

## *Finding Words for Dance from a Choreological Perspective*

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**Abstract:** What is the difference between dance theatre and physical theatre? What kind of vocabulary best describes this theatrical field which is so difficult to define in words? As a doctoral student, the necessity of explaining the creative layers - those abstract elements an artist works with - encouraged taking the decision to talk about movement through the vocabulary of choreological studies. First, this scholarly study of dance offers a valuable terminology for every researcher or practitioner in the performative arts area. Secondly, it separates the perspectives from which movement and ideas can be referred to: the creator's initial intention, the performer's embodiment of the material and the spectator's interpretation of the work. Finally, the best way to discuss about movement is to see it. Therefore, making references to different dance works is an essential perspective which gives an efficient tool for understanding the ways in which movement communicates.

**Keywords:** choreology, dance, movement, choreography, vocabulary, creator, performer, spectator

### Introduction

*The dance form is not determined by dance (only)... On the contrary, it is more of a compromise which has its origins in theatre, where the main accent is no longer on the dance itself but on the total stage event.<sup>2</sup>*

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2. Valerie Preston-Dunlop and Ana Sanchez-Colberg, "Dance and the performative. A Choreological Perspective – Laban and Beyond" (Hampshire: Dance Books Ltd., 2010), 9

As a pioneer of Expressionist Dance, Mary Wigman began formulating a description for her works in the 1920's, when herself, along with Kurt Joos and Lisa Ullmann, as students of Rudolf Laban, were trying to break from the traditional ballet and seeing dance more as a form of expressing human feelings. Today, almost one hundred years later, intending to give definitions to certain performative art forms is still a subject of debate. As a theatre-based choreographer, it became a necessity to determine a work's identity by situating it in a certain genre. This necessity is a result of a slight discontentment towards the reputation of contemporary dance in the Romanian performative arts field. Works labeled such as "contemporary dance performance", "dance theatre" or "physical theatre" may sometimes suffer from premature unsuccess due to the unclear opinions that spectators have, which make them misjudge a work before even seeing it. Some creators give even more varied titles to their works, like "movement theatre", "choreographic theatre" or "dance performance", trying to induce a correct type of expectation from their audiences.

In 1986, Lloyd Newson also felt discontent towards the phase contemporary dance was going through at that time and named his own company "DV8 Physical Theatre", long before "physical theatre" became a labeled genre for academic studies and research. DV8 (Dance and Video 8) Physical Theatre's work "is about taking risks, aesthetically and physically, about breaking down the barriers between dance and theatre and, above all, communicating ideas and feelings clearly and unpretentiously. It is determined to be radical yet accessible, and to take its work to as wide an audience as possible."<sup>3</sup> Through this brief and powerful description of their artistic mission, the company encloses the three main perspectives a theatrical performance can be seen through: the creator, the performer and the spectator. They are aware of the complex web of inter-relationships between the creator's initial intention of the work, its embodiment by the performers and its interpretation by an audience. This way of perceiving movement in general, no matter which label we use to categorize it, is known in dance practice and theory as a "choreological" perspective.

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3. "Artistic Policy," DV8 Physical Theatre, n.d., <https://www.dv8.co.uk/about-dv8/artistic-policy>.

## A Choreological Perspective

Making a brief synthesis on this vast research domain, “choreology, as a general term, is regarded as the scholarly study of dance. The term was first introduced by Rudolf Laban in 1926 in the curriculum of his newly opened *Choreographisches Institut...*”<sup>4</sup> The parameters of the choreological perspective on dance as a form of theatrical art were exposed for the first time by Valerie Preston-Dunlop in 1987. Valerie Preston-Dunlop is a consultant at “Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance” in London where she pioneered the development of choreological studies. A practical scholar, she received her initial training from Rudolf Laban, Lisa Ullman, Kurt Jooss and Albrecht Knust. She perpetuated her research not only through her written works, but also through training future choreologists who can spread the knowledge through the world of theatre and dance. One of her former students, Olga Masleinnikova, is a dance-theatre maker, choreologist, movement director, teacher and artist coach. Her practice combines Laban's contemporary developments for performing arts, somatic practices and her research around body energetics. She turned to this research field after the discontent she felt when seeing herself acting on video. The discrepancy she observed between her knowledge of the initial creative intention, the awareness process as a performer in her own work and the recorded product which she was able to criticize in the end, alarmed her and decided to discover new tools of analyzing this multi-stranded medium creators find themselves in.

