

**Budapest Kortárs Tánc Főiskola**

Táncművész BA szak

# **STAGING DANGER IN CONTEMPORARY DANCE**

## **REACHING THE LIMITS**

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Témavezető: Szoboszlai Annamária

# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
1. Theoretical analysis of danger on stage.....	5
1.1. A definition of the notion of danger.....	5
1.2. The role of danger in circus: the essence of a discipline.....	6
1.3. Dance facing danger: exploring new possibilities.....	9
2. Danger in circus.....	12
2.1. Danger as an expressing tool.....	12
2.2. Overcome the fear.....	13
2.3. Virtuosity before danger, and its benefits for dancers.....	15
3. Danger and dance: the example of Ultima Vez.....	17
3.1. Overview of the Ultima Vez company.....	17
3.2. Handling dangerous movements and movement qualities on stage.....	19
3.3. Relationship of U.V. dancers to danger and consequences.....	23
Conclusion.....	26
Bibliography.....	28
Appendix.....	29
Interview with Milán Újvári.....	30
Interview with André Rolland.....	38
Interview with Imre Vass.....	44
Interview with Máté Mészáros.....	51

## Introduction

Before starting to dance, I used to go to amateur circus trainings in Paris, and this is actually there that I had my first contact with a physical and artistic activity altogether. Despite the fact that I very much enjoyed those circus lessons, I could not continue for long and I started to dance only afterwards. Later on, within the course of my dance practice, I naturally got to think about mixing the two, using in the dance studio what I could learn during the hours spent under the circus tent. Practically speaking, my wish was to introduce hand stands and acrobatic movements into my dance improvisations or fixed materials. But I always experienced the difficulty to execute a movement coming from circus like a dance one, in other words to “dance” this acrobatic knowledge. Seeking for an explanation, I arrived to the conclusion that the danger of those moves creates in my body a specific state, which seems to break up with the state I am in when I dance. As a consequence, the purpose of this work is actually strongly related to this observation: what happens in a performer’s body when he has to execute an acrobatic move? Does it make any difference at all?

The fact is that I have been watching new circus and dance performances for quite long now, and throughout those years I also realised that I am far to be alone with this problem. Indeed, many choreographers are exploring their own territories through the inspiration of many different things, and circus is undeniably one of them. With the development of new circus during the last part of the XXth century, the crossings between dance and circus have grown more and more numerous; since both of the discipline deal with body and movement, the mix of the two seemed natural for a couple of choreographers. In those performances, questions around risk and danger often pop up. How to stage dangerous circus moves in a dance performance? How to deal with their specificity in comparison to dance movements? My experience as a spectator tells me that this mix is not so easy to do; some people manage to integrate the two to create some kind of personal style, while others only seem to pack different things together without finding a common denominator. My hint is that this depends mainly on the performer; if he could not find a homogeneous state when he is to dance a hybrid material, then one can see that his dancing gets “stuck” when coming to an acrobatic figure.

Looking from another point of view, the notions of danger and risk are actually not the privileges of circus. Thus, danger is key to understand the work of a choreographer like Wim

Vandekeybus with his company Ultima Vez. In the company's performances, we often see dancers sliding, jumping, putting themselves into hazardous situations, and it has become in the course of time one of Vandekeybus' main characteristics. The work of Ultima Vez arises the same type of questions: how do the dancers handle those risks on the stage? Does it make any difference for them to include dangerous moves within the frame of a choreography? One thing leading to another, questioning the difference between circus moves and dance moves will lead us to another question, maybe the most important of all: what does it take to execute a spectacular dangerous move like a dance move?

Since dance is not circus, its approach to movement and to the body has its specificities, compared to the circus field. Consequently, we can logically presume that the handling of danger in dance might dissent from the way it is handled in circus, since dancers intend to dance, and not only to move. Because dance usually deals with such notions like continuity, flow and the work on movement qualities, it seems important to me to examine how can performers mix those two elements in order to create harmonic and consistent movement qualities and phrases, where danger is tamed to meet the requirements of specific choreographies.

# 1. Theoretical analysis of danger on stage

## 1.1. A definition of the notion of danger

Like every theoretical notion, danger can be understood in different ways. In the common language, danger can be connected to the idea of risk of physical injury or to the idea of unknown, hazardous situation, like the risk of losing a bet. As a starting point, if we take a look into the dictionary, danger is defined as “*the possibility of harm or death to someone*”<sup>1</sup>. A little bit lower, danger gets another definition, slightly different: “*the possibility of something bad happening*”<sup>2</sup>. In the first definition, danger is clearly connected to the idea of physical injury, when the second definition is broader; here two key words lead us to the essence of the question: *possibility of bad happening*.

The word *possibility* refers to uncertainty: it stands for a probability of an event to occur. The word *bad* is in itself clear; something negative, dangerous, and/or painful. In this definition, I would like to underline that the notion of probability is key: there is a probability of something bad happening, whose degree of occurrence oscillates between 0 and 100 %. This probability depends on the context, on the nature of the situation. In case of a bet, it is quite easy to define how risky is the situation (one chance out of two to win a tails). But how is it possible to define the risk of a plane crash, and then the dangerousness of flying? Statistics helps in such a case to give an evaluation, but practically speaking the more complex a situation is, the harder it is to calculate its dangerousness. If the engine of a plane breaks down, the risk of crash is high, but not certain: the pilot might be able to land its aircraft anyway, depending on such factors like his piloting skills, the weather during the accident, the type of the aircraft, the nature of the ground, etc. Back to our subject, a performance is always a complex situation, where a lot of factors are playing a role all in the same time. Therefore it is quite hard to give a perfect evaluation of danger during a performance, knowing that dozens of factors can influence the success of an acrobatic movement, the reception of a jump, etc.

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1 Definition found in the online Cambridge dictionary.

<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/danger?q=danger>

Seen on 23.02.13.

2 Ibid.

Looking towards psychology helps us to understand how people react in front of a risky situation. In this field, the concept of risk is much more significant than the sole danger. In order to make things clear, **we will understand in this work the concept of risk as a situation comprising a probability of danger**. In her book *Between hope and fear: the psychology of risk*<sup>3</sup>, Lola L. Lopes writes: “Technically, the word risk refers to situations in which a decision is made whose consequences depend on the outcomes of future events having known probabilities”. Here, Lopes puts the accent on the notion of decision: how does someone decide in a risky situation, where inputs coming from outside influence the result of the decision. As a matter of fact, Lopes speaks only about calculation in her book: what makes a bet seem risky, which kind of people are ready to take risks, and why. Even though we will come back to her work later on, this kind of approach does not help much to understand what mean risk and danger on a stage. Indeed, during a performance, the decision is rarely made on the stage, unless it is based on improvisation. Most of the time, the decisions regarding the dance material are made during the rehearsing process, and the performance “consists in” repeating the actions that have been set during the rehearsals. So we will not be speaking in this work about the decision processes of individuals during a performance, but rather about the physical danger embedded within the performance: making a somersault, throwing bricks to each other, etc. These are all simple physical actions, and their fulfilment does or does not necessarily require specific competences, but their common denominator is that they all comprise danger, a potentiality for someone to get hurt (and not necessarily for the one who is the author of the action) if the action is not realized correctly. Since this last meaning is the one that interests us in this work, I would kindly ask the reader to note that here, **the use of the word – danger – will always refer to the notion of physical danger within the frame of practising performing arts**, on stage or not, unless explicit notice. That way, I presume we will be able to save some time and clarify what the work is about.

## 1.2. The role of danger in circus: the essence of a discipline

Circus is by essence a discipline where magic and wonder are the main characters. During its history, circus has grown as a place where people can see something they would never see

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3 This book can be found and downloaded here:

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/85038889/Lopes-L-L-Between-Hope-and-Fear-the-Psychology-of-Risk-1987>

Seen on 23.02.13.

anywhere else, exploits that are in the same time amazing and scary as well. In traditional circus, fear plays a central role in order to catch one's attention all the way long: acrobatics, trapezoid, wild animals taming and magic, in course of time circus specialised itself in amazement and tricky spectacular shows. Staging danger became of growing importance during the history of circus, and quite soon the point was to show the most dangerous and amazing trapeze artist, or the more skilled acrobats. As Francine Fourmaux explains it in her article *Le nouveau cirque ou l'eshtétisation du frisson*<sup>4</sup>, both in traditional and new circus risk taking is considered as a valuable action. In traditional circus, the architecture of all the numbers is actually made to put in focus difficulty and risk: the easiest tricks are always realised at the beginning of a number, and the more time passes, the more dangerous the feats will be, coming to an end when the orchestra arises the attention and the suspense by playing an increasing drum roll. Clearly, danger belongs to the tradition of circus: even though all the discipline do not imply dangerous figures (like clowns for instance), many numbers are based on the fear they can produce for the spectators (like taming for example, when the artist goes alone into the lions cage, putting his life in balance).

During the seventies<sup>5</sup>, circus artists started to look for a renew of their field, and came to think that they could give a bigger artistic value to their discipline. This is how a new current emerged in Europe known as new circus or contemporary circus. Performers in new circus refuse the traditional form of circus shows, organized by numbers, with no link between each others. Instead, the artists started to explore new possibilities, and they started to think their discipline as capable of telling stories, of proposing an artistic statement during the course of the performance. Nowadays, new circus is a pretty wide discipline, and its forms can vary greatly depending on the creativity and the tastes of the artists: some perform in theatres, others keep the traditional Big Top and its circular stage, others still use Big Tops but set their performances to be shown in a frontal position, etc. However, as new circus remain after all circus, the essence of the discipline stay unchanged: the disciplines are almost the same than hundreds years ago, and of course the technique which constitute the basis of circus arts cannot be rejected by the new generations. That's why one can speak about the essence of circus as strongly connected to danger, as after all people still go to circus performances to see exploits on stage. As Francine Fourmaux writes, "*In circus*,

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4 The article is available on the net: <http://www.cairn.info/revue-ethnologie-francaise-2006-4-page-659.htm>.

Downloaded on 23.02.13.

5 Jacob, Pascal: *Circus: an art at the parting of the ways (Le cirque: un art à la croisée des chemins)*, Paris, Gallimard, 2001. Title translated by the author.

*risk is object to staging and gaming, sometimes mixing laughter and dread*"<sup>6</sup>. This is actually true for circus as a whole: in new circus, the notion of danger is also very present, and it is often used as a dramatic element. Therefore risk can be considered as a key element of the circus field, and although circus has encountered drastic changes during the last decades, it is still linked to the notions of failure, risk and danger.

Although risk is a leitmotiv element in circus, the same is not true concerning danger. Thus, circus can stage a certain form of risk without danger; in such a case, the risk concerns failure without physical dimension. For instance, clowns do not deal with danger so often, but they used to stage a certain form of failure. Here, the risk concerns the possibility of being clumsy, of getting into ridiculous situations by the means of programmed failures. Those programmed failures are a key element in every clown's dramaturgy. Indeed, clowns play on their supposed inability and awkwardness to arise laughter among the spectators: tension is created by placing the clowns into situations where their visible lack of skills will create funny events on the stage. Therefore it seems important to distinguish risk and danger; risk is probably a larger notion, referring to something what can go wrong. Danger must be understood in its most original meaning, that is to say the very first definition of it in the Cambridge dictionary<sup>7</sup>. As a matter of fact, the new circus' relation to risk and danger is a little bit more complex than in traditional circus: in traditional shows, the performers never show their fears in front of a very difficult feat. They adopt a posture where there is no room for failure in general, and if someone comes to miss something like the final trick of his show, he or she often tries again in order to give the audience the show they came to see, as well as to expiate the previous failure. In new circus, failure and risk are staged as they are, and as Fourmaux says, artists' fears are showed on the stage, they can even be a narrative element in some cases. In fact, new circus adopts a new posture regarding risk and failure: they become part of the show, and the failure of a trick or an action does not necessarily means that the performer will stop the show to try again. In the performance "*Ieto*"<sup>8</sup>, the two performers play and try to trick each other: they clearly use the staging of their fears, their doubts as a narrative element to found their relationship, and to create a certain distance with the actions they do on stage. Meanwhile, the playfulness does not shade the difficulty and the danger of the tricks, and the fact that they act their own character does not interfere with the quality of the feats. This performance is actually a good

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6 Ibid. "*Au cirque, le risque est objet de mise en scène et de jeu, mêlant parfois le rire à l'effroi.*" Translated by the author.

7 See note 1 for more details.

8 Performed by the French new circus company Ieto.



example of the new direction artists of contemporary circus did take a few decades ago: risk and danger did not disappear from circus, they just became a sort of dramatic element, their existence is no longer denied. They are showed for what they are, and they often give the opportunity to the artists to enrich their acting.

### 1.3. Dance facing danger: exploring new possibilities

If circus seems to be a “natural” place for staging dangerous actions, the relationship of dance towards risk and danger is somehow less evident. Historically speaking, dance rarely used the possibility of danger as a way to astonish its audience. This does not mean that the notion of exploit was not part of dance, but it referred instead to the perfect realisation of a difficult figure, like for instance jumps in ballet. Jumps are not in so far very dangerous, though the risk of injury related to a bad reception always exist. They do not bring into play the lives of the performers, as circus can sometimes do. Anyway, during the twentieth century, some choreographers did explore new ways of showing dance, and it became natural to them that staging dangerous situations could bring new dimensions to their works. Quite early, choreographers started to get interested into basic physical laws, and more precisely they got to work on how to overstep them. For example the American choreographer Trisha Brown, in her piece *Walking on the Wall*<sup>9</sup>, played with the notion of gravity. Indeed, the piece consists in showing a man walking down a wall of a building in the street, hanging by the means of a mountain climber equipment. With this piece, Brown wanted to change an important factor of dance, horizontality. By setting her dancer onto a vertical plane, she deliberately turns inside out the traditional rules of dance, but she also confronts herself with danger. Although the level of security was high, one cannot deny that the piece, by defying gravity, arises in the spectators a sensation of palpable danger. Because no technical equipment is ever 100 % sure, any technical malfunctioning could have meant the death of the dancer. In any case, this new situation had a very heavy influence on the freedom of the dancer; indeed, as we will see later, freedom and danger are often very closely connected, in a negative correlation. And last but not least, it is interesting to notice that the challenge to gravity is the essence of a circus discipline like acrobatics, where the aim is clearly to jump as high as possible in order to execute in the air all kind of spectacular feats. In other words, although Trisha Brown worked explicitly in the dance field, the fact that she started to face the same type of problems than circus led her to similar artistic

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9 Fuchs Lívía, *One hundred year of dance (Száz év tánc)*, L'Harmattan, 2007 Budapest.

propositions. It is important to notice that Brown's aim was not specifically to stage danger; in fact, by reflecting on gravity's basic laws, she came to a solution where danger was present, although it was not at stake primarily.

