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On the cover: Proxima Dance Company, *Instar* (2020). Choreography: Maria Koliopoulou. Photograph: Elpida Tempou



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## INTERVIEW

# CONTEMPORARY IS MORE ABOUT THE MENTALITY THAN THE TEMPORALITY: A CONVERSATION WITH SANJOY ROY

PARASKEVI TEKTONIDOY



Sanjoy Roy

Sanjoy Roy has been a dance reviewer for *The Guardian* since 2002. He is a dance writing mentor at Springback Academy, which is a programme run by the Aerowaves European Dance Network. In addition, he is the founder editor of the European online dance journal *Springback Magazine*, established in 2018. This year he was invited to serve as a mentor in Athens for a workshop on dance writing by Onassis Stegi as part of the 7th New Choreographers Festival (28 January – 2 February 2020). My interview with Sanjoy Roy was conducted during two meetings. Our first meeting was right after his workshop, live, during the festival. For the completion of the interview we set a meeting via Skype on 26 May 2020.

During the three months between our first and second conversations, the coronavirus pandemic broke out. Just over a month after our initial interview, all rehearsals and festivals were cancelled. Art schools, theaters and cultural venues were shut down. As Covid-19 was spreading around the globe, everyday embodied experience was subjected to enforceable quarantine limits. Normality and socializing in everyday life, like having lunch with friends or celebrating one's birthday, was disrupted and was transferred, instead, to the digital world. Live gatherings and performances, on the streets or in public places, but also stages and the auditorium were similarly transformed into virtual/blended meetings.

Even as we move forward and learn more about the pandemic, there is still uncertainty as to how our future lives will be impacted. In this constantly shifting moment, we can only speculate how the dance world will be influenced. In an attempt to re-imagine the future of dance performances, we first need to know, understand and remind ourselves, both at an artistic and critical level, what existed before the pandemic. Hopefully, in this way, we will be able to have an insight into the *mentality of the contemporary*, as Sanjoy Roy calls it.

*Could you sum up your impressions from the festival?*

The festival is of new choreography, but that word, "new", can mean several different things: from pieces that have been made recently, to works in progress, to pieces that may be closer to working drafts. So that means we look at the works with our imaginations as well as our senses – we try to see not only what the works are, but what they could become. It's a delicate balance for an audience, but perhaps more so for a critic or a programmer. But there isn't a way to avoid that: it's part of the deal when you're looking at works in progress or working drafts. The other thing I noticed is that the selection covers a wide range of styles and formats, and that's gratifying. It made for a very varied programme.

*What is the difference between writing for dance as a journalist, as a reviewer or as a critic?*

These are overlapping positions, with no clear boundary between them. To complicate it further, I think the terms are used in slightly different ways in different countries and cultures. In Anglo-

phone countries, for example, reviewers are often called critics – the words can be used quite interchangeably. Yet at the same time, reviewing has a different connotation from criticism. A review is essentially a newspaper or magazine format where you revisit a performance, writing as a witness to it, while a critique is considered to be more analytical, theoretical or contextual. But of course, in reviewing there are elements of interpretation and contextualisation, and in critique there are elements of witnessing and testimony. All these boundaries are blurred, so there are no neat definitions. Dance journalism, furthermore, extends beyond reviewing and critiquing, because it can encompass previews, interviews, reportage, profiles, theme-based articles, and so on.

*How important is criticism/reviewing for the dance field? Or how do critics contribute to the field?*

Criticism/reviewing (I'll merge the two) is a way of mediating between live performance and an audience of readers. It is an act of witnessing and communication. It's one way that the work is registered, and reaches more people than those who were present at the event. It's not the only way, but it's an important way. It's important for visibility, for communication, for the development of a culture.

People working in marketing and promotion, or education and outreach, also have investments in visibility, communication and development, but they have different motives. There are lots of overlaps, of course, though I think the agendas of criticism are more liable to come into conflict with those of marketing and promotion than those of education and outreach.

