

GET STARTED

Sebnem Aksan

Sebnem Aksan, one of the three pioneers of contemporary dance in Turkey, sketches the current situation in a country whose people dance more than any other, but have little understanding for a dance art where only artists move.

Aydin Teker presses against a wall,

rolling her face across the glass separating the art gallery from the garden. The lush green behind her is very quiet and steep, with a few old trees on each level that create a full backdrop. She slowly walks the whole length of the glass wall as her features disappear. At one point she moves away from the wall in the same slow motion and goes to the stairs in the corner, watching us from the small patio where she stands; slowly she descends, disappearing, as if fading under ground.

This is just one episode of a site-specific piece that made use of this art gallery's unusual two story glass adjunct section. Then from the roof windows above, sounds of obscenity direct our attention upwards where five female dancers irritatingly try to get in by squeezing parts of their body through the skylights. A few more episodes follow in the corridors and staircases with more dancers not knowing where and why to go, how to act. The title of the piece: 'Permeable: The year: 1998.

Aydin Teker ended up doing site-specific work out of necessity. She is one of the few artists who has to create no matter what and where. When the State Conservatory, where she is still employed, did not want her to produce pieces for the students, she found the solution immediately: she rented a small room and started working with a former student. The piece she created, 'AGULOS' took many different shapes over the next four years. Its movement vocabulary remained while everything around it – location, costume, accompaniment, number of dancers - changed during its six-production lifetime.

At one time 'AGULOS' was set in a junkyard behind St. Sofia with six dancers dressed most absurdly with costumes of all sorts, selected and combined by a designer from a theater wardrobe while accompanied by a chamber orchestra dressed in black tuxedos playing on the back of a broken truck. Then for the second section, the audience followed the dancers walking twenty-five meters away into the cisterns where five dancers were moving in knee-high water dressed in white leotards while others were towing a prima ballerina from the opera on a small boat where she stood like a goddess. Then in the Yildiz Palace Poligome, 'AGULOS' became a duet accompanied by a saxophone player, continuing-the same night -under the rain in the palace gardens on a platform with one male solist moving to Bach while the audience watched from underneath their umbrellas. The experience was entirely different each time. The life of 'AGULOS' began in 1995, ended on the Brooklyn Bridge and on a playground nearby in 1998.

Aydin Teker never expected to be popular; she wants to hear reactions. How do people feel? What are they experiencing? She does not want to impose any particular views on her extremely well rehearsed and outlined work. When asked about her work she replies: "I really do not necessarily start or follow an idea; the piece unfolds while working with my dancers: The work process is very slow and demanding. The result is unique and original and as the years go by, more and more on the minimalist side.

Dance as art is only 55 years old

She is a highly unusual artist in the sense that she is quite an independent and individual character who does not fit into any conventional norms in Turkey let alone elsewhere in the dance world. She comes from a traditional background - State Conservatory education as well as State Opera and Ballet Company experience for two years. She was then able to receive a rather prestigious state scholarship to study abroad which enabled her to attend the London Contemporary Dance School SUNY Purchase and to finalise her studies with a BA and MFA degree at NYU in 1981. During this time she was able to put together a few noticeable and memorable individual performances in New York City. As required by her scholarship, she returned to Turkey to work at one of the state companies or conservatories. At the time there were ballet companies in Ankara, Izmir and Istanbul. Plus three conservatories, none of which were interested in what she had to offer. The one exception was the Istanbul State Conservatory (now Mimar Sinan University State Conservatory) where modern dance was a part of the curriculum. There she began teaching in 1980. Finally in 1991, the modern dance course of study was established as full undergraduate programme within the ballet department of Mimar Sinan University State Conservatory. Although dance has a rich and diverse folkloric tradition in this country and the public enjoys getting up and dancing at any opportunity, as a theatrical art form it is only fifty-five years old. Presenting the body on stage had never been the practice of the muslim population in this part of the world until the foundation of the Turkish Republic by Ataturk in 1923. Probably the most advanced idealist leader in Europe at the time, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk instituted a series of reforms to modernise and westernise the country. The six.hundred-year-old Ottoman Empire was dismantled. The Turkish people liberated themselves from the rule of the Sultans and from the British, French and Greek occupancy; the current new territory was drawn and the Republic was founded.

The first state conservatory of Turkey where a talented new generation was trained in the Western classical art forms was founded in the new capital city of Ankara in 1936 in accordance with Ataturk's orders. The world's leading authorities, such as Carl Ebert for drama and opera and Paul Hindemith for music, were consulted and hired to help establish the programmes. For ballet, the Republic chose to consult Dame Ninette de Valois, the founder of Britain's Royal Ballet. Her mission was to create the Turkish National Ballet which she did by first establishing the school and then the company. She served as adviser for both institutes for twenty five years by sending teachers and choreographers to Turkey in order to build up its repertory of classical and contemporary works and initiate the National Ballet.

Dance as an act of emancipation

The Turkish Republic was modelled after the growing nationalism in Europe and was adapted to a primarily muslim population. The government celebrated evenings with

ballroom dancing where men and women were "ordered to dance together" like their peers in Europe. Of course, they complied. They were also told to dress like Europeans; no more crimson coloured fezes for men, and gone. The black veils for women. Women were granted the right to vote and became members of parliament. For the first time, women could choose to become ballerinas, actresses, lawyers, or pilots. But problems still remained. Women may have been allowed to take on these new emancipated female roles; they may even have been allowed to become the bread winners, but the archetypal role model remained that of the "oriental woman." I think we can say that by now eighty years after the revolution, more women are educated and more women have successfully pursued careers. Women have been integrated into society and have established their status in family and cultural life. Consequently, the posture and the mannerisms of women are changing.