Some years later, in 1987, a young Belgian choreographer gives his première in Netherlands, where his piece received a lukewarm critics. Called *What the body does not remember*<sup>10</sup>, this piece was the first of the now famous Wim Vandekeybus. He wanted to work on “*The intensity of moments when you don't have a choice, when other things decide for you*”<sup>11</sup>. Here, the theme is explicitly reflexes and danger, as Vandekeybus himself explains it when he speaks about “*the accident that has to happen*”<sup>12</sup>. In fact, the object of the piece was the body's reactions when put into dangerous situations: landing on the floor in a horizontal position, receiving heavy bricks thrown by other people, etc. The title is an explicit reference to movements that are not learnt through a long process, but to those that are present in the body since our birth. Instincts and reflexes are the starting point of the performance: in order to work on this kind of movements and qualities, Vandekeybus had to look for situations where the body must adopt an instinctive reaction without thinking; that's why he came quite naturally to create dangerous and risky materials for the stage, in order to get out of his dancers the precise body state he was looking for. This statement actually puts on the question of freedom: if the dancers are placed in such situations where they have no choice, then the physical constraint that crushes them takes away all possible freedom. For instance, one of the most famous scene of the performance is when dancers throw in the air above them bricks, and remain standing under it until someone pulls or pushes them away from the fall. Here again, danger is the key element of the scene, and the tension it generates is always quoted by the spectators as a very striking moment.

This leads us to distinguish two different treatments of the questions of liberty in this performance: when the dancer jumps horizontally off the floor, he can only rely on himself to insure a safe exit for himself. In other words, although he is under a strong constraint, he is still the “master of his own fate”. But in the scene of the stone thrown in the air, here Vandekeybus introduce another element to complicate the situation: the dancer is again deprived of his freedom (he has to escape) like in the previous one, but he also has to entrust his own security to someone else. Giving up security and freedom, the dancer is in this case trapped in a stressful situation, where he is totally powerless. As it has been mentioned before, danger and freedom are often bound

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10 See <http://www.ultimavez.com/en/productions/what-body-does-not-remember>, seen on 23.02.13.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

to each other : **the more dangerous a situation is, the less freedom the dancer has.** Obviously this rule applies also in the every day life: when danger pops up, one must adopt an adapted reaction in the possibly shortest laps of time in order to get through it. Getting back to the stage, it is easy to understand that dancers who face danger are under heavy constraint, and although the degree of freedom depends always on the context (indeed, we can imagine that the freedom of move in the piece *Walking on the Wall* is greater than in Vandekeybus pieces, but still the dancer has to deal with his equipment's constraints, and ignoring them can lead him to very grave consequences), one must be fully aware of the limits within which he can or must act, because mistakes are not permitted. At this point a question arises by itself: why do some choreographers feel the need to put their performers into stressful and risky situations? What can be the effect on them? In fact, I believe that the answer lies in the previous quotation of Wim Vandekeybus<sup>13</sup>; when risks comes up, the intensity of the moment rises drastically, and the state of mind of dancers as well as spectators' changes. From a biological point of view, we know that the human brain releases adrenaline when put into stressful situations, in order to speed up the heart's rhythm, as well as the muscles' reaction time. So rising up the risk also rises up the intensity of movements, the intensity of the bodies on stage. On the contrary, if risk is not part of a piece, dancers are to experience a certain freedom in the way they dance. Although most of the time dancers execute movements that have been set before during the rehearsals, the way they execute them, the intensity they choose to put in it always depends on them, on their choice at the very instant of the movement. To some extent, this freedom, this irreducible space left to performers cannot be denied by any choreographer when making a piece: he or she can write the “music note” as precisely as he or she wishes, the way the dancer is going to perform it is not under control. I presume that this liberty of action gives to performing arts their unbelievable variety and diversity: it is always said that nobody can see twice the same performance, because many factors influence the performers before and during their show, like tiredness, their mood, their health state, etc. Of course, professionalism consists in mastering those factors in order to perform as close as possible from the initial wish of the choreographer, but we all know that this is possible only to some extent. By introducing risk on stage, it seems that choreographers want to confront with this freedom left to performers, and while they increase the intensity of their piece, they also diminish the field of possibilities for their dancers. Instead of freedom and stress-less movements, they opt for intensity and tension.

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13 See note 9.

## 2. Danger in circus

### 2.1. Danger as an expressing tool

As we have seen before, danger has a different role when comprised in dance or in circus. Circus arts started to use danger very soon, almost from the beginning and it has become part of the discipline. From the performers' point of view, what does danger bring? Does it make any difference to do dangerous things on stage or not? First I interviewed Milán Újvári, who danced for one a half year in the Cirque du Soleil company. Although Milán is a dancer, his experience in a circus company was very valuable for me, and his acrobatic skills help him to get a good overview of what is circus and what is dance. According to him, circus artists have a certain need for danger and adrenaline. He related a story where he climbed up the Freedom Bridge in Budapest with artists from the CNAC<sup>14</sup>, and there he could experience during this street performance that when he reached his own limits and got afraid of the height, the circus artists kept on going, and they “tried to maintain the tension to its maximum”<sup>15</sup>. With this anecdote, Milán wanted to express that for circus artists, reaching the limits or trying to push them back is part of their work, part of their discipline. As a consequence, their relationship to danger has to be different than for dancers: they seek for it, and intentionally look for situations where they can get adrenaline. At this point, we need to understand why circus artists look for this, and what can be their motivation to put themselves into such environments. Therefore I have interviewed during the course of my work a circus artist, André Rolland. Rolland is a tissue artist, even though he did some juggling and acrobatics as well. He prefers to call his discipline – in Hungarian – curtain dance<sup>16</sup>, to put the accent on the flow, the harmony that it requires. To the question why do circus artists look for danger, Rolland gave a personal answer: he does not seek for danger, just he accepts that what he does is dangerous<sup>17</sup>. What’s more, Rolland explained also that **dominating danger can be a very powerful expressing tool:**

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14 *Centre National des Arts du Cirque*, National Centre for Circus Arts.

15 See Milán's interview in the appendix.

16 “*Függöny tánc*” were his words.

17 See Rolland's interview in the appendix.

*“This is one of the characteristic of circus to overcome the fears so that people can fly – everyone would like to fly – and we show that, yes, this is possible.”*

This quotation shows that for circus artists, doing what is uncommon and dangerous allow them to express very powerful things, like realizing dreams. To go back to Milán's words, it seems that danger is not at first a physical need for performers, but just a inevitable element of what they do, which can strengthen very much their expressing power. Since he played in the performance *Virtus* of the Duda Eva company, Milán related a similar anecdote. In the performance, Milán had a part where he had to climb up a tissue, to tighten his legs and then let himself fall down in the air: as he told me, during the performance he could hear people holding their breath, paralysed by their fear while he was realizing his trick. Obviously, the way Milán related this story shows that he enjoyed this moment, that the expressing force of his fall was for him a new and good experience, another way of having an impact on the audience.

## 2.2. Overcome the fear

Circus artists use danger to express themselves, and to create relationships with their audience. But an important question remains: what is their deep relationship to danger? Do they feel any fear in front of danger? Taking for granted that circus artists are above all else people, then they obviously fear just like others in front of dangerous situations. The question is then to know how do they deal with their fears. Rolland told me that on the stage, he does not fear: *“(…) People don't want to see on stage that someone is afraid. They rather want to see that this guy, who is at 8 meters high, lives there and that he feels good up there”*<sup>18</sup>. As a matter of fact, the laws of circus do not really allow the performers to be afraid, because *“if we would show that, then we would kill the magic of circus”*<sup>1920</sup>. Still, as Rolland and Milán related it, it occurs that artists get afraid of a trick or a figure, mainly when it is a new one. Milán explained in details that the first time he tries a new trick, he is very often afraid to go for it, because he does not know which feelings will come along

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18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 However, Francine Fourmaux wrote in her book that fear can become a dramatic element, indeed many artists choose to intentionally show fear on stage in order to increase the tension of a scene. See note 6, p. 8.

with it. This moment is probably the most frightening for the performers, however, according to both of them, daring to let go the rope or the tissue generates a good feeling for them. Indeed, the sensation of overcoming the fear is key to understand their relationship to danger: Rolland said the important is to dominate one's fear, and it seems to be a real need for performers to get through this process from times to times. Thus, both Milán and Rolland told me that if they do not learn new tricks for some time, after a while they miss it, and they start to look for new things to learn. Here we can see that the challenge is what really motivates circus artists, or dancers who have a pronounced taste for acrobatics and dangerous types of moves. Consequently, Milán appears to have been right: strictly speaking, **artists do not seek** for danger itself, but **for the sensation of overcoming their own fears**. But as this cannot happen without putting themselves into dangerous and unknown situations, clearly one can assert that those performers do like danger, and have a certain need for it.

To be afraid of the unknown is a normal feeling, a feeling that artists like to experience. But there is another type of fear, that can appear when something went wrong already once. Indeed, after an accident, people do not try so confidently again the trick that brought them troubles; that's why they have then to overcome again their fear, to somehow delete the bad experience they had had once with a given move. Milán told during his interview that once he landed very badly after a somersault, on his neck. Although no serious injury resulted from it, he remained afraid of the trick for 6 or 7 years. What's more, he also experienced that changing one's mind during a jump for instance is the worst that can happen for the performer. As he analysed it well, when someone starts a somersault and then makes up his mind in the air, the situation gets very dangerous because the body is in an uncommon position, and without the correct impulse, there is a good chance that the performer will not be able to land as he planned to. Those movements belong to the range of reflex moves, they are most of the time involuntary and that get activated – in theory – as a protection for the body. Unfortunately, acrobatics is such that those protection processes do much more harm for the performers than good, and that's why Milán said that he always hopes that nothing like this will happen when he does a hard figure. Similarly, Rolland also encountered accidents during his artistic practice, and he told me that once he got a broken rib because of a mistake during a figure on the tissue. Since then, he remains worried when having to perform this move, and he precisely explained that he always has to fight off his fears in those situations. It is interesting to note that those examples are never related to good feelings for the performers, even though they proceed of the same mechanism, which is overcoming one's fears. Indeed **mechanism related to fear appear**

**to be dual: they can generate very positive feelings rooted in braveness, but in the same time they become troublesome when associated to an accident that happened already once.** In the latter case, they function like reminders, calling for a special degree of attention. Nevertheless, Milán related that he is not afraid any more of doing the somersault he missed once, and after some practice he managed to find back his positive attitude regarding the trick.

### 2.3. Virtuosity before danger, and its benefits for dancers

Last but not least, one aspect of the handling of danger in circus remains untouched: the virtuosity and its effects. According the Cambridge dictionary, a virtuoso artist is an artist who is “extremely skilled”<sup>21</sup>. So logically, virtuosity is the characteristic of an extremely skilled performer. The example that the Cambridge dictionary uses to illustrate the word is actually very relevant: *“The Times critic described her dancing as ‘a virtuoso performance of quite dazzling accomplishment’ ”*<sup>22</sup>. This example underlines that virtuosity has to do with dazzling and marvel. As a matter of fact, virtuosity brings amazement for the audience watching, and is often used within circus as an evidence of quality. In circus more than anywhere else, artists must be virtuoso in order to realize tricks and figures that will dazzle the spectators, because it is part of the discipline's essence. In addition to danger, virtuosity has a multiplied effect: indeed, it is even more dazzling to see someone showing virtuosity when put into a dangerous situation. Milán spoke about this during the interview: he mentioned that he saw once an acrobat who was so virtuoso, so talented that he was able to create a strong relationship between him and the audience thanks only to his assurance and his elegance. It means that Milán felt as a spectator that the artist was connected to the audience through his mastering of the situation; here, the **virtuosity not only serves to amaze the audience, but it becomes a medium used to establish communication between the artist and its audience.** It is hard to define what people see in this case, and a deeper research should be made in order to know precisely what happens for the spectators in such moments. However, one can be sure that assuming danger and showing a perfect mastering of it helps performers to open up themselves, to reach out instead of staying inside. There, danger wins a new meaning, as being able to connect artists to its viewers, and this way of reaching people watching seems quite new for dancers or

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21 Definition found here: [http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/virtuoso\\_2?q=virtuosity](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/virtuoso_2?q=virtuosity).

22 Ibid.

performers whose everyday performing activity is not strongly connected to danger.

Indeed, dealing with danger on stage or outside seems to give to performers a couple of advantages. First, as Milán explained it with plenty of details, getting into dangerous situations helps performers to increase their body knowledge and awareness. Milán used a lot of terms referring to the body during the interview, like “muscle memory”, “body awareness” and “body experiences”<sup>23</sup>. Those words all have in common that they try to describe what are the processes at stake when talking about acrobatics and danger. To resume what Milán wanted to say, we can say that acrobatics gives the opportunity for dancers to know better their body, and to experience feelings and situations that are uncommon. From those situations, a knowledge can be extracted that would possibly help dancers in other situations as well. In fact, dangerous performing situations often require an extreme precision in order to avoid the injury: as Milán explained it well, when one wants to let himself fall off the tissue with his legs tightened, he has to find the correct body tension that will allow him to be neither too stiff, nor too relax during the fall. Both of the two mistake could lead to serious injuries, so **it is very important for performers to have a very precise body awareness, and more than that, to be able to mobilize this awareness in dangerous situations,** in cold blood.