*What would you say has changed in reviewing over the last 20 years?*

A lot! And a lot of that comes down to one technology: the internet – which has, of course, profoundly changed society as a whole, not just reviewing. The number of people writing and reviewing has increased, but the number of them who are paid has decreased – as has the pay itself. The amount of editing has decreased, even for those who are paid. The format of writing has broadened, and publishing technology is much more available to many more people. All this allows for a wider range of voices to be expressed, in different styles – but it also makes for a more crowded and “noisy” field, which can make it difficult for these voices to be heard. There's a lot of competition for attention.

In dance, the number and range of voices is still a lot less than in theatre, which is a much larger field in any case. Theatre people seem to me, in general, far more opinionated, expressive and verbose than dance people!

I don't think the importance of the review in a traditional newspaper has diminished, but the number and the length of those reviews certainly has. So there is more competition for those slots, and less diversity within them. There are also fewer specialist writers in these roles: reviews are now also written by culture journalists or people who are not dance specialists.

Another thing: star ratings. They've been around longer than twenty years, but in this century they have become almost ubiquitous. I loathe them, because I find them degrading and distorting. But they're everywhere.

*Do you think that reviewers today are less strict and less critical than those professional experts of the past?*

Well, there are more writers reviewing on different platforms with different viewpoints and in different circumstances. It means that there is greater variety, of subjects, styles – and standards. Some of this writing is really very bad, and some is very good. The burden is much more on the reader to find out what to appreciate and what to trust, and which publication they might turn to. It's not helped by the unpaid model of writing, where "publishing" can sometimes be basically the same as "posting" – that is, with little or no editing or revision. It's all classed as "content" or "coverage".

I do think there is less sustained learning on the job. Reviews are more often gigs than stepping stones. So while there are more opportunities to write (especially for free), the opportunities to practise, learn and develop as a writer are more intermittent. The paid professionals of the past had more opportunity to grow into their roles than people do today.

Of course, it doesn't therefore follow that the paid professionals were necessarily better reviewers. I always think of one reviewer, employed for years on a national newspaper, whose writing was, in my opinion, dreadful. It wasn't only the ideas in the reviews that were clumsy; so was the writing: badly constructed sentences, ropey grammar. I sometimes use those reviews as a model for students: this is how not to do it. I still wonder if there was an editor involved, and if so, whether they cared.

*Could you define what choreography is?*

Of course not! Though I could suggest that one way of answering would be to think of dancing as material, and choreography as composition. Once again, I have to say that these distinctions are blurred and overlapping, but perhaps that could be a useful way to think. Let me refer to two choreographers I know in the UK. One is Siobhan Davies, who said to me once (I hope I remember it right!) that choreography is when material *does* something rather than simply *is* something. That is, choreographic material is not just "stuff", but it has purpose, function, or traction. It builds up or drives forward.

The other choreographer is Shobana Jeyasingh, who once spoke to me about the difference between a sequence and a phrase. For her, a sequence is simply a series of movements, actions or events, one after another. When choreographing, she is always searching for the almost mystical moment when a sequence transforms into a phrase: when it starts to connect with the concept of the piece. It gains a meaning or logic or motive. Using Davies's

terms, you could say that a sequence *is* something while a phrase *does* something. Or using my suggestion: a sequence is dance, a phrase is choreography.

*Has the 21st century brought a moment of change in choreography? And, if yes, what do you think this is?*

Well, in the UK I think a turning point was more in the 1990s. Previous to that, we had a very American influence in training and aesthetics, but sometime during the 1990s I think dance in the UK became more part of a European circuit. That entailed a number of things. It led to a more hybrid or interdisciplinary sense of what dance is or can be. There was also a growth in more conceptual or ideas-based work (some people here in the UK used to call this “European dance”). It’s not that these genres replaced the more physical or movement-based styles, but that the field of dance itself diversified, physically, aesthetically and conceptually.