By participating in the 2015 edition of “Dance Summer School” at “Trinity Laban”, the opportunity of receiving the first choreological studies “toolbox” helped widen the points of view from which movement can be comprehended through matters of shape and intention. This workshop was led by Olga Masleinnikova in a very well-structured manner, in order for participants to experience in a practical way all tools she was able to reveal to them in a two-week study. More precisely, each theoretical issue was given several practical examples, which the participants themselves had to create in order to “address the issues through the symbiotic relationship of practice and concept”<sup>5</sup>.

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4. Valerie Preston-Dunlop, Ana Sanchez-Colburg, and Sarah Rubidge, *Dance and the Performative, a Choreological Perspective. Laban and Beyond* (Los Angeles: Verve Publishing, 2010), 1.

5. Preston-Dunlop, Sanchez-Colburg, and Rubidge, 3.

Thanks to this first encounter with choreological studies, participants were also encouraged to take a deeper look into this complex world of movement analysis by researching further and reading the literature which speaks about this type of practice. Two of the books which were recommended then became the foundation of the future doctorate dissertation in theatre and performing arts, its title being “Seen dance. Danced dance. Created dance. Choreological Perspectives”<sup>6</sup>. Their titles are *Dance and the Performative* and *Looking at Dances*, both written by Valerie Preston-Dunlop, and revealing a very complex, yet very accurate way of interpreting movement and its medium, understood as “the stuff that an art object is made in.”<sup>7</sup>

### Looking for The Right Words

As a doctoral student, the necessity of putting into words the creative layers - those abstract elements an artist works with - encouraged taking the decision to talk about movement through the vocabulary of choreological studies. This choice has made things much clearer in terms of agreeing upon using certain terms to describe concepts which can be easily misinterpreted due to nuances. Preston-Dunlop not only uses very clear and simple vocabulary to “express that which lies outside language, the 'unsayable things' which Pina Bausch has so often referred to”<sup>8</sup>, but also brings constant references of essential works made by essential artists in the field of contemporary dance.

The terminology is so right, the examples are so valuable, but finding their equivalent in Romanian is quite a challenge. Following the *triadic perspective* (creating, performing, appreciating processes) from which the work analyzes different forms of performances made over the years, firstly, it is very important to establish an appropriate vocabulary for accurately naming these three representatives who are involved in the same artistic event.

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6. Translated from Romanian, “Dans văzut. Dans dansat. Dans creat. Perspective coreologice” by Andrea Gavrilu

7. Valerie Preston-Dunlop, *Looking at Dances: A Choreological Perspective on Choreography* (Binsted, UK: The Noverre Press, 2014), 1.

8. Preston-Dunlop, Sanchez-Colburg, and Rubidge, *Dance and the Performative, a Choreological Perspective. Laban and Beyond*, 10.

*The creator* can be found under the title of “director”, “choreographer”, or “author”, depending on the amount and type of responsibility he or she considers taking upon him or herself within a performative event. Many creators take even more than writing the script, directing and choreographing. Some also choose to design their own space, props, costumes, lights and even contribute totally or partially to their choice of sound. There is still that tradition which encourages the problematic assumption that choreographers only create, that performers only perform and that audiences only appreciate. But the changing theatre and dance practice over these last one hundred years show us how much the three processes are overlapping and sometimes unifying.