If dancers follow the path of acrobatics, they can gain plenty of knowledge and experiences that will be useful for them. But another advantage of collecting movements coming from other disciplines is to include them into the dancing. Nowadays, many dancers try to insert acrobatic moves into their moving, in order to explore new possibilities of movement; indeed, Milán related that he often uses in dance the figures he could learn during his training in capoeira or gymnastics. There comes a new problem: how to link harmoniously dance moves with circus ones? As seen before, acrobatics is different from dance because of the seek for dangerous body situations: but if someone wants to link both of them into a dance, then he needs to apply the continuity and the natural of dance to the dangerous and virtuoso moves of circus. Creating such a link requires a lot of work and training: according to Milán, achieving this demands “*infinite practice*” and a “*very long method*”<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, it seems hard to reach a level when an acrobat gives the sensation to dance his moves, to perform them with such lightness and elegance that one could forget that the move is dangerous. Some dancers do, but once more only with intensive practice. This way of performing acrobatic moves has to do with the notion of virtuosity, since a complete mastering of acrobatics is

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<sup>23</sup> See Milán's interview in appendix.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



needed to put into it accents, continuity and performing quality. However, reaching such a level assures the performer to have a strong effect on the audience, since the virtuosity he shows will for sure impress the spectators (Milán, dancer himself, was strongly impressed by this acrobat when he related his previous story).

### **3. Danger and dance: the example of Ultima Vez**

#### **3.1. Overview of the Ultima Vez company**

As it was said before, the Ultima Vez company developed a unique work, where danger is one the main element of the choreographies. From its first performance, Vandekeybus<sup>25</sup> used danger on stage in order to explore his own theories and ideas about dance and movement. As a matter of fact, the performance was so rough that one could effectively see what Vandekeybus had in mind: not to stage a theatrical reality, a fake one where people plays as if it would be real, but situations where dancers are really in danger, where they can get hurt if their partner does not catch up the – real – brick falling onto their head. Showing the reality, Vandekeybus wants to shock and provoke his audience: he wants to put on stage what people usually do not see, he wants to confront them with a reality that is often hidden or absent from their every day life. Those situations create for the audience a particular state, when the spectators see so much that they can imagine the worst happening. Vandekeybus calls this the “imaginary catastrophe”; the imagination of the spectator creates images of the accident, of the catastrophe that almost happened. For lack of being able to show a catastrophe on stage, Vandekeybus goes until the very last limit, where it almost happens; this is what he calls paradoxically return to reality. Indeed, his wish is to be as close as possible of the reality, but one can question the degree of reality that we are talking about. Obviously, all the situations that Vandekeybus shows are real, but still the effect he is seeking for is “imaginary”. So Vandekeybus uses real tools to create an imaginary effect on his spectators: although he tries hard, he cannot overcome the theatre’s reality, whose one of the fundamental rule is that theatre is not reality. Even though his fight for reality seems pointless, because of the essence of theatre, still Vandekeybus manages to tell us something about our life and our nature through his choreographies. What's more, this method requires a lot of virtuosity from the dancers: as Imre Vass

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<sup>25</sup> Wim Vandekeybus is the founder and the choreographer of the Ultima Vez company.

told me in an interview<sup>26</sup>, the performance he danced in (*nieuwZwart*) was brutal. Brutality does not mean danger by itself, but we can see out of his words and of Máté Mészáros' words that this performance and other ones as well were punctuated with accidents and injuries, partly because of their harshness. Erwin Jans in his book entitled *Wim Vandekeybus* explains that the Belgian choreographer's performances are a “*dramatisation of danger, of risk the body surrenders itself to*”<sup>27</sup>. As a matter of fact, Vandekeybus brings his dancers in such situations where they have no choice on how to get out of them: whether they must trust their most basic instincts, or they have to completely trust in their partners. In both cases, the performer is placed in such a situation where he becomes deprived of his freedom. This surrender is a characteristic of U.V.'s vocabulary: dancers pushed off the stage, lying on the floor when someone falls down on them<sup>28</sup>; many scenes related in the interviews imply a passive state from the dancer, a passivity that brings trouble with itself. It seems quite contradictory that Vandekeybus uses the freedom that the stage offers him to constrain his dancers so much: in his wish to come back to reality, he creates situations that are so dangerously real that they become coercive for the performers. As Máté Mészáros told me during our interview, Wim Vandekeybus likes to stage struggle, pain and brutality. His wish is to show the wild part of our individual, the animality that lies in every one of us. This animality is actually real, since it is a part of human beings, but the fact that we do not use it day by day makes it somehow unreal: this contrast makes U.V.'s performances so peculiar, because of the wild and tough quality of the dances, and the danger that they contain. We all know that the animal world is full of danger: it is made of struggle for life, fights and instinctive reactions to threats. Many of Vandekeybus' pieces reflect this, and considering his taste for animality, one cannot be surprised that danger plays such a role in his work. As he said once: “*I do think that one shouldn't humanise animals, as is so often done today. It is much more necessary to make people more like animals*”<sup>29</sup>.

One can wonder why is danger needed in U.V.'s pieces, why is it so important from the beginning of the company's work. Although answering this question would take us to another thesis work, I will let Máté Mészáros share his thought with us, since he knows Wim Vandekeybus quite well as he worked with him a lot. According to him, Vandekeybus likes to put danger, struggle and fight on the stage because his first intention is to provoke. His wish is to pull out the audience from its comfortable everyday life, and to show them that those situations could be part of their life, if

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26 See appendix for the detail of the interview.

27 Jans Erwin, *Wim Vandekeybus*, p.15, Critical Theatre Lexicon, Flemish Theatre Institute, May 1999.

28 These examples are extracted from *nieuwZwart*, see Imre Vass' interview for more details.

29 Ibid, p.13.

only they would live in other parts of the world. Through the process of the “imaginary catastrophe”, he gives emotional shocks to his audience and keep them alert that even though life is today quite peaceful for many of his spectators, those dark sides can at every moment come up again. So danger is not set on stage for its spectacular aspect, because “it looks good”, but rather to show how the world used to be, could be, or simply is. Obviously those scenes where danger pops up have to be successful, they have to look “good” to some extent, in order to be credible. Here starts the performer's work, when he has to move in a way that gives the impression of toughness, crudity and brutality from what the performance will seem credible and “real”.

### 3.2. Handling dangerous movements and movement qualities on stage

As a matter of fact, being a performer in U.V. means that one must permanently oscillate between the need for a “real” outlook of the scene and the security, the integrity of the performers. Both Imre Vass and Máté Mészáros told me that they always had to take position during the rehearsal process to find compromises between the aesthetics of the performance and their health. They were obliged to keep in mind two contradictory elements: making things as true as possible, but meanwhile paying attention to themselves and the others, in order not to hurt or get hurt. Of course this does not go for every minute of U.V. performances, but in some scenes the tension was palpable. In the interview he gave me, Máté Mészáros relates that in the performance entitled *Radical Wrong*, there was a fight scene comprising five performers. When they worked on this scene with Wim Vandekeybus, Máté told me that when they did not play the scene one hundred percent, they received remarks from Vandekeybus saying that the scene was not real enough, that “*this is not how you fight in real life*”<sup>30</sup>. On the other hand, Máté talked about the danger of such a scene: one must pretend that he really intends to hurt and hit the others, while he pays extra attention that nothing wrong will happen. As we can understand here, Vandekeybus strives in his pieces to reach a certain level of credibility. Strictly speaking, credibility does not mean reality; Vandekeybus wants to evoke things that – only – seem real in order to awake among the spectators feelings that they would feel facing such a scene in real life. This notion is key to understand Vandekeybus wishes concerning his dancers, the way he works with them and to understand how far he can get to express precisely what he wants. Concerning the performers, they must understand why they have to move in such a way, and why is it needed from the piece's point of view. This

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30 See Máté Mészáros' interview.

helps them to find the required quality of movement, so that the whole piece can be credible for the audience. Then the work accomplished during the rehearsal process is not about finding a dance language that could fit the wishes of the choreographer. It consists in developing enough attention and skills for the performers to be able to fight “almost” for real, to “almost” hit their colleagues so that the whole scene looks how it should. The aesthetics somehow disappear behind the need for crude reality, for a full credibility. If aesthetics is sent to the background, the same happens to the notion of choreography: performers improvise, and the only thing they really care about is actually not to get hurt (like in a real fight) and not to hurt anyone (which is here the only meaningful difference between theatre and reality). In *Radical Wrong*, Máté explained that one of the scene was made of fixed choreography and improvisation at once: Máté had to dance a fixed dance material, while one of the actor had to run around the stage with a big ball in his arms. As he could not see anything because of the ball, his run was random, and he always got to a different point at a different moment. Therefore, Máté had to pay plenty of attention to him in order to avoid accidents, as his colleague's run was unpredictable. As mentioned before, such a scene means a specific attention, because the smallest mistake can mean a very serious injury at any moment.

The concept of attention is key when talking about dangerous situations on stage. My aim here is not to diminish the importance of concentration in other contexts: obviously, anyone who has ever performed at any level knows that this is the basics of performing arts. However, Imre Vass did speak about a specific kind of attention he needs when coming to a dangerous scene. Máté Mészáros also put the accent on this term, and the anecdote he told me about the broken nose is – according to him – based on a lack of attention from his side<sup>31</sup>. In fact, all the stories he told about accidents and injuries have something to do with attention: once he got hit by a girl during a partnering part, another time he broke the nose of his colleague, and once while he was teaching two dancers entered in collision with each other while running backwards. As we can see, lack of attention can be harsh for people who do not concentrate enough when they should. Thus, it is not hard to understand that in U.V.'s pieces, the level of danger and physicality required by Vandekeybus does not leave much space for mistakes and absent-mindedness. Máté gave me enough examples for this; Imre, in his interview speaks also about **attention**, saying that it **has to be set on a different level in order to keep the dancing as safe as possible**. As he related in his interview, attention functions in these cases like alarm-clocks or reminders: they put the accent in a

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31 In *Radical Wrong*, Máté once hit one of the performers during the fight scene with his elbow, and he broke his nose. See his interview for more details.

particular moment, when one has to catch a girl jumping on him for instance. In fact **this type of attention refers to a specific body state that performers must reach** in order to be able to realize the moves they are asked to do.

This body state seems hard to define: every dancer puts his own words on it. Nevertheless, we can try to draw a map of elements needed to reach it. Imre talked about the necessity of releasing the body when he faces such moments: as he describes it, “(...) *I needed another type of attention, with which you try to relax yourself as best as you can in order to be ready for anything, to let anything happen*”. In this statement, he puts the accent on reaching a certain calmness before starting a hard part, to focus his attention on what is really needed. The expression “relax yourself” does not mean necessarily release the body or the muscles but in this context it has more to do with relaxing the mind, getting ready mentally for a dangerous scene. This implies an open-mindedness to be able to cope with anything that happens in the right way. Thus, when Imre was pushed off the stage in *nieuwZwart*, Máté told<sup>32</sup> me that sometimes he was sent off hardly, and then he always had to deal with landing as nicely as possible. This scene is a good example of what Imre wants to express there: even though you know what is going to happen, and even though you carefully looked before the performance where you will land after the push, one has always to deal with some micro-changes that can have their importance regarding the safety of the dancer, the success of the scene. Imre said that when such a scene is coming, the performer definitely needs to enter a specific body state, filled with focus and openness to be able to react to anything, to avoid accidents even though he was pushed in the wrong direction, even though the push got stronger than expected. Máté Mészáros also evoked the question of the performers' state in his interview; he developed the notion of 100 % mind and 100 % body. According to him, this refers to what performers do “*90 % of the time*”: it is, quite simply, when one concentrates on what is going on at the moment. Therefore it is the state that most of the dancers dance in, because it allows the performers to have a total control of what happens on stage. It is logically the state that performers use when realizing dangerous moves and scenes. In the case of U.V.' performances, it seems that something more is at stake, a specific body state close to animality. This is called the *alert state*. Anyone knows that this state is used among the animal world when a threat comes up: animals tense their muscles, show their fangs and all kind of weapons nature gave them to defend themselves. In alert state, the whole body seems to focus onto a single point, where the danger comes from. Naturally, such a state exist also for human beings: indeed, stressful situations can produce effects belonging to the alert state.

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32 Unfortunately he related this story off micro.

Obviously, the alert state for human beings is only about tensing muscles and focusing the attention, and in Vandekeybus' work, this state is like a leitmotiv. Dancers are always asked to handle dangerous situations where their whole body is involved, and their whole self – body and mind – is concentrated on surviving the given situation without trouble. The use of the alert state gets a brand new signification when thinking about the previous quotation of Vandekeybus about animals (see footnote 24): here the aim is to bring dancers as close as possible to animality, to get back to the state where instincts drive people, and nothing else.

Then Máté talked about another state, when the body is fully present (100 %) but not the mind (0 %). This state corresponds for him to two clear situations: the first one is when the performer knows so well what he must do that he does not need to focus especially his attention on what he does: his body knows for him the movements. The second one is when one gets so tired that he becomes unable to concentrate; Máté related an anecdote about one of his creation where he required the dancer to dance for 25 minutes non-stop. At the end, the dancer got so tired that he could produce a movement quality that interested Máté as a choreographer. In this case, the mind surrenders after a while and the body takes over: the dancer does not really pay attention to what he does, he ends up moving in a more instinctive way. This type of body state has its advantages, but obviously one cannot imagine that it can be used in a performance where danger is present at every moment. Such a lack of concentration would be too risky for the performer and his colleagues. As Máté described it when talking about the fighting scene of *Radical Wrong*, the performers could not afford to “lose their mind” during that scene: as a consequence, even though the visual effect of the scene can be something close to this, in reality everyone must pay full attention to his environment.

