Thus, leading to hidden and forgotten aspects of the difficult past in which the traumatic experience resides.

Seemingly neutral plexiglass surfaces are also inextricably connected to the creation of the affective atmospheres in the performance space. Working closely with the bodies, they transgress from scene to scene, transforming from transparent walls and windows into surfaces for image projections, from beds in a dormitory room to bunk beds in a jail cell or prison train. In one scene, the row of plexiglass frames forms a wall on the surface on which old black-and-white photographs are projected. It is the only time in the performance when, instead of the living bodies, the spectator is confronted by images. Khamov built the original concept of the performance around the idea that, with the passing of time, objects lose their shapes in our memory, as much as events and details of our lives and of history do.[11] A fact from the past stays but loses its connection to time, becoming some sort of abstract element. The people on the photographs are not meant to be recognized or observed closely, but history and memory, however vague, suddenly acquire a human face, something that is often missing behind facts and numbers. Who are these people? What is their story? By the end of the scene, the last remaining image shows a photograph of a younger version of the dancer who stands right behind the transparent surface, allowing the projection to be transferred directly onto his body, thus creating a visual connection between past and present.

Water

One element that stands out in the performance apart from the plexiglass panels is water. Following the practice of contemporary dance performances, water is no longer an unconventional element for the

11. Source: http://peria.tilda.ws/ (last accessed 12 December 2023).

performance environment. However, it plays a significant role in the chain of material assemblages that add to affective and meaning-making processes in the performance.

In one scene, a tall, transparent, tube-like aquarium of water appears on stage. The mode of the scene changes, as everyone and everything slows down and follows a male dancer who immerses himself into the water, surrounded by strips of fabric. Apart from shorts, he is naked, and his body is visible from all sides as if through a magnifying glass. He emerges and dives under, turning around and upside down. His precise movements continue the dance in a different environment, allowing his body a different quality that now is closely connected to the matter of water. He turns around, wrapped in the fabric, an allusion to a child in the womb with umbilical cord, until he comes up for air. Every time he dives, the soundscape of the performance changes, becomes subdued and calm with only flashes of light disturbing the peaceful atmosphere. The performer explores an almost meditative practice of getting away from the world, familiar to all of us who ever dived into a sea, a lake, or even put our heads under water in a bathtub. The element of water acts in unison with the body that transfers the sense of it to the spectator, sharing a mutual memory of the contact with water.

This seemingly calm intermission is followed by another surge in the performance's intensity where water plays a different role. After the dancer emerges from the water for the last time, he pulls the wet pieces of fabric with him. Other dancers pick up the wet cloth and start to dance around the stage and behind a transparent wall constructed of the same plexiglass panels. They hit the stage and themselves with wet pieces of fabric that are now heavy and make unpleasant but also familiar smacking noises when they hit the surfaces. Especially those of a human body. The scene is simultaneously a reminiscence of a washing day in a village, a childish but cruel game of chasing each other with painful whips made of wet fabric, and scenes of self-flagellation. Water gives a different quality to the fabric that in contact with surfaces and human bodies creates a distinct familiarity, something that the spectators can recognize or feel in their bodies, creating a new level of engagement with scenographic materials and dancing bodies.

Water returns in a later scene, albeit in a completely different role. The scene begins with a female dancer climbing up an aerial apparatus, which is two pieces of long hanging fabric. She strives to escape a group of dancers who hang at the bottom of the fabric, moving it from one side to the other as she becomes more and more entangled. As she is eventually pulled down, she is being forcefully submerged into the same aquarium one saw in the much more peaceful scene before. The dancer is hanging upside down from a rope contraption, visibly scared and struggling every time she is immersed in the water. In this scene, by becoming a part of the material assemblage with the human body, water takes a different agency, becoming an element that acquires the power of unpredictability and aggression. The dancer's body does not make a choice this time; she is submerged in water against her will. The sudden appearance of violence addresses the spectator's own

body anew, engaging it in a tense realization that once again a childish game turned into an act of violence. Where holding one's breath in imitation of the earlier scene in which water took a non-threatening role was an active choice of a human body, in this scene, holding one's breath is a torturous struggle against being possessed by the element and the violence perpetrated by others. At the end of the scene, the dancer is pulled out of the water and carried away in the arms of one of the male dancers. The struggle is over but with which consequences? While the skilful and highly intense presentation is rehearsed the spectator's experience nevertheless, is based on an immediate embodied response to the potential threat such a violent act can bring to the human body.