The history of modern dance in the West is full of women who have pulled themselves up from the depth of their being. They left a legacy, a reminder of their age but not a role model to be imitated. You could interpret 'Giselle' because it has a classical syntax that has been solidified throughout the ages. But how can you interpret Martha Graham's 'Night Journey,' which is about her personal transformation as a woman as well as an artist? Ballet had established the roles for women - though created by men - the Sylph, the Swan, the Fairy. But modern dance does not provide roles to "imitate;" it expects you to constantly create your own role.

Mini-skirts: a disaster on stage

This year at the third annual modern dance festival organised by Middle East University dance group, I noticed that a lot of the female dancers chose to wear boots and mini-skirts. I thought they might be copying some of the European contemporary dancers and this could also just reflect the fashion of the day. Imitation is an accepted part of the developmental process since we are followers rather than leaders in these matters; however, the lack of original, individual vision disturbed me even though here and there the search for sexual identity by female choreographers was noticeable. The male choreographers, however, had far more clarity, vision and assertion in what their performances. They posed questions politically, socially, sexually. I became strongly aware of the costume choice when the Swedish company (E L D) appeared last on the programme and suddenly three females entered: grounded, territorial, aggressively assertive, both emotionally and physically - female Vikings as it were. They were also wearing boots and mini-skirts but these women knew how to carry themselves in this outfit. And you understood why the fashion came about! Whereas our girls fell short. They were shy of exposing their derriere and kept pulling their skirts down in discomfort as if caught between their desire for independence and the traditional customs of modesty. I thought this gesture alone could have been a sufficient motive for a dance piece.

Dance imported to and from Turkey

But we entered into this history in the middle of the modern age and are still unable to rise above expected standards though we have produced a number of excellent dancers. I think the most important aspect of this adaptation problem is that classical ballet is not innate to this culture because it was a social and cultural product of the history of particular countries, especially Italy, France, Denmark, Russia, and Britain. Another factor worth mentioning here is that the autocratic tradition and manner of classical ballet education required a very strict form of discipline, which was imposed

on a body Turkish people found alienating. Just as ballet in the world now and then suffers from the lack of creative talent, so do we Turks even more so. This particular attitude of balletic art restricts creative energy.

When I taught my first modern dance class to ballet dancers they refused to take their shoes off and lie on the floor. That was back in the early seventies; today more young people apply for entry into the area of modern dance, although they know that there are no jobs available for them. But the dance "bug" is very strong! Interest in dance is growing in every direction. There are modern dance clubs springing up at a number of universities; people are teaching whatever they know to each other. They are presenting works wherever a venue can be found. And more and more people from different disciplines outside the field are seriously pursuing their interest in dance and are challenging the creative process.

The Turkish dance bug

In the early seventies, I believe there were only three of us who were bitten by the "bug"; Duygu Aykal, Geyvan McMillen and myself. The next generations were influenced by them. They prepared the bridge between ballet and modern dance. Interestingly enough, all were women! Until then the Ankara State Conservatory and State Opera Ballet were the only strong institutions in the country. Duygu and Geyvan were members of the company when they went abroad; however, their movement style remained loyal to ballet while conceptually they were contemporary. Duygu studied choreology and assisted Leonide Massine. Geyvan attended the London Contemporary Dance School and later studied with Merce Cunningham. I went to London and then to the Juilliard School in New York. Duygu produced major works in Ankara until her early death in 1985. Geyvan produced and taught independently in Ankara and later in Istanbul influencing quite a number of people, among them: Aydin Teker, the creator of the pieces which began this essay. Aysun Aslan and later Mustafa Kaplan and Mustafa Sander who finally settled in Istanbul making it possible for contemporary dance to grow in this cosmopolitan environment.

Aysun Aslan founded the Turquaz Dance Company in Istanbul which lasted three years (1991- 1993) and including herself, Dilek Evgin and Aydin Teker created the possibility to produce their work. Till this day, Dilek Evgin individually produces dance concerts with her former students and shares programmes with other choreographers, besides teaching ballet at the Mimar Sinan University Conservatory. Mustafa Kaplan and Mustafa Sander established their physical, conceptual styles and are presenting their work here as well as abroad. Sander lives and produces in the States ,while Kaplan teaches and works in Istanbul.

Sprouting schools

Most recently in Istanbul, Tugce Ulugun Tuna {MFA degree from Mimar Sinan University where she is an assistant teacher at the young age of twenty-seven) presented her first and very unusual concert called 'Dance With Different Bodies'. The programme included physically disabled people, sometimes performing alone, sometimes with dancers. Mixed with her previously performed solos and duets, Tugce created a highly powerful, soulful evening of dance. There is also Zeynep Tanbay who holds a teaching certificate from the Martha Graham School in New York City. After having danced with several companies in the States for ten years, she is now back teaching at Yildiz University. She organised an individual concert last year

where she danced and presented her balletically inclined yet innovative choreography with dancers from abroad.

Today there are three schools in the country that offer professional education on modern dance: Mimar Sinan University State Conservatory (the modern dance programme was founded in 1991), the Ylidiz University Fine Arts Department (modern dance programme began in 1999), and the Hacettepe University State Conservatory (modern dance programme was opened this year). There is also a state subsidised modern dance company in Ankara. Its director, choreographer, and founder Beyhan Murphy exposed her ballet-trained dancers to many styles and choreographers and has built a strong repertory company whose members also provide modern dance education in the capital city. More and more people from inside and outside such institutions are seeking information and persevering despite the very limited circumstances - the lack of venues and lack of teachers - to create the art of modern dance in Turkey.