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Exploring Space with Aydin Teker

Turkish choreographer Aydin Teker stretches out a long and expressive arm, as if trying to grasp something hidden in the air. The gesture, as powerful as the wind racing over her rooftop terrace, is accompanied by a deep sigh of frustration. 'Ah! How can I explain it?' Addressed to no one in particular, the question seems to be one that Teker asks often. When the answer comes, it is in the course of the creative process itself.

From her own accounts, creativity is something that Teker was born with. 'When I was a little child,' she remembers, 'when my grandmother gave me a job to do that I hated, I always created something with it. If I had to put up the washing, I used to hang the clothes in a special order, by color or size, and people used to stand and watch the way I did it. I used to play all the time.'

Teker's creativity found an outlet in dance. At the time, ballet was not popular in Turkey, and when, on her grandmother's prodding, she auditioned to study at the State Conservatory, her neighbors in the conservative, close-knit Ankara suburb Yenimahalle were appalled. 'They couldn't believe my parents would send me to that school. Everybody was saying to them, "You have one daughter, and you've given that daughter to *köçek*\*." But I had the image, you know, of flying.'

Ballet school, it turned out, was not what she had expected. The way I was trained was very, very traditional. I was 10 years old when I got into the *conservatoire*, and nobody really cared about my personality, my creativity. They said, "This is first position, this is second position." I was shown things, and I pretended to do them. ... Then a few years passed, and suddenly I realised, "I don't want this. I don't want to be a fairy anymore. I don't want to pretend anymore".'

The problem was that she didn't know what it was that she wanted - until she discovered modern dance. Her first exposure to modern dance was when a German company paid a visit to Ankara. Their performance, she says, 'changed my life.' It was very, *very* important for me. Suddenly, I could see there were other ways. I got this idea that, "Okay, I don't want ballet, but I want something like that." ... Suddenly, my attitude towards dance changed, and I became a very good student. I had this idea that I would go to Europe and become a choreographer and do something like *that*.'

After finishing the *Conservatoire*, Teker received a scholarship to study at the London School of Contemporary Dance. Her enthusiasm caught the eye of well-known Japanese choreographer Kazuko Hirabayashi, who accepted her on the spot, without an audition, as a special student at the State University of New York. 'I was doing composition, improvisation-everything... In composition classes I would study so much, I would work and do my assignment, and Kazuko used to look at me and say, "No. That didn't work." I would try harder, and the next week I would bring it again, and again she would say, "No. It's not working." The whole year just went like that. At the end, one day I just went to the bathroom and cried and cried and cried. And I

decided: "Okay. I cannot be a choreographer." Amazingly, in the week that went by before she could explain to Hirabayashi her decision to abandon her tutored career, something finally clicked. How it happened, what it was, is something Teker still can't put into words.

'When you don't know anything; she says,' it's such a strange feeling. ... It happens when you start learning that you have more and more problems. Each choreography teaches you something. When I see something, a weakness, or a problem to solve, then I have another reason to choreograph. ... I'm not afraid to try things. If things do not come out, it's all right. The first time I go through a piece with my dancers is a lot more important than anything else. The result is just a result; it's the creative times that really matter.'

Teker admits that not every dancer is willing to put up with her perfectionism. 'Anybody who can work with me has to be very patient. I kill them, and I kill myself. ... I don't want Barbie Dolls, I don't want perfect bodies, I want something expressive. ... I don't care about the movement, I care about the concept, finding out what it's all about.'

In 1988 Teker returned to Turkey, where she taught improvisation at the State Theatre in Istanbul, and in 1991 she began teaching at the Mimar Sinan University, Istanbul State Conservatory, eventually becoming Head of the Modern Dance Department in 1996. In 1998, she was invited by the British Council to participate in an international exchange programme between experienced choreographers and composers organized by the Royal Festival Hall in London. Ultimately, the experience was extremely rewarding, but it didn't start out well at all.

'A week before I was going I called to find out about getting my ticket, and they said, 'Oh, so you didn't get your ticket? That means you didn't get your cassette.' It turned out that before the start of the workshop, all of the participating choreographers had been sent audiotapes with musical excerpts to choreograph, while the composers had received videotapes of dance pieces to compose for. Teker finally got her tape -the night she arrived in London. This left her with the daunting task of choreographing - in her hotel room - a work for 'music that you couldn't even count, it was so complicated'.

The rest of the week went a lot better, and led to a series of projects with British composers Paul Witty, Luke Stoneham and Jim Pywell. Teker took an unusual approach to the concept of choreographer/composer collaboration. Instead of creating dance pieces for the composers' music, she created dance pieces for the composers. The piece she created with Witty had him drumming on the windows of the South Bank Centre in London, while the audience watched from outside.

For the past decade or so, Teker has been involved in choreographing dance performances, like the one with Witty, that take place away from the traditional stage. For example, her piece Aulos was performed several times, first at the Yildiz Saray in Istanbul as part of the International Theatre Congress, next in a junkyard, and later under the Brooklyn Bridge.

According to Teker, choreographing site-specific works can take an enormous amount of time. 'The space needs time, the movement needs time and the idea needs time. ... For days and days and days I rehearse in the space. I make the dancers improvise, but I always make rules and keep the rules changing, making more and more limits. There comes a point when you suddenly see that something is happening. What happens is my dancer becomes part of the space, and the space becomes part of the dancer. They melt into each other. When this happens, that's it. I don't have to worry about it anymore. Anything can work after that.'

Any place can work, too. 'When you enter a place; says Teker, 'without even realising it you look at it as if you can do a piece there. ... At the *Darphane* (Imperial Mint in Istanbul I had a piece called *Sıkstırmak* (Squeeze). There's a room with shelves, and I put my dancers in the shelves. Only 40 people could fit in the audience, and when they got in they were really squeezed. I closed the doors, and my dancers performed in the shelves. There were many sections, but in the end people left because they got so hysterical in that room. But they never forgot this performance.'

Recently, Teker has been creating works for an even smaller space: the video screen. Her video *Focus* features the choreographer in the act of trying to thread a needle. As a result of a superb editing job, she appears at times to be suspended in the air upside-down, creating an image of overwhelming concentration and tension. Teker also examines the concept of focus in her latest choreography, a piece called *Density*, with the British composer Nick Rothwell, which was performed in May at the Istanbul Sanat Merkezi, with support from the British Council, and in August at a festival in Zurich.

Despite a busy summer Teker is looking forward to beginning another semester at the *Conservatoire*. 'I'm very happy being there; she says, 'because while I'm teaching I'm learning so much. The way I teach is also the way I choreograph. My students always know that I am exploring something and that they are a part of it. We explore together.'

· *Köçek* is the Turkish term for the male dancers who performed as entertainers during the Ottoman Empire, when it was considered taboo for women to dance in public.