From a personal point of view, as a creator, the choreographic process includes working with the movement material as a performer, experiencing it from an actor's and a dancer's perspective. One reason lies in the fact that performing involvement is always a method of empathizing with the body exposed to effort, technical challenges, emotional pressure of all sorts and vulnerability towards public judgement. In the same time, this procedure is a tool for efficiency, especially when it comes to lack of time when working on a production or (and) lack of physical skills when demands are higher than the performers are capable of (willing to). This last aspect represents an issue in the Romanian performative arts field as time is very often extremely limited when it comes to mounting a production. Having an average of one month for the entire creative process in an ordinary state-funded theatre, many creators choose to prepare their material in a quite detailed manner in order to save time. Therefore, a considerable amount of original ideas may never be discovered during rehearsals due to the time-consuming process of memorizing and embodying spoken and (or) movement material.

*The performer's* roles are traditionally seen as those who either act, or either dance in a specific artistic work and do not create, nor appreciate. Finding an equivalent of the term “performer” in Romanian is highly problematic, as the only words available to describe its function are that of “executant” and “interpreter”. The first one brings along a sense of non-creativity, of someone who irrationally follows specific directions and obeys compulsory rules. The second word in Romanian, “interpret”, also has the

same meaning as in English, that of a translator, but it also refers to a person being cast in a role of a theatre or music production. This means that he or she gives an interpretation to that specific part or score, without being allowed to reshape it drastically. For instance, if an actress plays Ophelia, the lines that Shakespeare wrote may be changed or even eliminated, her physical appearance might be far from that of a traditional perspective, but the idea of embodying a character outside that actress's personality and experience remains untouched. In dance, "embodying a role requires a similar layered process of assimilation and investment in which the dancer's habitual inscription adapts to the choreographer's demands."<sup>9</sup> As a dancer, it is obvious that working with renowned companies like "Netherlands Dans Theatre" or "Ballet Prejolocaj" requires special movement techniques which clearly identify him or her with that technique's unique culture. Even if a choreographer with a different vision towards dance practice and medium chooses to collaborate with such a company, he or she will rather think of a work suitable for those specific bodies than try to reshape them. For example, Canadian choreographer Crystal Pite adapted her aesthetic views towards her preferred type of performers while working with NDT 1 dancers for productions such as "Parade" (2013) or "The Statement" (2016).

Therefore, the term "performer" is preferred, borrowed and utilized in Romanian as it is, to be able to speak of the bodies that make a performative context happen. Focusing on dance theatre and physical theatre, "productions of this sort see the medium of dance as a way to deal with matters physical, physically."<sup>10</sup> In consequence, these current genres emphasize *corporeality* which

sees the human body as a body that is personal, social, emotional, animal, mineral, vegetal, sexual, biological and psychological, as well as an agent of motion, and one that is given a context, a space, which is in itself socio-personal, political, domestic, abstract, conscious, unconscious, etc. Movement in *tanztheater* arises from the interplay of humans in these diverse at times incongruent manifestations."<sup>11</sup>

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9. Preston-Dunlop, Sanchez-Colburg, and Rubidge, 8.

10. Preston-Dunlop, Sanchez-Colburg, and Rubidge, 9.

11. Preston-Dunlop, Sanchez-Colburg, and Rubidge, 9.



**Figure 1.** Scene from “The Statement” by Crystal Pite.

Companies such as NDT do not rely on human diversity, even if they state that each one of their dancers excels in their solo qualities. This is only true from a purely technical and virtuosic point of view because they are all carefully selected, weight and measured, to match a cultural identity very similar to that of classical ballet. Lloyd Newson's works, on the other hand, are rather “content-based, he casts according to subject matter and performers’ suitability for each new project.”<sup>12</sup> In the company's latest works, such as “To Be Straight With You” (2007-2009) or “Can We Talk About This?” (2011-2012), they deal with social issues like freedom of speech, gender and sexual orientation inequalities, religious extremism in a “documentary-style dance theatre production”<sup>13</sup>. “Newson is known to cast people not normally regarded

12. “DV8 History,” DV8 Physical Theatre, n.d., <https://www.dv8.co.uk/about-dv8/dv8-history>.