Another important factor in the 21st century is the rise of hip-hop and street dance. It’s partly because it’s how so many young people come into dance in the first place. Back in the ’80s, people came through jazz dance and aerobics and *Fame*, which really influenced the look and feel of contemporary choreography, with all those leotards and lines. Street dance is a huge influence in this century. Even when you don’t see it plainly on the surface, you can often sense its influence underneath. It’s part of the choreographic DNA nowadays.

*You have seen many performances all over Europe. Do you notice something particular about Greek choreography, compared to other European work? Could you define commonalities or differences?*

I really don’t think my knowledge of dance outside the UK – or maybe just London! – is enough to make this kind of judgements. But perhaps I can say that dance in the UK has a reputation for being less conceptual or theoretical than in many other non-Anglophone countries. As I said before, some people here used to call conceptual dance “European dance”. I think that is indicative of a cultural tendency, too. The UK doesn’t have the same valorisation of philosophy or intellect that seems to me more common in many other countries, I think including Greece. We can see that tendency in the style of criticism and reviewing too: Anglophone cultures are more pragmatic and less intellectual in the way that people write about dance.

As for Greek choreography in particular, I don’t think I can make a statement on the basis of this one festival. I don’t have the knowledge, and the works in the festival were pretty diverse. I couldn’t really see a pattern here. That’s not unusual: impressions are very mixed very often. One of the few times I was struck by a pattern was at a new choreography festival in Rome (for Premio Equilibrio). There were many solos and duets which seemed to me to be all drama and no narrative. Was that particularly “Italian”? Could be – an emotional intensity untethered to any story. But it could have been just that festival, that year, and what I picked up from it. Another was

at the PT19 performing arts festival in Portugal. There, I noticed that many works were multimedia or disciplinary hybrids, without being self-conscious about that – they weren't forcing a point about it, it seemed to come quite naturally.

*Contemporary dance is multimodal. What intrigues you as a spectator? What do you respond to in contemporary dance?*

Over the years, it's become clear to me that I have a soft spot for choreography that has thoughtful group composition. I like it when I see that working well. It's partly I think because it's quite rare to see – in contemporary choreography, people often don't have the resources to work with larger groups. So there is a lot of working with yourself, duets, maybe trios, but standing outside and working with a group is a rarer opportunity and so a rarer skill. One of the reasons I like Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker's work is because her compositions are phenomenal. Another example was Christos Papadopoulos's *Elvedon*. I adored that piece – it had a real purpose to the way that it worked as a group. I think Anastasia Valsamaki in Athens also has a feeling for group composition.



Christos Papadopoulos, *Elvedon* (2015). Photograph: Patroklos Skafidas

So composition is an aspect of dance that I know I particularly enjoy. Then there is something far less definable that all people who love dance notice, once in a while: those moments when you feel alive or surprised, or you discover something you didn't know. It's a delight to find those magic moments of poetry where you feel transported beyond energy or appearance, when you feel that the performance is a portal onto a wider world of the imagination or the sensorium.

*What is contemporary in contemporary dance?*

This is a much argued topic. Some people simply say: if it's dance being performed now, it's contemporary dance. Which may be strictly true, but I'm not sure it's strictly useful. So, let me again quote Shobana Jeyasingh, a British contemporary dance choreographer who was trained as a classical Indian dancer. She says: in classical dance, you can be right or wrong. There's a consensual idea of correctness in classical dance. You can do something and people can say: that is not right. Contemporary dance has the license to make up the rules. You can invent things and try to make them work. The rights and wrongs are less meaningful. It's more a question of how and if it works. I find that a more useful way of thinking about what is "contemporary" in contemporary dance. It's more about the mentality than the temporality.

*Can dance be political?*

Dance is already political. It's both a field of production and consumption and exchange, and a form of symbolism, communication and representation. So, of course, it's already political. Isn't everything? Maybe the question is: can dance change the world? Again, there are two levels to this. Dance as production, distribution, organisation, exchange; and dance as meaning, communication, sensation, performance, art. On both levels, dance can make changes to *its* world, but can it change *the* world? Perhaps not on its own, but it can be part of a world that makes changes. And it is, whether we like it or not, part of a changing world.