Soundscape

Connections established through the material qualities of the elements of human bodies, plexiglass, and water are further bound together and magnified by the use of sound. *Feathers*' soundscape embodies principles of enveloping sound and, to some extent, uses these sounds that are already present in the visuality of the performance and connects them to common atmospheres: a train, a disco, a city, folk songs, and lullabies, and, even more elusive, sounds of childhood. Because the performance is built on familiar, even if fleeting and elusive, sensations, the sound designer, Daniil Koronkevich, adapted sounds and aural connections from real life, based on the idea that our everyday lives have a distinct soundtrack.[12] This soundtrack regulates our movements and tempo, varying from a fast pace of people in the morning traffic to a calm walk in the woods. Thus, as Koronkevich explained, the soundtrack should create a united impression without breaking the performance apart.

Even the pre-recorded monologues of the dancers played in the first part of the performance, in which they remember from their childhood, creates a soundtrack for the performance. It is simultaneously a soundtrack to the action, even if not directly describing what one sees on stage, and a bridge connecting the dancers' and the spectators' bodies. The sounds of voices are produced by bodies. Pre-recorded monologues are not connected to specific dancers but create an aural canvas of familiarity of voices of others that tell a story. The meaning of the stories might be familiar or completely foreign, but they are still there to represent living bodies with their memories.

As much as interaction between the material elements of the performance produces sensation, allusion, tension, and recognition, rather than a clearly defined meaning, sound also practices, in the words of Salome Voegelin (2010:10), its own *fleeting actuality* and "does not describe but produces the object/phenomenon under consideration." For instance, the uneasy, disturbing sound of rising tensions between bodies as a game turns into a fight. Barely audible sound as the dancer dives under water contrasts with the violent noise that accompanies the other dancer submerged into the water against her will.

12. Source: http://peria.tilda.ws/ (last accessed 12 December 2023).

The entire soundscape is tuned to the main language of the performance – the language of interactions between human and non-human bodies. Broken, seemingly chaotic dance movements, slight changes in posture that are required for a successful implementation of an acrobatic trick, even practical acts when the stage elements are being properly installed, are all twisted in one, unbroken canvas of sounds. Sounds that vary from dusty industrial rhythms to traditional laments. Pamela Howard suggests that sound can be considered "a visual element", possessing the ability to "create a soundscape that can give the spectators contextual information" (Howard in Haughton 2018:141) even if it is not presented visually. It is especially relevant to the scene with image projections that are supported by the sound of old lullabies collected specifically from the Pskov region located in the west of the country. Soothing singing accompanies a succession of images, creating an engrossing atmosphere of memory work in which images speak instead of bodies and address not so much the spectator's memory but a sensation of it, something familiar even if not fully recognizable.

Ephemeral as it is, sound becomes part of the material assemblages of the performance's scenography. The soundtrack of the performance is not only something recorded and played; it is also a breathing, creaking, gurgling of the performance's space as a living body. Groaning sounds of the plexiglass beds, rustling of clothes, gurgling of the aquarium are impossible to control as elements take over the material assemblages of active matter. The plexus of the recorded and live soundtracks create atmospherically *tuned* spaces (Böhme 2013:4) that wrap around the spectator. Alongside the kinaesthetic engagement tuned spaces pull the spectator towards the shared experience with another human body as the sound evokes memories and sensations necessary for the reflective engagement with the performance.