During the interviews, I asked a question regarding the degree of holding back during the rehearsal process: did the dancers think about holding themselves back, or did they always do the maximum of what they could do at that moment? It turned out that both Máté and Imre had always in mind the question of the long-term: indeed, a move can seem interesting and good-looking when done for the first time, but then after a while the dancer realizes that it is not healthy. When they created dance materials for the performance, Imre and Máté always kept in mind that they will have to perform those movements many times, and that they should keep them healthy in order to be able to do them almost every evening for weeks. It means that they tried to incorporate to their materials movements that do not harm their articulations, in which shocks and collisions are as minimal as possible. On the contrary, one of the dancer of the performance, called Dawid Lorenc chose not to hold back anything, and he did not take into consideration the long-term: as a result, Máté told in

the interview that after the performance “*he had to put ice on his body in order to be able to walk*”<sup>33</sup>. *NieuwZwart* was played more than one hundred times, and it seems clear that if someone does not keep this in mind when choosing what kind of moves he wants to bring to the creation, problems can occur. Máté speaks about a lack of experience to explain such a behaviour: Dawid was freshly coming out of his dance school (P.A.R.T.S.) and he did not want to spare any drop of energy he had. So **handling danger on stage requires also a longer-term view in order to avoid injuries that would appear with the course of time**: carefully choose the materials and movements that one does, think about their repetition day by day for a long time seem to be very important elements to keep one's dancing safe and healthy. Indeed, injuries do not only occur when a move is not done correctly: Máté also gave an example during his interview when his knees went bad because of a work that was too demanding for his articulations. Consequently he had to operate his knees in order to keep dancing. This aspect of danger is actually a quite different one, because it refers to a longer period of time, but still taking it into consideration from the beginning of a creation process is as important as paying attention when realizing a hard figure on stage.

### 3.3. Relationship of U.V. dancers to danger and consequences

After all this, we can start to draw a panorama of danger in dance. When is danger? How to deal with it and what are its consequences for the performers? First, we saw that danger brings with itself some injuries, incidents or accidents that force performers to permanently think about the potential danger of a scene, of a move, and as a consequence they also hold back sometimes their energies in order to prevent themselves from getting injured in the moment or later on. Injuries have a mental effect on the performers: they remember when it happened, and why. As Máté describes it, his relationships to previous injuries are not all the same: in some cases he is not afraid of trying again a movement that created problems for him, and in some cases he is<sup>34</sup>. Generally speaking, dancers come to hold back or keep a critical eye on their work when it is possible – for example during rehearsals, when they have to create movements materials. During the performance itself, it seems harder to do so since the quality required cannot be subject to compromises: but as Imre Vass says it, if one has a problem he can always do something to facilitate his life on stage without sacrificing to the quality, to the goal of the performance.

33 See Máté's interview in the appendix.

34 See the anecdote of his first injury, during a ballet class at school.

Imre Vass also told me during the interview that danger is not only present on stage: other situations can be dangerous, if some conditions are gathered. Any time dancers start to concentrate less, any time they get stressed or step in the unknown, the situation can become dangerous. For him, auditions are a good example for this: everyone wants to show his best side and as a consequence, people can go too far and stepping beyond their physical limits, they get hurt and/ or hurt the others. This ardent wish combined with the stress of the audition create a state that can drive performers to lack concentration, to reduce the critical distance they have with their current actions and its potential danger. Furthermore, both Imre and Máté make a clear distinction between dancing a fixed choreography and improvising. If the material is fixed, it means that the dancers have rehearsed it before they perform it on stage, and with practice the danger that they can contain is drastically reduced. On the other hand, when improvising, dancers do not always control everything they do. This state of mind is described by Máté when talking about his improvisation performance he made some years ago; he arrives to the same conclusions that Imre Vass, who confessed on his interview that to him, a performance in which everything is improvised is more dangerous than a performance of U.V. where everything is known and fixed. To illustrate his words, Imre compared the work of Adrienn Hód and U.V., saying that the latter was not as dangerous as the improvised performance that the Hungarian choreographer used to do. Why? When improvising, two factors improve the potential danger of the situation: firstly, the performer does not know precisely what he is doing, and secondly he does not know what others are doing meanwhile. In a fixed choreography, you more or less always know where your fellow dancers are on stage, and when. If only one of those two factors happen to be random, then one creates a situation where anything can happen, good or bad. Máté told about one his injury that occurred in *Radical Wrong*, when he got surprised during his solo by one the dancers who was improvising (the scene where an actor was running around the stage with a ball, without seeing where he goes), and he showed up at a place and at a time that was totally new for Máté. Máté got surprised by his colleague on the stage, and as he was not prepared to the situation he got in, he avoided the dancer but got wounded in return. So if one of the factors (dancer's actions or environment actions) is improvised, danger comes up; if both of them are improvised, the situation would eventually get even more dangerous, since the unpredictability comes then from both sides. That's why Máté and Imre explained me that **improvisation is a very dangerous situation, since its first characteristic, unpredictability, is a source of danger for the performers**, as well as a source of interest both for the spectators and the performers.



Last but not least, I would like to conclude this part with a quotation of Rasmus Ölme, who was kind enough to answer a questionnaire that I sent him. I asked him his opinion about when is danger on stage, and he wrote back the following:

*“I would say that the real risk is when you do not understand the danger of what you are doing.”<sup>35</sup>*

Here, Rasmus puts the accent on the necessity of thinking and understanding the movements. Indeed, as we now know, executing a dangerous move reclaims a specific state that the dancer must reach in order to be in (relative) security, in other words to decrease danger. But in addition to the question of concentration and attention, Rasmus points out the need of understanding precisely the risks of a given move: knowing what are the potential risks of accident, the common mistakes related to the movement, why do they happen, how is it possible to avoid them, etc. For instance acrobatics has its own rules as a technique, and many times dancers go in this direction because of the visual effect that acrobatics brings them. But its rules are sometimes very different from the ones that prevail in dance, and a misunderstanding of them can lead to hard falls and injuries. The good use of run-up, the knowledge that one must have about gravity and how to orientate himself within the acrobatic move are very important: by gathering knowledge about a technique or a simple move, one starts to get a picture of what is needed, and – maybe more important – what can happen if the needs are not fulfilled. Besides this technical side, the sentence can be applied to any situation where danger is present: we saw that auditions or improvisation sessions are other situations where danger often pops up. To my mind, it is very important that one understands what is at stake in those cases as well. Everyone knows what it is to dance in an audition, but I am not sure that everyone keeps in mind that this can be dangerous for the reasons listed above; then, being conscious of one's physical and mental state, being aware of one's own limits and understanding the risks that are linked to the whole situation help prevent accidents. It can also increase the attention dancers pay to each others in auditions, and therefore reduce the risks of collision, shock and so forth. From then on, we see that the awareness of danger has a very important role in handling danger itself. In fact, I would say that **every situation has its own degree of danger, and the question is not necessarily the importance of the danger itself, but instead the awareness of it.** Indeed, a movement very dangerous will not be a problem if one knows about it and has enough technique to handle it correctly. On the contrary, any situation comprising the smallest risk can become problematic if one or more actors are not completely aware of its nature. In those cases,

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<sup>35</sup> See the interview of Rasmus Ölme in the appendix, question 7.

danger is more present as a general feeling for the spectators watching for instance, and seeing that danger is not correctly handled on stage is in fact a very bad feeling for the audience.

## Conclusion

As a conclusion, it seems pretty difficult to draw a precise line of what is danger in dance. Of course, the definition of danger we used in this work helps to delimit what is and what is not voluntarily dangerous within the frame of a dance material. Furthermore, looking upon circus did help us to understand what can be the benefits of acrobatics and danger in general, in circus and in dance. Indeed, we could draw through the example of circus a map of what acrobatics is good for, and in other terms, why is danger positive for performers when handled correctly: it helps improving dancers' skills, and it can enrich one's dance vocabulary. We also examined the role of the virtuosity notion: understood like a full mastering of a dangerous situation, virtuosity applies on the audience a very strong effect, and it generates a special link between the spectators and the artists, paradoxically filled with fear and fascination at the same time. In the last part, we studied from closer the work of the Ultima Vez company, who deals intensively with risk and danger. First we tried to understand why does Wim Vandekeybus like to stage danger, and what does it bring to the performances, to the dancers' presence. Then we examined how do dancers deal with danger in U.V. Performances: a strong focus, entering a specific body and mental state and keeping in mind the long-term when creating dance materials, those elements are key to safely work with danger within the frame of performing arts. Then we looked upon the question of – when is danger? – with the help of Rasmus Ölme. After all this work, it is visible that danger is a very complex notion. All the performers I interviewed explained me that knowing what to do is the safest net against accidents: attention, openness, awareness of the risks, I could write a long list of what is necessary to handle correctly danger within dance; my guess is that all this helps to create a sensation of safety for the performers, but the question is to know the degree of reality of this safety. In other words, is it only a sensation or is it real? During our interview, Milán Újvári talked about what happens when someone practices a lot a given acrobatic movement: “(...) *there is no danger in you, but the move remains dangerous, independently of you*”<sup>36</sup>. My guess is that he formulates here the essence of the problem: one can work on himself, on his appreciation of danger and his mastering of a move, but

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36 See Milán's interview in the appendix.

he or she cannot change the nature of what is done. Then, saying that an acrobatic move “is not dangerous” seems to refer to some kind of mental protection mechanism, since nobody can ignore danger when facing it.

Personally speaking, I realized during this work that my relationship to danger has changed. Before working on this theme, I was always thinking that my fears are due to a lack of practice, and that an appropriate period of training and work could dissipate those fears. But I realized that no one spoke about a complete peace of mind during the course of this work: of course one can act to reduce his own fears, but more than everything he has to learn to live with it. I presume this is the biggest thing I learnt during those months: doing acrobatics implies an irreducible danger, and even though it might sometimes be hard to take, I will never get rid of it. Probably there lies its magic as well. Going back to the dance studio, I understood that working on this subject has brought me peace of mind; indeed I learnt to be afraid “peacefully”. I can already feel that this will take me forward, and that I won a precious freedom knowing that I am compelled to be afraid and to make things right.

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## **Appendix**

## Interview with Milán Újvári

*Realized on the 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2013.*

*Me: I have a couple of questions, more or less 15 that I would like to ask you. I will start with some questions about you and your artistic career, and then we will talk about danger in dance and circus. My first question is: where did you learn to dance?*

Milán: I graduated in the Hungarian Academy of Dance<sup>37</sup>. Before I did some fashion dance: disco, jazz, some hip hop. The acrobatic things I do come mainly from ballet, the jumps from the fashion dances. And another important thing to mention is that I did capoeira for 5 years, in a group.

*Me: In Hungary?*

Milán: Yes. I went to Brazil for 1 week, otherwise here in Hungary. So my background is mainly a dance one: but I have been always interested in jumps in ballet, in break dance as well, and in fact the capoeira influenced very much my moving. Afterwards I stopped it because I felt that I start to get stuck into one style, and I wanted to get to know other things as well. Nowadays I am interested in those jumps that go downwards, when you land roughly on the floor, which require a compact body state. Those kind of jumps when it looks like you just break yourself up on the floor but meanwhile there is a technique behind it so that you do not get any problem. Of course many other things interest me, but if we speak about danger and acrobatics then this is it.

*Me: Okay. After the dance Academy, where did you work?*

Milán: After the Academy I danced one year in the Frenák Pál company, in the piece entitled “Boys”<sup>38</sup>. Afterwards we worked on a solo, that Pál choreographed for me, but I was very young and after one year we decided both of us that the best was for me to go. After this I attended the Mu Terminal for one year, and from there I went to Cirque du Soleil for one and a half year.

*Me: I see. How did you manage to get in? Did you go there for an audition?*

Milán: I sent a DVD to them, and they called me back to invite me to the audition. I went through, and 3 months after they called me that I should replace a guy who left the company.

*Me: What did you have to do there?*

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<sup>37</sup> “Magyar Táncművészeti Főiskola”, translated by the author.

<sup>38</sup> “Fiúk”.

Milán: I did not have to do acrobatics. They took me in as a dancer, but of course my acrobatic background was an advantage. For us, for the dancers, acrobatics was not required; I actually almost did not use it, just in a small improvised part. They asked me what would I do in this impro and I showed them a couple of jumps, a couple of variations and they chose some. That was all the acrobatics I had to do. To me, the exciting part of this job was not this but the environment we worked in, especially the medical background: the medical security set for the artists. When we went on tour, there was a dedicated group of doctors who came with us, and 2 physical therapists. We could get massage every day if needed, if one would have any kind of injury then they would take care of it, bandage it. In Cirque du Soleil, very often the doctors are on the top of the hierarchy, and they have the final word, not the artistic directors. For instance once I had migraine, and before the show I said that I can play the parts related to my character, but I would not like to dance. The artistic direction said “fine, let's do it this way”, but then the doctor said that he would not recommend that, because on stage I could get dizzy with the lights. I must mention the stage managers also: if someone falls down or anything, they can intervene very quickly. It was interesting to see that when a dangerous part came, the team was standing in the wings, watching, and if everything was fine then they just went away. That was a very professional environment. In fact, since I am pretty small, compact and flexible, in all of my works I use acrobatic elements extracted from what I have listed before: capoeira, or jumps downwards. For me, acrobatics is important because it gives you experiences, some kind of *body knowledge*, *body memory*<sup>39</sup>. The strange thing in acrobatics is that you must coordinate your body in one moment, to collect everything in order to be able to land after a jump. Basically, the danger lies in the fact that the body gets into such situations it is not used to. And there is an interesting thought in this, to create a training for dancers based on this principle – I do not mean that everyone would have to jump backwards flips, but to experience how it feels when the body gets into dangerous situations. I mean if one goes to body jumping, it's great, moreover this is closely related to how he moves. So if one could build up such a training in which dangerous situations are present, and the dancer must somehow solve them, then the dancer learns with danger, thanks to it.

*Me: I understand. My next question is quite simple: when is danger for you?*

Milán: I feel danger when my brain knows what to do, but my body does not obey. For instance now we did a circus piece with Duda Eva, called Virtus, and there we worked with tissue. So I had a trick in a scene where I tighten my legs to the tissue and then I let my body fall in the air,

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<sup>39</sup> Those words were pronounced in English during the interview.

backwards. What I want to say is that one can assimilate certain things, and certain things seem easier to do for me because of my body, but I feel danger when I know what to do, but my body goes against it.

*Me: Let's say if you do a somersault, does your body goes against it every time or just at the beginning? When does this occur?*

Milán: This occur when I try a new trick. Then I feel myself in the most dangerous situation: I know what to do, but I don't dare to let go the rope, or the tissue. In other words I don't dare to go through the feeling. If I do acrobatics on the floor for instance, then I would rather say that there is a sort of attention, because I could land badly. So I think about going up, I activate a kind of protection, attention; but I do not feel danger.

*Me: And when you danced in Cirque du Soleil, was there any scene where you had to do some more acrobatic things, because you spoke about an improvised part...*

Milán: I did a kung-fu jump there. Then there was another part, the improvised one, where everybody had to improvise two measures, and there I did some capoeira, and I went out with a somersault. So I had one or two tricks in the show.