There's another question here though, which is: *should* dance change the world? In terms of production, distribution, employment terms and so on: yes, dance should change its own world according to the human and ecological values that it considers important. As an art though? I think that depends on what artists and audiences want to do with dance, and what they want dance to do. I don't think they should feel obliged to make dance that is *about* politics, that's for sure. On this matter, I like to quote from a European Dance Network report written by one of our Springback Magazine contributors, Yassen Vasilev. He wrote that we need to "think of ourselves not only as artists but also as political subjects whose actions support or challenge the frame we're operating in. Art probably cannot change the world, but political subjects can change both the world and art."<sup>1</sup>

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1 <https://www.ednetwork.eu/activities/art-practice-in-times-of-uncertainty>

*What do you think this pandemic will bring to dance and arts in general?*

Right now, the pandemic is bringing a wrecking ball to performing arts, and dance in particular. Dance, even more than other live arts, relies on physical co-presence, in its training, creation, rehearsal, performance, presentation and circulation. At the same time, digital recordings or mediations of dance are often even further away from the live event than with other performing arts. On top of that, the field is full of unstable, intermittent employment practices, and organisations with few reserves. Beyond dance and arts, economic practices are failing on a wider scale in any case. So, I think the pandemic is going to have – is already having – a huge impact. The big question is what will happen next. And I genuinely have no idea what that will be.

The one thing I am sure about is that digital technology and online communication, which has already come to the fore during the quarantine period, is not going to go back. It's here to stay and will surely evolve as it is used more in communication, in distribution, in administration, in creation and perhaps in performance, too. I don't think it can replace live dance, but it will certainly supplement it in a big way and become a more embedded part of its organisation.

Other than that, I can't tell. All I know is that the pandemic has exposed the interconnections and fault lines between societies, cultures and ecologies. Dance is part of that bigger picture. What that bigger picture will become I do not know. I hope it will be good, but I am not too optimistic overall. And for dance in the immediate future, I confess I am quite pessimistic. The coming year will be a critical time. But crises are moments of change, and change has been needed for a long time already. We need to go towards it.

As the occasion of my first encounter with Sanjoy Roy was a workshop on dance writing in a new choreographers' festival, the discussion was focused on the nature and notion of dance reviewing and choreography, as well as the transformations that the two have gone through in the 21st century. Over the last twenty years, the widening of the virtual space is transforming criticism very quickly, altering the form of writing, the number of voices heard, and hence the position and the role of professional critics. Contemporary dance artists nowadays keep broadening the notion of what constitutes dance in performance, following the heritage of innovative dance artists on both sides of the Atlantic. Contemporary choreographers are in search of the "new". Each devoted to experimentation and exploration, constantly looking for originality; as did their ancestors in both American postmodern choreography and European avant-garde and Dance Theater. As if contemporary is synonymous with inventing things; with the search for the unknown that is possible in a concrete historical moment.

What will possibly happen during and after the lockdown? How will dance assimilate the restrictions in physicality that the coronavirus pandemic has brought? Only the future knows

how this historical moment will reshape the entire experience of the theatrical performance. Contemporary choreography and, by extension, its reviewing are by nature constantly changing practices. I feel that, at this transient moment, even more than ever, we need to detect the traces of these fleeting doings. One way to attempt it is by recording the dispositions, the ensemble of incorporated properties, aesthetic, political etc., as they are expressed by active agents in the field. This interview hopes to contribute to this documentation.

# BOOK REVIEW

KATIA SAVRAMI (2019) *Tracing the Landscape of Dance in Greece*. Foreword by Ann Cooper Albright. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 137 pp. ISBN 978-1527542204. Hardback. £58.99.