Equal to other elements, sounds contribute to the construction of the performance's meaning. In one scene, the plexiglass frames are put together, forming an enclosed, transparent space. As if entranced by rhythmic music, one by one, the dancers, who at this moment are wearing mouth covers in the shape of birds' beaks, enter the plexiglass space from above. They move mechanically, imitating bird-like movement, perfectly in tune with the techno music. Gradually, one of them realizes that they are entrapped and, breaking the monotonous movements, starts to pound the plexiglass walls. Panic erupts and the dancers' bodies start to move chaotically, attempting to free themselves, crashing into the walls to no avail. The frenzy lasts mere seconds until the music changes and the performers' movements steadily return to the same rhythm, once again becoming a synchronized beat of a macabre, convulsive dance. From time to time, one of the dancers climbs on top of the construction, attempting to break free, only to fall back down the next moment.

In this scene again, the dancing bodies are closely connected to scenographic materiality as it exercises its power over the performance space. Trapped in the plexiglass cage but still visible, the moving, struggling bodies are

familiar. The return of the motif of enclosed, limited space, in which bodies are forced to be together, as it appears against their will, trigger empathic engagement from the spectator's point. Does this pounding of bodies hurt? Is it hot in there? Why can they not come out from such a seemingly feeble construction? Masks are painfully familiar as a grotesque reminder of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, where a sense of being trapped and doomed was a soundtrack of many peoples' lives. The music's intensity is no longer a playful monotony but a reinforcement of the discomfort. It is simply too loud, too intense, too much.

In the final scene, the country's traumatic history comes together with the private memories. The bodies are set free, like birds freed from a cage. The dancers pour water on each other, with feathers falling from above, as they dance wildly to the song by a cult Russian rock band Auktyon that starts with the line "Nobody told me that I disappeared."[13] The last scene of the performance is no longer a space of complex dance moves or acrobatics but a temporality in which the dancers' bodies express uncontrollable, childlike joy of freedom. The freedom that is achieved by overcoming the traumas of past and accepting the known. The performance finale is a carnivalesque riot that leaves space for hope of breaking clean from the past, from the oppression and melancholy, from lies and terror and thus from trauma. The liberation that cannot happen that easily in real life.

Conclusions

Miriam Haughton (2018:31) emphasizes "(...) the staging of trauma seeks to acknowledge, illuminate, navigate, and deal with stories and histories of trauma that, while deeply distinct and unique in each context, remain troubling and exposing for the society to whom they speak." Analysis of how a dance performance can represent the traumatic history of a country in general or in the context of one's private experience is important for several reasons. A study of different forms of performative expressions allows to extend a vocabulary of communication that performative art possesses in relation to the audience. Furthermore, non-verbal forms of performative expression, especially, as in case with *Feathers*, those that deal with traumatic, hidden, forgotten, or dangerous histories, helps to see the role performative arts play in non-democratic societies. The dance performance is also a careful invitation to a form of therapy, where through emotional engagement, the spectators have the possibility to acknowledge the hidden and complex, potentially their past in the context of the history, and how traumatic experience may have shaped their family generation after generation.

In context of the present-day Russian political and socio-cultural environment, it is critical to recognize what role memory plays in structuring society and that the possibility of the positive change in the future is tightly linked to awareness of the past and its traumas. As Dominic LaCapra (2001:68) points out, "historical losses call for mourning – and

13. Auktyon (rus. Аукцион) is Soviet-Russian alternative rock band from St. Petersburg. Founded in 1978 and active to present day. The band is famous for its music being influenced not only by post-punk and new wave aesthetic but also by avant-garde jazz music, European and Central Asian folk music, and poetry of Russian futurist Velimir Khlebnikov.

possibly for critique and transformative sociopolitical practice." The performance is culture specific; it might not even speak to each and every spectator who sees it. Yet, it is attempting to find a universal language of bodies, objects, and sounds, that together create an encompassing space where the complex, uneasy, and unimaginable can be communicated and understood.

In the era of global amnesia, propaganda, death of empathy, and reign of individualism, it is exactly these small acts that start from a desire to help those on the margins of society and end in a rare act of exploration of the past, losses, and traumas that play a crucial role in the construction of a civil, democratic society from inside.[14] Working with trauma in the expressive context of the dance performance creates a possibility to break the silence. And the silence needs to be broken to make it possible to approach a hidden and suppressed past in order to understand the present and to find hope in the future.

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