*Me: And during those moments did you feel danger, or was it a routine for you that did not require particular attention?*

Milán: Honestly, since I am not a gymnast, I always took it this way: I breathed a big one, and then I jumped. Obviously there is always a bit of danger in it, and that might be contradictory with what I said before, or maybe I should speak instead of adrenaline. In fact, the fear is there when I do not know the feeling of something yet; when I know it, the fear disappears, but the danger of the figure remains, it will always be there. And that's actually a good thing: you cannot fight against it, all you can do is to get more used to it, to find a routine in it. People like it, I do like it until a certain point.

*Me: According to Rasmus Ölme, there is danger when people don't know what they are doing. So if we think about it, if someone perfectly knows what he does, there is no danger in it. Regarding what you have said before, do you agree with him?*

Milán: I agree with him, obviously if one knows what he does then it is not dangerous. But I take very much care of my body, and I do not like to get injured, so I pay special attention in those cases, and I generate in myself a small danger situation telling: “what if I land like that?”. So that's true that there is no danger to some extent, if you know what you do then there is no danger in you, but



the move remains dangerous, independently of you. Once I did a performance on the street and I did a somersault, but I was angry because of some security crew who came along. So I did the jump and I smashed my heels on the floor. I was sure of my jump, I did it well, just due to an emotional state my heels did hurt for 2 weeks afterwards. So you need attention, because the movement is dangerous, not how you do it, but the thing in itself.

*Me: You told me that when you performed in Cirque du Soleil, you always took a big breath before doing the somersault. How is it? Do you always need to stop? Or with practice it just becomes a move like all the others? How can you integrate those movements to your dancing?*

Milán: In my work, I precisely try to achieve that the acrobatic moves come from the dance, so that there is no stop. So I work on the fact that the movement flow goes on all the time, that the energy, the impulses give possibilities not to stop, if the dancer is in a “constant attention” state. But actually the key word has been said before: it requires tons of practice, and the more you possess the move, the more routine-like it will be.

*Me: Another theme: did you already get injured due to dance?*

Milán: Once when I made fashion dances, I went to the gym to practice some acrobatic tricks and I did a backwards flip where I ended up falling on my neck. I did not have any serious problem, just a strain in my neck muscles. But that was a very very bad feeling. Afterwards, I did not try it for 6 or 7 years. Basically I did not really need to, because I did a lot of ballet, and it is only when I started to do capoeira that I did it again; and it went very well. So I did not have to do it, and meanwhile I was afraid of it.

*Me: And how did it happen? Were you afraid the first time after the injury and after it was fine or are you still afraid of it?*

Milán: I am not afraid any more, but I used to be.

*Me: Many dancers related that if they got injured once doing something, then afterwards a fear always remain in them, not all the time but it can happen.*

Milán: For me, there is always a moment that is scary: it is when you make up your mind in the wrong time. What I mean is if you start your move and then in the middle of it you tell to yourself “Don't do it!”. But it's already too late. So it is not possible to make up your mind at any moment during the figure. You might not land as nicely as you wanted, maybe you will put down your hands but all this is more secure then to change your mind. That is really very bad, and it is scary as well,

because it is a reflex move, and it is supposed to be a protection, but actually this attitude creates the most trouble for the acrobat. So one needs to do those moves with faith: first comes the jump, and then one has to collect himself quickly, and nothing else.

*Me: I understand. If you start a somersault, then what are you thinking about? Do you think to those things, what not to do, or something else?*

Milán: I only think about the impetus, to get a continuous one, and the jump. To give everything in the jump. Nothing else.

*Me: My next question regards the mix of dance and circus: do you think that it is possible to “dance” a circus move, and if yes how?*

Milán: I think it depends mainly on the practice. I can compare this to hand-stand: I am not a hand-stand artist, but I know one or two tricks, for example the scorpion, when I just let my legs fall backwards and then I feel that my body is in balance, but it is tense in the same time. So one need infinite practice to be able to do that, a very long method, and a lot of “muscle memory”.

*Me: How do you mean?*

Milán: I mean that the body gets into a pause which is very uncommon. That's why so much practice is required; let's say someone wants to learn to balance on one hand. He or she will have to do it plenty of times, and at the beginning it will not be successful, but then he or she will start to understand what is this balance position. And little by little this “muscle memory” will be able to turn on, and it will be able to take the artist into another position where the body is also under control. In other words, I think that it is possible to make your body learn, and I think it is not by coincidence that we often speak about martial arts when talking about acrobatics, because it is a such a way, or path, such a mental approach that is somehow above sport and dance. There is some religious and sacred in it. I might exaggerate, but anyway it is a lot of work, really. So it is absolutely feasible, just a very careful and intensive training is needed in this case.

*Me: Now I would like to talk about the presence of the artists, dancers or acrobats. Do his presence get modified, changed when someone does a difficult acrobatic trick?*

Milán: I think the presence changes, because of the risk. But this is also vincible, and actually this is precisely what is beautiful, when someone can do dangerous or acrobatic moves very elegantly. When one sees that the performer does not deal with his security, because he knows the movements, he practised a lot. So the presence varies, because one is there on stage, and he is occupied with

what he wants to say, but when comes such a moment where he has to make a trick, then he gets occupied with his own security as well. True that he wants to say something, but meanwhile something very bad could happen with the performer himself, so his attention will turn inside a little bit in those cases. It can be wonderful when performers do such things and stay completely out, when they do not deal with those questions at all; I am sure you have seen such performers already, maybe just on the net. So I think it is an endless fight to achieve this; the presence changes, but it is possible to go against it.

*Me: Yes. Meanwhile, I spoke with some people who told me that one cannot completely vanquish that, that something will always remain.*

Milán: I think so. Even though we cannot see it, it is great that some fear remains. Otherwise people would kill each other on stage, mainly if you dance in a company like Ultima Vez. So it is a good thing that this attention remains, because otherwise performers would not reach this point where everything goes great, but instead everyone would get a broken leg. So it is possible to reduce this thing, but if someone does not feel anything like this, sooner or later he will get injured or he will die. So everyone needs a blocking process, instincts that protect him. If a tiger would show up here, I do not think that you would compliment me about the phone or anything, you would just run away as fast as you can.

*Me: Okay. And regarding circus artists, because I know that you know plenty of them, how is their relationship to danger? Is it different?*

Milán: It is different, they are somehow addicted, in fact they are looking for those situations, for adrenaline. Once the company Kréta Kör made a performance with the students of the CNAC<sup>40</sup>, called Urban Rabbits. One year before the performance they came here in Budapest to do some street performances with Árpád Schilling, and I was there also. We climbed up and down on the Freedom Bridge, at the beginning I enjoyed it, but after a while I felt that I am not really secure and I calmed myself down. But the others kept on going, they tried to maintain the tension to its maximum, so for them it is an expressing tool, like dynamics, presence and impetus for dancers. For circus artists, beside the presence and those common tools we use on stage, danger has an important place in their range of expression. This capacity, this property is essential for them, and they need to be addicted to some extent. But I understand that; a trick is like a joke: if one tells a joke over and over, after a while he will start to get bored and he wants to learn a new one. The same happens

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40 Centre National des Arts du Cirque, National Centre for Circus Arts.

with acrobatics for me: I am not an acrobat, but I know a couple of tricks. I always feel that I am not good enough in acrobatics, so once I went to practice with Péter Juhász and Csaba Varga and I realized that I am bored with the things I know, and I wanted to learn new things. So it works a little bit like a drug, you always need more; I think lots of circus artists start from this point, not all of them but many.

*Me: As far as I see, since they do not dance, the constraint of maintaining the movement flow, the continuity is not so important for them. So don't you think that their relationship to danger is a little bit different, because they can take a deep breath, mark a little stop, things like that?*

Milán: That is an interesting thing, mainly if you can examine this question from the spectator's point of view. I saw already genial acrobats who did not do else than their tricks, but in such a way that the easiness, the softness of their moving was enough to create a connection with the audience. The acrobat was very very focused, concentrated, and I think it is worth to examine the inside states of the performers from the outside, from what the spectators see. I have an anecdote for this: in Virtus, when I did the figure I talked about before, when I let myself fall on the tissue: by the end I could really dominate my feelings during the figure and during one of the evenings I let myself fall as planned, and I heard some spectators hold their breath from fear. So it is really a kind of magical thing, and it is interesting because when I climbed up, and when I tightened my leg to the tissue, I did not want to care about where I am, my life, my fears, or anything.

*Me: Yes it is really interesting, because it sounds like if you would have stepped in another world, another state of mind during your preparation. You did think about you, about the danger but still you went for it.*

Milán: Yes, the preparation is key. For instance you cannot prepare correctly if you are angry, because it will not work. On the contrary, if you prepare calmly, then it can look like if there would be a flow, a continuity in the movements. You stay calm, and of course you concentrate on yourself, the trick and on what you express. The important is how you can calmly prepare yourself, so that you can do the figure afterwards.

*Me: Was it difficult to find back your “dancing presence” after doing circus tricks, which require another type of presence, of attitude?*

Milán: No. If you only jump on one leg for a half year, and afterwards you start to walk again, this will be hard. But in the same time, your leg will get much stronger. So my approach is that these tricks, those things I do complete my dancing, or they complete each other. If one stays in one style

for a long time, then it is hard to find back your previous knowledge. But if he finds the right balance between the things, then it just enriches the moving.

*Me: How do you mean? What does it bring to the dancers?*

Milán: Stamina, strength and body awareness, body experiences. For example for the tissue figure of letting go the tissue and falling, it is not possible to contract your body too much, but neither is it allowed to completely relax, because otherwise your spine would break up. So there are moments when you must contract, and others when you must relax, and all this falling down from a 3 meters height. So it gives such a body awareness, such a knowledge of how to use the body that is useful for any dancer. I think every dancer, every performer longs for this kind of body knowledge.

*Me: Yes it requires a high precision that can be used later in any other situation.*

Milán: Yes, and the use of objects also counts. How your body builds up relationships to the objects, how does your body relate to the world, and inside all this how it can do the required figures, how to master the body that it can realize the tricks. These are complex and interesting things. It is all about experiences, like in the fun park: if you seat for the fifth time in the roller coaster, you might start to get bored, but the first time it is a very strong experience, a body experience. It is exciting, like acrobatics.

*Me: Okay. Thank you very much for your time.*

Milán: You are welcome.

## Interview with André Rolland

*Realized on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May 2013.*

*Me: My first question is pretty simple: what do you do in circus? Which discipline do you practice?*

Rolland: Tissue, people call it like that or curtain acrobatics<sup>41</sup>. I like to call it curtain dance<sup>42</sup>. I can also do a bit of acrobatics on the floor.

*Me: Where did you learn?*

Rolland: I finished a circus school that was in Budapest, but it closed down. It was a 2 years formation, for the rest I learn by myself: I go to workshops, sometimes abroad, and I watch things on the Internet as well. This how I gather my knowledge.

*Me: Okay. Another question is what do you live from? Performances? Teaching?*

Rolland: Mainly from my performer's activities, but I do teach also.

*Me: Could you make a short list of people who you worked with?*

Rolland: Lately I worked with the Duda Eva company, Experidance, Jokai theatre, and with Bemén József.

*Me: And could you tell me how long have you been a professional circus artist?*

Rolland: I am a professional for 5 years only, this is a young career. I started with juggling, and afterwards I continued with acrobatics and tissue, which are pretty dangerous stuffs.

*Me: The next question is: how do circus artists handle danger on stage? Milán Újvári said that there is a difference between dancers and circus artists in their relationship to danger, and that circus artists look for dangerous situation. What do you think?*

Rolland: I wouldn't say that I look for danger, instead I accept the fact that what I do is dangerous. Anyway I like to do it, but for sure not because of the danger. I do not say to myself that today I go to play with my life, just what I do comprises a dangerous part. I try to reduce to the minimum the potential danger of what I do: I always check out the security. So I don't look for danger, I rather live with it.

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41 "Függöny akrobatika", translated by the author.

42 "Függöny tánc", translated by the author.

*Me: Staying on the concept of danger, are you afraid sometimes of some moves?*

Rolland: There are some tricks which are really dangerous, and when I try them for the first time then I can be horribly afraid. But if I manage to overcome the fear, then it is a very good feeling. Afterwards it won't be as frightening as it was, so if you put it like this yes, I seek for danger so that I can overcome it, dominate it. It's true that if for half a year I did not learn any new trick, anything challenging, then I don't feel good and I start to look for something new, maybe just on videos that I watch and then I try some things out.

*Me: Okay. How do you handle danger? Did you use to take some breathes, to repeat things in your head before you go, or anything?*

Rolland: When I perform, there is no danger. If I reach this point where I perform something in front of an audience, then I practised so much those things that I do not fear from them. It can take me half a year or a whole year to practice a trick until I am able to show it on stage, but people don't want to see on stage that someone is afraid. They rather want to see that this guy, who is at 8 meters high, lives there and that he feels good up there. So I never do things I am afraid of on stage. During the practice this is another question, there I can show that I am afraid, because then the others would support you, help you. But let's say most of the time I handle danger this way that I don't show that I fear from something.

*Me: I asked you this question because dancers related stories that when they got injured for any reason after a jump for example, then they start to fear from it, but there are also some times when they won't be afraid of a figure even though they got an accident with it once. So how it is for you, do the injuries influence your fears?*

Rolland: I had already an accident like this: one of my rib got broken because I did not tight myself correctly. Afterwards it was very difficult to make the figure again, but I did it and it was fine. But then now in Békéscsaba I had to do the figure in the performance, and I did not break my rib but still I pulled my side muscles quite strongly, and next day when I had to do it again I really took a deep breath before entering the stage, but I knew that this is in the piece, I must do it, but still I did not do it zealously. It was not a good feeling, the thought of the injury was there in my head, but still you have to do it, no doubt.

*Me: Now I would like to talk about virtuosity. Do you think that circus artists look for virtuosity, and then accept the inherent danger that goes with it, or would you say that they look for both of them, because – as said Milán – they need adrenaline from times to times?*

Rolland: Of course, this seek for adrenaline is very important. Virtuosity is needed; but fear is also needed to some extent. You need to show things that make people stop breathing when they see it. This is one of the characteristic of circus to overcome the fears so that people can fly – everyone would like to fly – and we show that, yes, this is possible. In order to achieve that, you need to overcome your fears.