In her new book, *Tracing the Landscape of Dance in Greece*, Professor Katia Savrami offers the readers, as the title suggests, a historical overview of the emergence and development of dance as art in Modern Greek culture and society. In this respect, she unfolds the complex historical, sociopolitical, cultural and economic circumstances that delayed the dynamic development of classical ballet and modern or contemporary dance in Greece, in dialogue with the intellectual and artistic trends that have shaped the scholarship featured in dance studies over the last twenty-five years. Given this dual approach, she examines how a collective national identity operates with and through dancing bodies, as well as how aesthetics and politics converge in regional and global dance practices.

In terms of methodology, Savrami combines academic research and historical writing through the use of archival materials and ethnographic analysis, supported by her embodied experiences and memories of dance from Greek and international educational institutions and artistic milieus. In addition, since ethnography and discourse analysis generally involve a spiraling or cyclical process, Savrami often avoids the linear temporal logic that places the past, present, and future on a set timeline in Western thought. Instead, in a roughly chronological sequence of dance events, she traces the fleeting moment of the present in historical texts of the Greek dancing heritage and moves forward in a critical reflection on “the future of dance in Greece” (p. xx).

The significance of the book lies in a set of interrelated ideas about the meaning and content of dancing in diverse spaces and times, which suggest possibilities for “rethinking the history of dance in Greece” (p. 116). Thus, reflections on the dialectic relation of theory and praxis in the making of choreography are discussed with regard to several insufficiencies in the Greek national system of dance education policies. In broader terms, the book is a unique contribution to the world’s dance history, as writing on the interrelations between the lived experience of bodies and the prevailing philosophical discourses of dance is limited to a small number of sources in Greek historiography.

The book is structured in four coherent chapters. Each chapter is divided into well-defined

sections, which allow the insertion of new material on specific topics.

The first chapter outlines the origins and evolution of ballet in Western culture. Beginning from the Renaissance court dance spectacles, it proceeds to the establishment of theatrical ballet as an autonomous art form. It continues with the genre of ballet d'action, the golden age of ballet in the Romantic era, the impact of Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Europe, as well as the refinement of ballet in the post-revolutionary Russia/Soviet Union. The text is enriched with several concepts of the classical antiquity integrated into Western European staged performances. As noted, despite the idealization of classical antiquity by European thinkers and artists, Greece remained alienated from the humanistic values of Renaissance and the various ideals embedded in the perfection of ballet because of four centuries of Ottoman occupation.

The second chapter describes critical historical moments and ideological constructions that shaped the Modern Greek identity and culture, with particular reference to the art of dance. This historiographical journey begins with the foundation of the Modern Greek state in 1832. From that time onward, the effort of politicians and intellectuals was to establish a Westernized sociopolitical and cultural environment; a vision adopted by an emerging bourgeoisie in urban centers rather than the rural population. In the Greek provinces, the collective identity was preserved in oral language, the Christian Orthodox religion, and folk traditions. The discussion expands on the importance of classical antiquity in Modern Greece, voiced in diverse ways in a national narrative of "Greekness" or the timeless continuity of Hellenism. The notion of Greekness was intimately linked to the revival of the tragic chorus in the Delphic Festivals (1927/1930), as conceived by Eva Palmer-Sikelianos, under the influence of Isadora Duncan's ideas of modern dance. From the 1930s to the 1970s, Koula Pratsika, Rallou Manou, and Zouzou Nikoloudi fused imageries of ancient *Orchosis*, folk traditions, and trends of modern dance in their choreographic works and educational methods. After a synopsis of the introduction and expansion of ballet and modern dance teaching in the country, the need to reform dance education is explained. Suggestions are thus made for the development of a resonant twenty-first-century dance education, as all vocational schools operate on the basis of the outdated curriculum of the early 1980s. Tracing echoes of a distant past in recent years, the narrative ends with Dimitris Papaioannou's conceptual heterotopias at the opening and closing ceremonies of the Athens Olympic Games (2004), which emphasized the dominance of classical heritage in postmodern culture and politics.