13. “Can We Talk About This?,” DV8 Physical Theatre, n.d., <https://www.dv8.co.uk/projects/archive/can-we-talk-about-this>.





**Figure 3.** Hannes Langolf in “Can We Talk About This?”

Source: [www.dv8.co.uk](http://www.dv8.co.uk)

The third party of the triadic perspective is generally referred to as *the spectators*, and, from the traditional point of view, they are known as the audience, which are also bodies, but which do not interfere in the artistic process in any way. And by saying this, there is a return to the discontentment this article began with, the one regarding the unfortunate reputation of contemporary dance in Romania. This conservative idea is still widely spread among art consumers who expect a well spent evening at the theatre and find it difficult to be challenged in any way. It is a quite voyeuristic way of perceiving performative art, in the sense of not being willing to waste any intellectual, emotional or physical energy for the sake of it. People still prefer sitting in the dark on comfortable chairs and, very sadly, sometimes access their phones or discuss with their neighbors as if they were at the cinema. But leaving this sort of ridiculous frustration aside, it is the difficulty of comprehending movement as a language which lays at the roots of this issue. Being used to the straight-forwarded type of vocabulary most of the visual media world uses, people tend to feel discontent when facing a performative

action: they either underestimate their intelligence or they are unsatisfied by the clarity of the message. Each complaint can be easily understood or empathized with as long as the subject can relate to other similar cultural experiences. This being said, it is appropriate to admit that many types of movement performances cannot stimulate each person in the same way, due to their various cultural and social backgrounds. In every community, there needs to be a kind of pioneering in every domain to attract interest and appreciation, even if it is not always a positive one.

*"Dance as a language*, a phrase used by Laban, Wigman and Jooss, should not be taken as a methodological premise, but mere metaphor which describes dance's ability to express (taken to mean, bring out, make manifest) that which lies outside language."<sup>15</sup> This performative way of expressing should serve to effect a transaction between the parties. Nowadays, there is a big number of productions that rely on the spectator's involvement not just intellectually, but sometimes even physically. In Ohad Naharin's famous "Decadance" (World Premiere: 2000, Suzanne Dellal Center, Tel-Aviv), seen at The Sibiu International Theatre Festival in 2014, the dancers come off the stage and pick audience members to be their partners for the upcoming sequence. The entire idea is so simply, yet so ingeniously managed by the dancers, that they make *mundane*<sup>16</sup> bodies seem aesthetically expressive. The audience really seemed to enjoy what was happening and, perhaps, only someone extremely shy would have refused the invitation to go on stage and dance next to those incredibly talented dancers. By drawing this conclusion, it is correct to say that excellence is always responded to, even if it comes in shapes people are not accustomed to, as Preston-Dunlop

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15. Preston-Dunlop, Sanchez-Colburg, and Rubidge, 10.

16. Term used by Preston-Dunlop which refers to non-performative, life-like behaviour. It is another problematic term used in the Romanian theatrical vocabulary as this type of behaviour is named "civil", relating to ordinary citizens and their concerns. This term also embeds a pejorative meaning as it is too often used to criticise actors of not being sufficiently focused or bodily involved in their creative process. A similar negative connotation is widely given to the term "theatrical" and it is found when judging an artistic view or behaviour which seems aesthetically exaggerated. It also happens when life-like forms are being desired inside that work.

affirms: “For the aesthetic function to function, the dance needs to be an excellent example of itself whatever its genre, whatever its type. The spectator will respond to excellence even if it is an unfamiliar excellence.”<sup>17</sup>



Figure 4. Scene from “Decadance” by Ohad Naharin

A similar experience, from an engaged spectator's perspective, is seeing / participating to Wim Vandekeybus's “Go Figure Out Yourself” (World Premiere: March 22nd 2018, “Les Brigittines”, Brussels), seen at “Fabbrica Europa” International Festival in Florence, just two months after its world premiere. This work truly relies on the audience's response to the physical demands the space and the performers have. Being in an unconventional space, a former railway station's building, buying the ticket does not involve comfortably sitting on a chair and having the same visibility from all angles. On the contrary, the production relies on chance from a comprehensive point of view. People are asked by the performers to follow them to various corners of the space in order to be seen and heard. So, in order to witness all five stories, it would mean seeing the show five times and trying not to be “seduced” by the same performer twice.