*Me: The question of the presence on stage comes next. According to you, do the presence of people change when they do dangerous and difficult moves on stage?*

Rolland: On the stage, I am a completely different person, because I do things on the stage that I do not do in my every day life. The interesting is that one gets so strong energies on the stage from the audience, so many things happen in you, and those things would never happen in the everyday life.

*Me: I understand. And what if you have to perform dangerous moves, tricks?*

Rolland: I don't come out from this state. On the stage, I am more courageous, more concentrated also, so it does not occur when I would start to be afraid of something. In the performance I do now, the frightening part lasts maybe 10 seconds, so I actually have no time to be afraid, or to think about it. When I climb up there, I just think about being in harmony with the tissue, the curtain and I really do not think about fear or anything like that. I might have stress because of the performance itself, that I can do my figure on the music, that everything goes well. I can be afraid of that, but not of me getting injured for instance.

*Me: Dancers related that when they know that a dangerous moment, a dangerous scene is coming, then a sort of special attention comes in, they start to pay an extra attention to what they do. How is it for you?*

Rolland: Of course. When I hold the curtain, then I pay much more attention about how do I hold it, how do I do my moves, etc. It cannot be a different way: I don't have to concentrate on the fact that I must concentrate, because to be 8 meters high above the ground gives you a standard attention anyway.

*Me: And what about when you do acrobatics on the ground?*

Rolland: That's an interesting question. Also when I do acrobatics, or juggling. Basically, when people step on stage, their concentration rises up, and I don't think that there is a special kind of attention for circus artists, I just think that the stage brings specific energies for the people who perform on it. It is the same for dancers, they don't care about what is happening in their everyday



life when they perform, they just concentrate on what they do. For me it works the same: when I step on the stage, I only think about the stage, my environment, my character.

*Me: I understand what you say, but I presume that all the moments you live on stage are not exactly the same...*

Rolland: There are some specific moments, but I never come out of my concentration on stage, I don't start to fear there. In the rehearsal studio I can show my fears, and I can afford to have some, but on stage definitely not. Of course there are moves I was afraid of because of an accident, but then I practice them so much that after a while I manage to make them the same way, without fears. I think I cannot allow myself to show that I am afraid, except if it is part of my character. But if we would show that, then we would kill the magic of circus.

*Me: Okay. Now I have a very simple question: when is danger on stage? According to what you said, if everyone practised enough then there is no danger on stage, isn't it?*

Rolland: This is a good question. Danger is there, but those are instead things that do not depend on me; for instance what if the tissue cracks and I fall down on the floor. One can try to make things as secure as possible, clearly there will always be a part of danger in those things. I try to kill those voices in me that say that the situation is dangerous, and so on, because if I would listen to them then I guess I would just go home.

*Me: Yes this is a point of view. So if I understand well, circus does not comprise danger on stage. Right?*

Rolland: There is, there is always some danger. There is one thing one can do: to concentrate as much as he can, and to do his best. But of course there can always be accidents. I had a colleague, he fell from the tissue and broke up his spine. So there is a gigantic danger in acrobatics, but I really like to do it, not because it is dangerous, but because of the freedom one can find in it. When I leave the floor, I am in the air, this is a very good feeling.

*Me: I asked this question because according to Rasmus Ölme, danger is present when people know what they do. Do you agree with this?*

Rolland: Well on the stage, the danger is under control, directed.

*Me: In dance, the flow of movements is very important, and in circus this element is not as pregnant. In circus people might have the possibility to stop, to think things over for a second. Do you think that helps circus artists?*

Rolland: Absolutely. Well actually I do try to maintain a flow in my numbers, in what I do. I try not to stop before or after a trick, but I try to link movements with each other, just as dancers do.

*Me: And does this make things more difficult according to you?*

Rolland: I don't think that things drastically change because of that, but I think that it makes them a little bit more difficult to realize. If I would follow the great circus tradition that stands before me then yes, things would be easier for me. But since this is not the way I chose, then I need to practice more, to find smooth transitions between the moves, to create one movement flow, phrases. This is the new circus approach: a little bit more difficult, but also more enjoyable.

*Me: My next question is maybe more for dancers, but still I would like to ask you: do you think that it is possible to dance a circus move, like a somersault or anything like that? On the tissue as well?*

Rolland: Yes I think it is. It is interesting that you put up the question, because when I worked with Experidance, we had a scene where I was dancing on my tissue, and then the dancer had to do the same movements but on the floor, lying on it, standing, etc. That was a very interesting thing. I know this is not what you asked, but I think that you can put on stage a dancer and a circus artist, and they can do exactly the same moves.

*Me: Okay. I was thinking about one of the dance specificity, this sort of state dancers sometimes speak about. Do you think that one could realize circus moves in this state, do you think circus artists can get into this state?*

Rolland: Yes, but it is more difficult. In circus many times you cannot allow yourself to let go, to try out things so much that you do not know what will happen. In dance you can try out things, if your material is not difficult then one will not get into deep troubles, but in circus you cannot do that.

*Me: Yes, and if you speak about acrobatics on the floor, and not tissue, then what would you say?*

Rolland: Yes it is possible. On the tissue also, after a while. I did not get to this point, after 6 years of practice, where I can let go and concentrate on other things like the flow of my moves, my body state. I still need a couple of years of practice and then I might be able to focus on my feelings, instead of the technique, the movements themselves.

*Me: Fine. Many thanks for your patience.*

Rolland: You are very welcome.



## Interview with Imre Vass

*Realized on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 2013.*

*Me: So I have a couple of questions, more or less 15, and I would like to go through my questionnaire. The first one is: where did you study dance?*

Imre: I started in the Budapest Academy of dance<sup>43</sup>. Afterwards I went to some workshops in Impulstanz in Vienna, I took part twice in the DanceWeb program. And now I am doing this Spatio programme which is said to be like a master degree but in another form.

*Me: And did you learn another technique in addition to your dance training like martial arts, gymnastics or acrobatics?*

Imre: Nothing, only dance. During our training in the dance school we had once or twice a little bit of aikido, and that's all.

*Me: Before dancing in Ultima Vez, where did you dance, or work? Which companies did you dance in ?*

Imre: I danced in the Hód Adrienn company, in a performance called *Arboretum*, because someone got injured and I had to replace him, and I also danced in the Tünet Együttes with Szabó Réka.

*Me: Okay. And in these pieces, was there any form of specific danger? I know that we have not defined yet what I understand with this word but would you say that danger was part of your work before dancing in Ultima Vez?*

Imre: I must mention one of Iván Angelus' piece which was called "Danger"<sup>44</sup>. This was a school piece that we made in Barcelona. That is a reference, and then very simply I like to jump, to roll on the floor and so on. I can also think about the Contact Dance Festival of Budapest where I went every summer when I was in the school. This helped me to improve technically. There I dealt with contact, the floor, and things like that, and I believe that it was an important part of my dance education.

*Me: Which U.V.<sup>45</sup> performances did you dance in?*

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43 Budapest Kortárástánc Főiskola.

44 *Veszély*.

45 *Ultima Vez*.

Imre: In 2009 I danced in *nieuwZwart*.

*Me: How long did you rehearse for this performance?*

Imre: We rehearsed 4 months. That was pretty long, but we were a brand new company, so we had to spend some time to get to know each other.

*Me: When you worked with them, did you use knee pads or any kind of equipment?*

Imre: For sure I used some. I always forget that I used them but I am sure that I used knee pads. At the end we made a lot of turn on the knees, and other movements so I used knee pads sometimes, not always.

*Me: So this is for the rehearsals, but during the performance did you use some?*

Imre: I used only one. The costume designer made for me a costume in which there was a protection for my knee, a small mat in it.

*Me: Now I would like to talk about danger. How would you define danger? For you, when is a movement dangerous?*

Imre: In the performance there were some movements that were really hard, hitting the floor and so on and I always tried to reduce those ones as much as possible. There was a guy who did not try to reduce the impact of those parts on him, and as a consequence the performance was much tougher for him. For me there was one scene when I am walking on the edge of the stage and then someone pushes me off the stage. If you are in such a theatre like Trafó, where the stage and the audience are in one single space that is fine, but we played the piece around one hundred times in maybe 40 or 50 places and there were places where I had to jump down from a 1,5 meter high stage in the dark. So I would put this in the dangerous category, because if you do not give the right impulse for it then it will not look good, so you are obliged to put some energy in it, and from there the move becomes more dangerous. This is hard to define actually, right now I met with Wim Vandekeybus and he told me that one of the dancer got hurt landing from a backwards somersault in the performance *Oedipus/Bêt noir*. Obviously he made this jump hundreds of times before dancing in the company. So for him that was not a dangerous move, but still he got hurt for some reason. Of course you must pay more attention to some movements because they are harder to realize, but the question is when will a move become dangerous? Personally I did not do such movements, very acrobatic or dangerous, I did not want to go into this direction for the U.V. performance.

*Me: Can you tell me why? Because you were afraid of it? Because you cannot do such movements?*

Imre: It is not because I was afraid. I mean I am not afraid to fall: if I fall then I stand up again and that's it. This did not block me. In fact in the piece, there are a lot of collisions: collisions with the floor, with the others. The point is not that those moves must look dangerous, and there are not even dance moves to some extent, but still we used them a lot. And it also depends on what you name danger, or injury: because we know that the body always faces micro-injuries – when you stretch, maybe when you do a plié for instance – and these are damage to the body. Obviously it is not the same than when you have to dance in a physical piece for one and a half hour, because there you need to have some stamina as well to avoid injuries, but the definition is important.

*Me: According to Rasmus Ölme, the real danger is when you do not know what you are doing, and we are not aware that something is dangerous. This is his definition of danger.*

Imre: I agree with him. If you have a picture of what you are doing and how it should look like, then you reduce the risk. Situations like auditions also come to my mind, when one wants to show everything he can without really thinking about the consequences. For example if you go to an U.V. audition, then you have 10 minutes to show yourself, and then if you go further you have to improvise and there people put in the tricks they know, and I think that it is really interesting to look at the people in those moments, because they can get into such states that they step into the unknown and from that point everything can happen. Then it depends on each of us: what comes out of it, how do people handle those situations where danger is there.

*Me: Did you go for an audition at U.V.?*

Imre: Yes, actually I went twice.

*Me: According to this, would you say that dance automatically comprise danger, or instead only some situations can be dangerous? So how would you define danger? Is it always there?*

Imre: Depends on from where you look at things. To some extent it is always there, but I would not name this danger. If someone improvise and he tries a brand new thing then that can be dangerous, but I try not to go to such situations personally. If you take into consideration injuries for instance, let's say if somebody got his knee operated already twice, then I am not convinced that he should go to dance in the U.V. Company, because there is a danger for him. And when the dancers throw bricks to each other, there you see danger popping up also. But anything can be dangerous as a matter of fact: you had a very intensive period and afterwards comes a break, and there you sit down on a chair and you hurt your knee. Practically you did not do anything, still an injury will result. Or if you think about off-balances: they can also be dangerous if you do not know how to

deal with them, how to land.

*Me: Okay. Now I would like to talk about the performer himself; do you think that there is a difference for a performer to do a “normal” dance move or to execute a dangerous acrobatic movement for example?*

Imre: Now that you are asking, there is a difference according to my own experiences. If I think about U.V. performance then yes, there are some extra-situations; I was not really out of my “normal” performer's state but still I needed another type of attention, with which you try to relax yourself as best as you can in order to be ready for anything, to let anything happen.

*Me: And when does this particular type of attention come? When you are in a partnering scene, or you can feel this attention alone as well?*

Imre: Obviously if we are two, I need to care about myself but also about the other. But from another point of view each movement is always different, so even though there is a choreography, you need to adapt yourself and to do your best with the given parameters of the day. If you look at the dance, the choreography as a whole it is the same, but when you look at the details of a movement then it is always different, it always has a different form, and of course this is also true when two people dance together. And I do not speak of what happens when the stage, the environment is physically different. To me it is interesting to see that those dangerous situations are different, but only to some extent: they come up as reminders for where you have to really pay attention, a little bit like alarm-clocks. But actually if one really knows his job, if the performance has been rehearsed enough, then people get very self-confident and they perfectly know what to do.

*Me: I am glad that you talk about it because you performed nieuwZwart almost one hundred times, so I would like to ask how does your relationship to danger evolve with the course to time? Do you step into some kind of routine after a while?*

Imre: Basically it is really great to do something one hundred times because it is always possible to find something new in it, to work on something. For the performer, the piece remains always fresh and new to some extent, and it does not get boring after a while. I have a story related to this: the première was in may, and then we performed it for 3 months in a row until august. In those 3 months we performed maybe 30 times, and afterwards we got a 3 or 4 weeks long break and we started over again in Brussels, with 12 performances in one place, with 4 performances per week, something cruel. There something happened with me, my knee got injured. The first week after we were back it was a little bit hard, but then things got better and better, I felt better and better in the

show. The second week I was very self-confident, so I decided to introduce some challenge into it: and in the last-but-one performance in this theatre, I had a problem with my knee. Afterwards we performed until Christmas, and at that point I could not even bend my knee because of the injury. It is interesting to note that I got hurt when I started to feel really confident with the performance, and then I did not put my hand on the floor when I slid and that was my mistake.

*Me: And regarding the dangerous parts, did you feel after a while that you do not need to pay so much attention to it because you did it already dozens of times, or did you always need to be careful to the same places?*

Imre: Since the performance was pretty long, one and a half hour, we needed to concentrate because of the tiredness as well. If you allow yourself not to pay attention, not to concentrate in such cases, when you are tired and when you need to do something very physical, then you can get into troubles very quickly. For instance if you think about the scene of *What the body does not remember* when they throw bricks to each other, it is not possible that you do not catch up the brick because otherwise it will break your partner's head. So you do not allow yourself not to concentrate in those cases.