The third chapter contextualizes the distinct course of theatrical ballet in Greece, drawing from historical archives, autobiographies, reviews, interviews with renowned artists, and other sources. It begins with the foundation of the Greek National Opera as part of the Royal Theater, in 1939, a few months before the country's occupation by the Axis powers. Initially, ballet's role was to support opera and operetta performances housed in the premises of this cultural organization. In 1944, the Greek National Opera Ballet was established as an autonomous body; since then, it has staged some of the greatest ballets of the classical repertory. This chapter

includes footnotes on people involved in the foundation of the Opera, an obscure continuous alternation of foreign and Greek directors of the ballet company, principal dancers, as well as ballets performed from the 1940s to the 2000s. In regard to the synchronization of the national balletic scene with the international one, due to financial and other restraints, the text shifts to selected choreographic works that have contributed to the (r)evolution of ballet over the last century. In doing so, the enduring legacy of George Balanchine's abstract classicism and William Forsythe's attempt to bring ballet to postmodernism are discussed.

At the outset, the fourth chapter focuses on a notable development of the Greek contemporary dance scene during the 1990s, in line with social and cultural theories and philosophies integrated into choreographic approaches in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This development coincided with the prevailing sociopolitical and economic changes after Greece's entry into the European Community in 1981. The contact with the artistic trends of the time, the liberation of bodily expression, and the state subsidies for the arts marked a turning point in the local dance scene. The 1990s generation of choreographers, inspired by either Tanztheater or postmodern dance, challenged conservative notions of gender, often combined with fragmented views of national identity, and/or dance vocabularies and earlier compositional methods, in their works. As the 1990s performances caught the gaze of a wider public, dance festivals, workshops, dance associations, state and private dance scholarships were established. The high period of cultural growth in Greece ended abruptly with the global economic crisis of 2008.

Nevertheless, in the midst of the so-called "Greek crisis", a new generation of dance practitioners shared experimental practices in collaborative forms, avoided authoritarian choreographic modes through research processes, theorized dance as a site of resistance to neoliberal politics in lecture-performances, and created performative events with refugees in public spaces. Alongside this, a few Greek dance scholars organized three dance conferences (2009/2010/2015), in collaboration with national and international educational and research institutions. This initiative encouraged the publication of *Choros International Dance Journal*, the first academic dance journal in the country. Paradoxically, despite the above progress, all successive Greek governments have not recognized Dance Studies as a valid academic discipline. The discussion shifts to ballet and the work of two renowned Greek choreographers in particular. In 2016, Adonis Foniadakis was appointed director of the Greek National Opera Ballet. After a year of choreographing innovative neoclassical ballets for the company, he resigned to continue pursuing his career abroad. That was a key moment in the history of the Opera, as it was relocated from its original home in the center of Athens to a luxurious building in the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center. In 2018, the director's position was given to Konstantinos Rigos. Since then, Rigos has organized, choreographed, and presented a series of groundbreaking artistic, social and educational activities. His long-term vision is to overcome past difficulties, resistances, and subjectivities, in order to raise the status of the Greek National Opera Ballet to international standards. Although the scale of the ballet company grows, Savrami, knowing well the history of dance in Greece,

wonders whether the state will be able to financially support these efforts.

At the end of the fourth chapter, Katia Savrami raises a number of reflective questions about the future of dance in Greece, such as “The lights glow. What will happen next?” (p. 116), quoting from Harold Pinter’s “Poem” (1981). The answer remains unknown, as the publication of the book was followed by a new global crisis, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The strategy of social distancing has had a devastating effect on the performing arts, especially on dance.

In conclusion, the mapping of the shifting landscapes of dance in Greece is an essential source for scholars involved in the field of dance, but also for artists working in theater and performance. The book contributes to a broader historiographical dialogue, documenting how the art of dance was established in Modern Greek culture and society. Overall, it highlights the meaning and content of dancing in diverse human histories and societies, on a political, social and aesthetic level, as well as the perpetual human need to produce culture.

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