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17. Preston-Dunlop, *Looking at Dances: A Choreological Perspective on Choreography*, 29.



**Figure 5.** Tim Bogaerts in *“Go Figure Out Yourself”* by Wim Vandekeybus

Being in the situation of standing as an audience, not to mention being pushed, pulled and danced around, is not necessarily something that everyone enjoys, but it definitely minimizes the need to judge a performative act from a narrative aspect. “Theatrical codes are entered into by artists and spectators alike. The expectation of being interested, moved, shocked, bored, or appalled, is present for an audience as soon as they enter the theatrical space.”<sup>18</sup> When a member of the audience is not familiarized with certain sets of codes, or simply with the idea that various art forms can be synthesized and put together simultaneously, the work's message and intention can be invisible or misinterpreted.

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18. Preston-Dunlop, Sanchez-Colburg, and Rubidge, *Dance and the Performative, a Choreological Perspective. Laban and Beyond*, 4.

## Practice Aspects – Initial Intension, Process and Response

The choreological perspective refers to dance as an embodied performative art, and its study

locates it within the field of theatrical framework organised by theatrical codes, in whatever venue that happens to take place. (...) Choreologists may be found practising as, an calling themselves, choreographers, teachers, notators, reconstructors, performers, historians; that is, in professions where corporeal and verbal knowledge is integrated.<sup>19</sup>

It is a highly valuable tool for answering important questions every artist should have regarding his or her work: “Does my creation communicate? What? How? Do spectators see what the creator sees?” It is sometimes frustrating for an artist to realize his or her work has had a smaller impact on the public than expected, but it is essential to discover the cause. From a personal experience, the questions which are applicable in the attempt of dance and physical theatre making are: “Is the choreographic material too simplistic?”, “Are the performers not skilled enough?”, “Is the idea uninteresting?” All these questions seem to have in common a sense of underestimation or/and underappreciation towards one's ability to express him or herself artistically. And it is, of course, advisable to try to improve things from the inside, whether it is technical skills, manner of materialization<sup>20</sup>, or choice of theme/ narrative/concept. But, sometimes, it is also correct to question whether we are addressing the right audience, or not...

Working on “The Recipe for Perfection in Too Many Steps That Lead Nowhere”<sup>21</sup> in 2018 has raised questions regarding the general reception and, more exactly, the interpretation of the message(s) within the entire

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19. Preston-Dunlop, Sanchez-Colburg, and Rubidge, 3.

20. “Mm”, the Manner of Materialization is used by Preston-Dunlop in *Looking at Dances* (page 133) and refers to “how it is made”, those specific ideas and methods which are embedded in the active work process and which give shape to the finished product.

21. Translated from Romanian, “Rețeta perfecțiunii în foarte mulți pași care nu duc nicăieri”, a physical theatre performance by Andrea Gavriliu (Teatrul de Nord Satu Mare).

production. Regarding the main topic of the work, what was initially meant to ridicule people's current lifestyles, ended up being taken for granted by many viewers. The irony towards excessive physical training and healthy living, the hunger for professional fulfillment and public success, seeing personal development books as literature and other aspects of neurotic behavior of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, was obviously taken as advice, and the confirmation came by hearing several opinions while exiting the theatre, such as: "I really need to go to the gym!". A work's impact upon people is something common to be different, as a review of the production says: "Everyone will look at it from a personal perspective. Everyone will refer to it according to their own experience..."<sup>22</sup> The same review also innocently rises a more important issue of comprehensibility which is directly linked to the question whether the work addresses a suitable audience:

I have written (so far) almost 800 words, but just a maximum of 50 about the show itself. It's not that I didn't like it. It's just that it is really hard to characterize. It is physical theatre, it's different from everything I've seen so far (also different from everything that has been seen on stage in Satu Mare), which makes it extremely hard to characterize. How could I describe the way actors interpreted? How could I characterize their processes?<sup>23</sup>

From a choreological perspective, this review contains some key words that are essential in the analysis of a performative event: "to like" (appreciation), "to characterize" (labeling), "interpret" (confusion towards the performer's contribution to the work).