*Me: Rasmus Ölme said that when you deal with danger, the body gets into a particular state, where tension is palpable. According to him that is why Wim Vandekeybus works with it because this state is interesting for him. But I wonder if this state is still there when you perform for the hundredth time.*

Imre: Of course you know the piece, you know what to do but when comes the moment of something dangerous, it does not become boring after a while. If the dancers understand why they do what they do, if there is an intellectual part in it, then it does not become flat or boring: one can perform one hundred times if needed.

*Me: Okay. And before the performance, did you need any specific preparation, concentration or whatever?*

Imre: Practically at the beginning we had trainings before the show, some kind of warm up as well and afterwards we went through a couple of scenes that were a little bit more difficult. After a while we did not get trainings and we had to warm up by ourselves: here I did not have any routine, specific preparation (neither did the others I think), I was only paying attention to my body, to warm it up according to its state on that day.

*Me: And what happened during those trainings?*



Imre: Well it was always different: sometimes they could get an external teacher for us, and other times someone from the company warmed us up, for instance Iñaki Azpillaga. That was good because we did not really need something like yoga then, and Iñaki made a training a little bit more physical, where we had to use our body, to move completely. And we needed this, because if your body is not correctly warmed up then it will not work as you wish. But we did not have any kind of specific preparation, sometimes we had to go through one or two group scene, or we had to repeat some duos with our partners, but that was it.

*Me: After your injury, how did you dance in the performance? Did you hold back a little bit?*

Imre: That was funny, because we made this serial in Brussels and afterwards we came to Budapest after a one week break. At this point I had no idea about how is my knee going to be in Budapest, but then I made there my best evening. Obviously because of the fact that I was at home, it went fine for me. I had to warm it up much more carefully, I spent one hour to move it step by step, to be able to bend it more than 90 degrees, and then of course you can change one or two movements if needed, and it was fine like this. I cannot say that this was not an extraordinary situation for me to perform in Budapest, so I tried to dance as well as possible, even though I paid attention to my knee. Of course I held myself back a little bit, but still I paid particular attention to do everything I could to my maximum, to find a balance between the two, in order to keep the performance's feeling, its atmosphere. Anyway the injury was not so serious, it obstructed my movements sometimes but that was bearable.

*Me: I have just a last question: would say that the work of U.V. is a particularly dangerous one, or do you think that it is not different than the others if you know what you do?*

Imre: The performance I danced in was a brutal one: we had a lot of shocks in it, and from outside it was a painful show. So it was dangerous as well, of course, but instead I would say painful. Another U.V. Performance came to Budapest, *Spiegel*, and this one was much more tiring than *nieuwZwart*, even though in *Spiegel* dancers were changing<sup>46</sup>. In *nieuwZwart* we had to stay on stage all the time, so we were always in a performing state. And moreover that was brutal: lots of shocks, collisions, etc.

*Me: I talked with Fuchs Livia and she told me that an Ultima Vez' dancer told her that those pieces are not so dangerous; if you know what you do that is just like anything else. What do you think about this?*

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<sup>46</sup> *Spiegel* was a compilation of previous performances of the company, some scenes picked up from a old performances of the company. The staff was changing from scenes to scenes.

Imre: This is a choreography. So I agree with this, because it might look dangerous, spectacular but those are just dance moves all in all, and in a fixed choreography that is not so dangerous. I think improvisation can be much more dangerous because your task is to do things you have not done before, to explore such states or qualities that are unknown to you. There is danger in this, and as a consequence you need much more attention, preparation. For instance the Hód Adrienn's performance *Basse Danse* comes to my mind where everything is improvised – obviously they worked on it for months – but this is for me more dangerous because they have to use their bodies in particular ways, they have to reach their limits and this seems to me more on the edge than *nieuwZwart*. If one does a somersault and he lands off in a bad way, this is one thing, but you are part of a very complex improvisation, I think the situation is also dangerous. I saw a performance in Trafó, *Contact Gonzo*, a Japanese company, and that was genial. Within seven seconds I got into a strange state, because of their crudity, their freshness, that was incredible. There were duos, trios that were really dangerous. They are not dancers, they never did contact improvisation or anything like that: they just started on the street, to jump onto each others, but still they could concentrate very strongly, and they have a very precise technique. It can seem violent of course, but for me that was not the point: it is true that in a U.V. performance you can have some intense moments where you really need to concentrate, maybe twelve within a show, but in *Contact Gonzo*, every second was filled with this. The performance was only half an hour long, but that was already a lot since every moment was dangerous and intense. It can seem to be a crazy thing, and it is also related to the Japanese mentality, anyway for me this is the dangerous category for sure. Not really because of the possibility of injury, but because it demands a continuous attention on everything.

*Me: Okay, thank you very much.*

Imre: You're welcome.

## Interview with Máté Mészáros

*Realized on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 2013.*

*Me: So I have a couple of questions, more or less 15, and I would like to go through my questionnaire.*

Máté: Fine.

*Me: The first question is: where did you learn dancing?*

Máté: At the Academy of dance in Budapest<sup>47</sup>. I graduated in the folk dance line, where I was taught folk dance, ballet and modern/contemporary technique. I studied there for 6 years, and I have a bachelor diploma.

*Me: And did you learn other body techniques like gymnastics, acrobatics or martial arts?*

Máté: I practised gymnastics for 6 years, from 6 to 12 years old. Then I learned karate for 3 years, and afterwards I did some aikido. So those other types of movement are always part of my dance, my movement.

*Me: I understand. Before dancing in the Utlima Vez company, did you work in circus company, or other company where risk was part of the work?*

Máté: In the contemporary ballet of Szeged. When I was there, their style was very different from now. In fact I learned there a lot of acrobatic lifting and jumps when I was 19, in 2001. The director of the ballet of Szeged is Juronics Tamás, and when he started it, 25 years ago, he started to dissect his own self, in order to find out how to create new and interesting movements. As he also did some gymnastics when he was young, acrobatics was always part of his movement, so in the first company where I worked, I got my first foretaste of acrobatic moves. Mainly the lifting-ups and the partnering was tough: there were some jumps which required some bravery in order to do them. And for the men, you needed to be there, to catch up the girl when she jumps. For instance, there was a jump when the girl is standing and then she jumps in the air, makes a twist and lands on her partner knees, horizontally. So for the girls there were some dangerous moments, and since I was the smallest man in the company, I had to do all these figures as well. Sometimes we had to learn a piece just for the lifting-ups, even though we never danced it, for example this one when 3

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<sup>47</sup> Táncművészeti Főiskola.

trampoline were on the stage, and you had to jump from one to the other. With a trampoline you can jump much higher than on the floor, and we had to make twists, somersaults and other figures like this. So I had the opportunity to train those skills in the ballet of Szeged. Since I came from gymnastics, back flip or those kind of things were totally fine for me. But the move by itself has no value if it does not mean something, I understood this after some years, others found out faster but I needed a little bit of time for this. Anyway we should speak about the risk, how does it turn up.

*Me: Yes that is actually one of my question but let's talk about it. So on the question of when is there danger during dance, Rasmus Ölme thinks that risk is present when someone does not know what he is doing. What about you, how would you define danger?*

Máté: I must agree with him. In fact if you are not concentrated, anything can be dangerous. Lack of concentration is one the most dangerous situation; so even though it depends on the piece, during the creation process when you have to create new moves, when you let your fantasy guide you, you reach sometimes a point where you do not know precisely how a move is going to end up. At first you think a lot and you try to imagine what will be the end of the movement, whether you land on your hand or on another part of your body for example. But during the creation process, there are moments when you do not see 100 % what will happen, because you have never tried this before. So I think the unknown contains also some danger.

*Me: Okay. And if someone has to do a back flip on the stage, is this dangerous for you?*

Máté: It is not dangerous. If you know the technique it is just as dangerous as other movements. I mean it is as dangerous as any other movement: if you had enough time to practice, and you feel confident then it does not have to be dangerous. I work in Ultima Vez and there are some circus artists, who were taught in circus schools, and their conception of danger is completely different because of their technique. I can also do one or two tricks in acrobatics and it is not dangerous for me since I practised them a lot: I did not imagine those moves, because I knew how I should land on the floor. So for me the danger is not on the stage, but during the creative process. You do not bring something risky on stage, if it is really dangerous then you don't do it. Nobody wants to see someone having an accident on the stage.

*Me: In relation to this statement, I remember that Vass Imre told me that he had a scene in nieuwZwart, when he had to walk on the edge of the stage when someone simply pushes him off the stage. If there is no gap between the stage on the audience's space, that's fine, but if one has to fall down in the complete dark from one meter high, then don't you think that this is dangerous move?*

Máté: Yes. I also danced in this performance. Once we had such a show when the guy who normally pushes him off stage did not dance, and then I had to replace him. Although we performed this around one hundred times, we always looked at where he was going to land down, and when you run to send him flying, you perfectly know which direction you must push him in. Your body must be rough and wild, but in your mind you know what you do; anyway he is right that that was dangerous, because sometimes he was kicked hard. But as a matter of fact not anybody could have done that. He has such a physique that he can take it, it does not count for him. There is a part in the performance when a guy jumps on him: Imre lies on the floor and the other dancer falls down on him from a hand stand, with his back. When he was doing it, he always said “Just go for it, it doesn't hurt”. Then we had to replace him, and the other dancer told us that to him that was a unbearable situation. So Imre has such a build-up that he can bear when others hit him. So the dancer who had to fall had to be very careful not to hurt Imre's substitute. The artistic assistant was always asking “do you know what you're doing?”, and the others always replied “Yes yes” but still the guy lying on the floor was pretty scared of this scene... Well I could tell dozens of stories: there was a guy, Dawid Lorenc – he was also in the piece – and I had a duo with him. Actually it was pretty simple: a couple of jumps and catching-ups. The thing is that it was made from improvisation, so we were catching up and turning one another but I was the dominant, so I had to lift him up and then put him down in such a way that it looks like it hurts. Once I pulled his hand and lifted him up, then I put him down. But when he landed on the floor, his head hurt the floor and he lost consciousness. Two seconds after he opened his eyes again but I could see that he did not even know where he is, so afterwards we took it easier on this one. It was not me who made a mistake, but both of us. We did not pay attention to each other, and this can be very dangerous if you do not pay attention to the others.

*Me: We talked about this with Vass Imre, that this is one thing that someone does something dangerous alone, but when one has to do this with someone else, then one should double his level of concentration in order to concentrate on the other as well.*

Máté: In aikido there is a basic thesis, which says that you must always adapt your own knowledge to the knowledge of your partner. Even if you are a three-dan master, if your opponent is a beginner then you should also be a beginner yourself. And it is crucial to transfer this into dance as well: when I teach, of course I have made 10 000 times the lifting-ups I teach, but I will not do them with full power if I know that the one who I am dancing with does it for the first time. I must always hold myself back and wait for my partner to improve in order to go deeper into the things. This way

one can avoid sources of accident. During my last training in Brussels, two guys strongly bumped into each others, during one of the most simple exercise. We were playing a simple game, we had to catch each other and both of them were running backwards to avoid someone, and they bumped into each other with their back. Somehow they took it too seriously, they did not pay enough attention to their environment and they got an accident instead of warming up. I had two accidents in my class while I was teaching, this is the first and the second one was when the ambulance came and take up a girl from the class. Her back got stuck during a movement: I showed a jump, she made it and her back went wrong. The problem was not that the exercise was bad or that she was not warmed up, just she had already some troubles with her back before the class, and since then she still has. Obviously that is my responsibility if someone gets hurt during my class, doing my own moves, so that was a very bad feeling for me.

*Me: Which Ultima Vez performances did you dance in?*

Máté: I danced in *nieuwZwart*, afterwards in *Radical Wrong*, then *Oedipus/Bêt noir*. Now in the last piece I did not dance but I was Wim's assistant, in *Booty looting*, for this one I made some dance materials but I did not dance. I taught them to the dancers and I completed some assistant tasks. That was the fourth one where I worked with Wim.

*Me: How long do you work on a performance in general?*

Máté: Between 3 and 5 months. The schedule is from 10 am until 6 or 7 pm, depending on the intensity of the piece. If it is very physical then until 6, for instance like when we worked on *nieuwZwart*, after 6 pm everyone was exhausted. But when we did *Radical Wrong*, we worked from 10 am until 10 pm because that was a more theatrical performance, and we were only improvising on theatrical scenes so we had some long days then. It also depends on how many people dance in a performance. In *nieuwZwart* we were only seven, and when seven people jump all day long after a while there is nobody to work with. In *Radical Wrong*, we were more people so we worked in groups of 2 or 3. This way there was always someone to work with.

*Me: And did you use any equipment like knee pads during the rehearsals?*

Máté: No. Instead I like to do movements that I know that they will not hurt after some time. Of course when one dances with knee pads he feels that he can go for anything much easier than without them, but after a couple of years he will pay it off. Knee pads do not protect you against everything: in the moment they might help, but after 4 or 5 years troubles will appear for sure. I see

things like this because I got operated 4 times, 3 times on my knees and once on my ankle when I broke my leg. All these were inattention, lack of warm up or accident. So none of them happened when I was ready to dance, concentrated and I missed something. When I dance in the Szegedi Kortárs Balett, I was young and I did not really know my body, and it happened that I danced with knee pads but then my knees went wrong and they got operated twice. Once we worked with a dancer coming from the Batsheva dance company and we were always on our knees, turning and jumping, he even made a solo for me, but that destroyed my knees. So if I do a choreography, I try it 10 000 times and only after do I let the dancers go for it, and I always take care that they do not need to use any extra equipment. It does not mean that we do very simple things, but we stay within the borders of the body, I do not want to use knee pads because then I think I am beyond the limits of the body, but that's only my opinion.

*Me: Would you say that every single movement is dangerous in dance, or do you think that only some moves can be risky?*

Máté: I think danger is or a state of mind, either an artificially produced situation beyond the comfort zone. When I do a piece, I always cut it into smaller pieces and I take a look at what should this part reflect. For example I made a piece with 4 male dancers where there is a part when 2 guys fold a third one very roughly, Mikó Dávid. I made it intentionally look violent and painful, but it was of course carefully worked out before during the rehearsals, and the whole thing started from an emotional state he had to reach before it. So I think that was in fact the consequence of an artificially created situation.

*Me: Then how would you define this scene? Was it within the borders of the body's possibilities?*

Máté: Absolutely. David has such a body that it is possible to fold it. At the same time we needed to make such a torture scene that we could transform by the end into an absolution. So the scene was really needed, from the piece's point of view, and we had to take it into a slightly violent direction, so we practised a lot a couple of lifting-ups because they were not doing them the right way, but then we could find out how those things can be made without problems and we could include them into the piece. Then we knew that the situation will be a little bit dangerous since that was what I was looking for.

*Me: Okay. I know we talked about it already, but when is there danger on the stage according to you?*

Máté: To me, a situation is exciting if real things happen on stage, if one can create real danger on the stage, this can be interesting. For this you do not need to make something dangerous physically, threat can be enough, when there is a strong opposition between two characters, and when the continuation of the situation would lead to something dangerous. That is to say if they go on doing what they do, it will unequivocally end up with an injury. It can be for instance a scene where one of the character holds a knife in his hand, and if the other one runs to him then we know that he will effectively die. So that's already a dangerous situation. These ones can only be shown on stage if they have something to do with the piece, if they make sense in it; they will get sense if they serve the purpose of having an effect on the audience, because of their theatricality. When the reality creates such situations when you have to step out of the comfort zone you are in. Obviously there is a lot to say about danger, a lot of different points of view. We made situations where the dancer, in order to make a scene as I wished it to be, had to overcome his own limits and to tire his own self until the extreme limit, and it can be dangerous when he has to dance while he cannot even walk. In my last performance I made such a scene: the dancer had to dance for 25 minutes without break, and then he ended up in such a state, that he could produce such a dance quality which was exciting to me. He said that he hated this scene, but he understood why he should do it. Because if you want to “play” it, if you want to pretend that you are very tired, you will not be able to create the same quality as when you are effectively exhausted. This is what I like, when something looks like this because there is no other possibility, because this is really how it is. I very rarely choose solutions where someone must pretend something, and then comes in the notion of danger. If somebody gives everything he has, then it gets interesting and exciting, because he or she cannot lie. Of course this the choreographer's responsibility to know what he asks from his dancers, and how much he wants to “torture” someone because he likes the scene made out of it. There comes also the question of what is the most important: what happens with me on stage, or what the spectators will get out of it? Why should I work with arts? In fact this is another dimension of danger on stage: I bring myself in such situations in front of the audience where I could get hurt, where I could get serious injuries that will affect my everyday life. To show such situations is a responsibility, because people do not meet with those situations, those body states every day. But still I do show them, because I have some kind of inner impulse, because there is a form a exhibitionism in me, which is in theory unhealthy, but that's not even sure. This is only what people say.

*Me: Obviously there is some in every performing artist...*

Máté: Yes, but it's not sure that it is unhealthy. Those who cannot do it say that it might be



unhealthy... I spoke with psychologists and they said that this is not healthy; I told them I believe it is, I believe it is normal. I mean one can look at things through different angles, and one must choose the angle that makes him comfortable to live with this. For me it's good to believe that this is normal, this is how I can stay healthy. Maybe it's not, but at least I can keep going this way, I can keep working.

*Me: To come back to Utlima Vez, I would like to mention Rasmus Ölme, who said that if one knows what he does, then what he does cannot be dangerous. But when I think about U.V<sup>48</sup> performances, where for instance somebody had to hit a dancer lying on the floor, I get doubtful about this statement. How do you see this?*

Máté: I must confess that this scene was not so good for him. For example he got some contusions on his ribs because of it, or once he got hurt on his hipbone and he could dance only with difficulty. So that was part of it, because it was improvisation. One use improvisation because he wants to see something that is not repeatable. If we speak about *nieuwZwart*, there I would not say that there is danger when you must do something you have done one thousand times before. But in this performance I actually broke my leg in a part where improvisation was in it. I had a fixed choreography but a guy had to run with a big ball in his arms and he could not see where he goes. So I had to adapt my movements to him, looking at where he is in the space. Even though I had a fixed movement material, still I had to constantly modify it, jumping frontwards or backwards in order to avoid him. This is how the accident happened: he showed up in such a place where he had never been before, and I did not count on it. So I jumped out of his way, and we avoided the collision but then I required something from my body that it could not do, because I was not warmed up. This was my mistake. In fact in *nieuwZwart*, Wim wanted to work with improvisation in order to create new situations, to bring on stage things that he does not know, and in those parts I see danger. In *Radical Wrong*, the piece for children, there was a fight scene with dancers. We practised it a lot of times, and when we pay attention to each other, when we make it well then there is no problem, no one gets hurt. We could create such a scene that you do not see on the street, because everyone goes straight without paying attention to nothing. So our intention was to keep it genuine, but not to hurt anyone. In this scene I never hurt anybody, but once I gave such a nudge to one of the guy that his nose broke. So the accident is always part of improvisation, nothing was choreographed in this: the whole scene was about five guys meeting and fighting with each other. When we were too careful, we always got trouble with Wim who said that he only sees that we pay

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48 Stands for Utlima Vez.

attention to each other, and there is nothing like this in real life. So we had to make it look like it would be real, like we do not pay attention to the other, but in reality we are 1000 % careful not to hurt anyone truly. It means you have to constantly monitor yourself from outside, you to have to give everything you have and in the same time to know precisely where are your body members, while it looks like you do not care about it. And there was another accident with one of the girl, we made a duo that was really good, one of my favourite along my 12 years long career. I really loved this duo, a very good partnering, we were very much used to each other but once she hit my eye with her heel inadvertently, so strong that my eye could have fell down from my head. Suddenly everything got blur, I could not see anything and tears were falling out my eye, the pain was unbearable but we kept on dancing. There we were dancing a fixed choreography, so the problem had to be inattention. Someone did not pay enough attention, I or she, so I think Rasmus is right: if there is a lack of concentration, then danger pops up. Still I think one cannot say that in Wim's dance pieces there is no danger.

*Me: According to what you say, it seems that this is effectively part of the game, because you already talked about a couple of accidents.*

Máté: I think that there is in him some kind of search for truth, that can turn radical. Something about a physical truth, so this is not about playing, something good or something bad but it is really about living an experience, and if you really go deep in it then some situations can show up when you are not always in control. Of course other people might have different feelings about it, might have another point of view. In *nieuwZwart*, there was a scene where everyone had to bring a quality of movement, but inside it you could do whatever you want, whatever is good for you. So everybody did this scene differently, and for instance Dawid, the polish guy who was dancing with us, he really demolished himself in this scene; I mean that after the show he could barely walk. He was the youngest dancer among us, and this was what he wanted to bring in the piece, that was his choice. For Vass Imre the situation was different: he was the dangerous character in the piece, but he did not bring himself into dangerous situations, just he brought danger to us, the other characters on stage.

*Me: Yes. Imre told me that there was a dancer in the piece who was really getting hard on himself, and that he – Vass Imre – did not want to get to this point; so he always paid attention to stay beyond certain limits. What about you?*

Máté: Dawid was the one, yes. *NieuwZwart* was his first piece after the school, after P.A.R.T.S.

and he had an obvious lack of experience: he made some great things in the dance studio during the rehearsals, but this is okay when you have to do it a couple of times. When you go for more than one hundred performances, you cannot do that, because you have to do it every evening. So his knees and his elbows were always purple, full of bruises, and after every show he had to put ice on his body in order to be able to walk. But he chose to do this, still since then he does not do such things... Actually I am curious to see him again because we are going to perform the piece for the last 2 times in Norway, and he will be there. After four years I am curious to see how is he going to dance in this piece, I am sure that he will have a different approach to it.

*Me: My next question is about the performer himself: when a performer must do a dangerous scene or a dangerous move on stage, do you think that another state – body state of mind state – is needed for it, or do you think that there is no difference since one must concentrate anyway?*

Máté: There is a state when your body is 100 % under control, and when your brain 100 % controls what is going on. I would say that this state corresponds to 90 % of the time, but there is a state when your brain might not be there at all, but your body perfectly knows what to do. The consequence of this is a sort of euphoric state, when everything works well but you do not consciously control anything, you just leave things happen in your body. It may happen because of tiredness, or because of a great self-confidence: you have done that so many times that you know what will be in the end. And there are cases when you are ready in your mind, but your body is not ready: and in such case, you might want to do everything, but to no avail. Nothing will happen as you planned it. So you need to put yourself into the situation, to tune yourself somehow; then you can find to optimal behaviour, the optimal state, in your body as well as in your mind. On stage I think 90 % of the time the majority of dancers are present with their full body and mind. But I like it when you move from instinct, for example when you improvise, you cannot fully control yourself but you feel when you go in the good direction, when you do great things. Then you can feel that you can follow something, and you do not need to be there 100 %, and it is good to disconnect your controlled self and to let things happen by themselves. To dance in a way that you do not think about it, and you do not have to. I did an improvised performance in Norway some years ago, we were 2 musicians and 3 dancers, and when we started to work we – the dancers – told the musicians that we would like to make blocks of 10 minutes because if we have to dance more than this then we get too tired. And the musicians replied that they do not do such things (they were experimental jazz musicians), because they play as much as they want, and we dancers have to adapt ourselves to what they do. We said that it was fine, because we thought that this can be interesting and moreover

that was a challenge for us, so we started to work for 3 weeks: everyday we met and we improvised, and it turned out that our performances lasted always 1 hour and 20 minutes. That was not a conscious choice, because we could not bear more; just somehow this is how it got to an end everyday, and this is for me an example of a successful result without control on the process itself. During those impro sessions a lot of interesting things came out, we lifted up the drummer from times to times, we also started to play music and the musicians moved as well, so we allowed ourselves to go wild, and good things came from this particular state: of course we knew more or less who does what, we knew what to count on. So the body can definitely end up in particular states.

*Me: Rasmus Ölme wrote in my interview that this is precisely the reason why Wim Vandekeybus works so much with danger, because then bodies enter a different state, they get filled up with some kind of tension. My next question will be about the preparation: do you need or did you need any kind of specific preparation for those performances, when you know that you are going to do something dangerous on stage?*

Máté: If you think about going for one week in the mountains to meditate alone on what you are going to do, the answer is no. During the rehearsal process you know what is going to happen, and you practice it. Even if there is some improvisation in it, you know its frame: how much time you have for it, etc. etc. So you do not get mad from it, we are talking about free improvisation. That's why you do not need any specific mental preparation for this: you need to know yourself in order to be able to put yourself into the performing state where you can give what you have to, what you are required to offer on stage, but this goes for any performance. For instance I used to calm down myself very much before a performance: half an hour before the beginning of the show I do not move, I just stand or I looked to the others and I collect strength from them. I do not start to jump around, I just stretch so that I am warmed up, but I used to put myself into a zero state at the beginning of the performance, and then during the performance I give everything I have. Some move all the way, they continuously do something and when the performance starts they just pursue from their previous state. Instead I go back to nothing and then I start from this point. Maybe that is just a fake tranquillity, because you know what is going to happen, and I would rather say that this is a state of suspension, of expectation.

*Me: After the injuries you had, did you hold back a little bit? Or did you fear about something? Was something different?*

Máté: After having broken my leg, I knew perfectly why it happened and I paid particular attention to my preparation afterwards, so I warmed up correctly. But there is a ballet jump that scares me particularly, because once I broke my ankle doing it. I was in school and the ballet class was over, I was already out from the studio when I heard someone saying “let's do it once more”. I came back and I made it concentrated but still I broke my ankle. Until today I am scared to do it, every time I have to do this jump I think about my broken ankle, because it hurt me so much that I still get shivers when I think about it.

*Me: The example you give is something that happened during a class. But what if the accident happened during a rehearsal or a performance?*

Máté: This is different. If you try to do something you already made thousand times, if you fall down obviously you know why. If you start to hold yourself back when you need impetus for a jump, then you know that this is not going to work and that you will possibly get wounded. So you have to throw yourself in those moves. There is a jump that I used to teach during my workshops and I know precisely what will happen at the end because that is a very hard coordination, so I stand next to them if the girl would miss it and fall on the floor. I know what is the common mistake about it, so I can stand at the right place and catch them up if they fall. However after a long practice everyone can make it, and there are no such incidents like a girl would hit the guy on his neck or something like that. But if as a guy you get hit during this jump, then of course you start to think about what is going to happen during the next attempt.

*Me: My very last question will be about your state as a performer when doing a dangerous move or scene on stage: did you experience that you get into another state of mind, or have you ever felt something different when you need to do such moves?*

Máté: Before something like this you always remind yourself about this hard jump, about the fact that you have to catch the girl otherwise she will fall down, etc. etc. I used to talk to myself during the dance but this is almost a part of the choreography for me because most of the time I speak to myself during the dance. There is a jump that I used to do, and before I do it I always tell to myself “big plié” and things like this because I know that if I just try it “like this”, then I do not jump high enough and I cannot make it. When you mark a choreography, when you just go through it carefully, there are always moments when you give signs to yourself, reminders. This is the 100 % mind and 100 % body: you know what you have to do and your body is ready for it. Or it can be a memory of something bad that happened: when the fighting scene comes in *Radical Wrong*, there I

tell to myself that once I hit someone in the face, and that if I do not pay attention this can happen again, of maybe someone will hit me. We are 5 in this scene, and one of us is an actor. He did not get any dancer training so when we start to fight we always neutralize him first because he is tall, big, so we pull him down on the floor and then we keep going. Here fear is at stake instead of a memory: we know that this can mean trouble for somebody, since there was already before.

*Me: Yes, at least I learned that those performances are not so peaceful.*

Máté: Wim likes to provoke, to provoke such situations which do not happen in real life. I never fought on the street, and I do not really wish to. If I have such needs, then I go to a karate class. Wim likes to show those things when people can feel how peaceful their life is. What he shows is part of the world, but not of ours. In other civilizations, other parts of the world people must struggle for life day after day. This is also inside us, just we do not use it, we do not meet with it in our every day life. For Wim it is different; he likes to struggle, to fight, that is why there is so much fighting, pain and suffer in his pieces. I think this part of his life.

*Me: I presume. Thank you very much for your time.*

Máté: You're welcome.

## NYILATKOZAT

a szakdolgozat eredetiségéről

Alulírott Blondel Arnaud (születési hely és idő: Bois-Guillaume, 1984. szeptember 24.)

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*Reaching the limits*

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Budapest, 2013. május 29.

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hallgató aláírása