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22. Emil Călinescu, "Reteta Perfectiunii in Foarte Multi Pasi Care Nu Duc Nicaieri – Tranzit Feszt 2018," *lateatru.eu*, 2018, <https://lateatru.eu/reteta-perfectiunii-in-foarte-multi-pasi-care-nu-duc-nicaieri-tranzit-feszt-2018/>.

23. *Idem*.



**Figure 6.** Scene from *“The Recipe For Perfection In Too Many Steps That Lead Nowhere”*  
(Photographer: Kay Ross)

When it comes to appreciating a performance, such a reaction requires that the work contains elements which deserve to be seen, heard and felt. The concept of “merit” was developed by Roman Jakobson, Russian linguist and literary theorist, a pioneer of structural linguistics. He described communication to be dependent on the codes shared by both artists and spectators. Spectators can recognize originality even if it is unfamiliar to them: innovative movement material, originality of the soundtrack, surprising ideas, and so on. Being able to appreciate a work for its aesthetic values is very often fractured by the need to label that certain artistic event. Another “while-exiting-the-theatre-after-the-show” comment saying: “Now, what am I going to tell my daughter when she asks me what kind of play I have been to?”, brutally proves this sense of being lost in a world where everything has to correspond to something. Roughly said, making physical theatre for communities where this genre has not been popularized (yet), can make the creator look like he or she is not “theatre director” enough to make plays, but not choreographer enough to make dances. Furthermore, it makes the performer feel neither

an actor, nor a dancer. This constant decision dance and physical theatre makers are pushed to take reveals the absence of a variety of such creations and the perpetual denial of dance and theatre people to connect and create common vocabulary.

Being involved in the creative process, it is clearly difficult to be detached and to observe own work. This matter is understandable since every artist wishes to be a great example of him or herself. For this reason, the choreological perception upon one's work can be a very efficient and objective way of analyzing creative products and processes. But, since the term "choreology" does not exist in the Romanian dictionary, spreading it in both theatre and dance academic fields is probably going to be a challenge due to its very complex features.

It goes almost without saying that writing a book about dance practice without dance there in front of you to refer to is destined to fail. It is certainly like trying to get over a very high wall with no ladder. (...) Movement described in words is awful. It is, after all, indescribable as is the smell of a rose and the taste of a good wine.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, this is the reason why experiencing various performative events has such great importance from all three perspectives: the making, taking part of, witnessing. The codes we get accustomed to by participating to as many forms of art as possible are the ones responsible for making us more open, more appreciative, and more entitled to bring criticism of any kind. Therefore, besides seeing, making and taking part of such creations, the constant experimenting of movement workshops through Europe is also a consistent part of a personal research which makes the analysis more accurate. Being conscious physically and intellectually of various forms of dance and techniques which are now available "for testing" around the world is an essential point of view when it comes to integrating movement vocabulary in a debate.

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24. Preston-Dunlop, *Looking at Dances: A Choreological Perspective on Choreography*, Introduction.

No matter how compatible artists are with their public's demands and expectations, giving a voice to their creativeness using whatever tools they have at hand is essential. Even if, sometimes, it involves taking certain risks of being misinterpreted or judged - because bringing an authentic vision in one's work is a sensitive matter – “the artistry lies in saying what you want to say while allowing the spectator to be touched uniquely by his own life experience. That takes maturity.”<sup>25</sup>

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25. Preston-Dunlop, 23.