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THE DANCE OF WORDS

THE EMERGENCE AND INFLUENCE OF LITERATURE IN
THE CHOREOGRAPHIC WORK OF MAURICE BÉJART

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I. I. Background to the research, problem definition

The subject of the thesis is the work of Maurice Béjart (1927–2007), one of the highly influential dance creators of the 20th century who produced an oeuvre full of contradictions. Starting from the 1970s, the art of the French choreographer also became known in Hungary; however, we fell under the influence of his creations rather than truly and deeply getting to know them.

The aim of my thesis is to attempt to outline the major milestones of the creator's career (since the Hungarian-language literature on him is incomplete and full of erroneous data), its dance-historical aspects, the evolution of his creative style, and to examine the influence that literature exerted on the artist and the development of his oeuvre. The investigation of literary influences significantly contributes to a more thorough understanding of Maurice Béjart's work, given that numerous creations in his oeuvre were inspired by European and non-European literature.

At the same time, uncharacteristically for his profession, the choreographer himself engaged in writing—creating a novel, a play, and essays, while two autobiographical volumes also flowed from his pen. It is worthwhile to examine his writings from the perspective of how theatrical thinking and the act of creating within the scenic space emerge from the texts. His strong literary attachment raises new research opportunities regarding the mutual impact of dance and literature, which may lead into the field of rather incomplete Hungarian dance-aesthetic investigations.

In the introduction of my dissertation, I formulated the following fundamental questions:

1. How does the Béjartian dance language evolve and change from experimental works to the dance theater form? Can Béjart's use of the body and the applied dance technique(s) be called unique? How does he use the tools of visual and movement metaphor in his works? Does his literary attachment play a role in this?
2. What is the essence of the concept of Béjart's total dance theater in relation to the dance and theater history of the era (e.g., the work of P. Bausch, J.-L. Barrault, or J. Vilar)? What does this concept mean from the perspective of the body, ritual, and scenic means of expression?
3. How does the relationship between literature and dance manifest in Béjart's choreographies? Is it a matter of literary adaptation, or is the influence from which the work is born more complex?
4. What role did childhood experiences and traumas, the paternal intellectual heritage, readings, and the activity of reading itself play in the choreographer's creations?
5. What place do Béjart's writings and texts occupy in European dance literature? Do these writings possess literary value? Do the texts written by him carry and, if so, how do they convey the choreographic vision?
6. How does the autobiographical doubled/multiplied self manifest? How does the choreographer relate in these texts to his creative self, to creation, and to memory? How does autofiction appear in his autobiographical texts? How is his ballet *The Nutcracker* connected to the autobiographical texts? Can the work be considered as a dancing autofiction?

II. Research Methodology

In elaborating on my topic, the investigation was hindered by the fact that there is no conventionally accepted, fully developed methodology for analyzing dance works. A dance historian, who approaches a work with philological thinking to uncover its content and formal regularities along with its interdisciplinary aspects, understands work analysis differently than a dancer or choreographer, for whom an analytical description of a dance piece means describing the assignment of movements to one another, the arrangement of dance in space, and its connection to music.

Regarding dance work analyses from a dance-historical approach, performance analysis appears methodologically to be the most applicable procedure in the sense of the terminology used by Patrice Pavis (1947–)¹. This defining figure of contemporary theater theory links two approaches to the term performance analysis—reporting analysis and reconstructive analysis—which are worth applying together in connection with summarizing the Béjartian oeuvre.

In the case of viewable works—even though we do not encounter individual choreographies at the exact moment of scenic representation—it is possible to grasp the dynamics of the dance creation and the feelings and meanings triggered by what is seen. For non-recorded, and thus non-viewable pieces, I chose reconstructive analysis as a method, which: "... always operating post festum, collects the signs, relics, and documents of representation, as well as those statements of intent written by the artists when the performance was being prepared..."²

This latter is particularly... of great significance in Béjart's case, since he not only spoke in detail about his creative intentions in his autobiographies but also analyzed his thoughts related to his own works in numerous interviews, in-depth interviews, and documentaries.

During the study of Béjart's oeuvre, alongside his life path, it was primarily necessary to examine the dance and theatrical phenomena of the era, because the choreographer's life and work were deeply rooted in the artistic life of his time. At first, it seemed logical to investigate only the theatrical environment, but it quickly became apparent that all those fields (philosophy, literature, music, film, religion, travel) to which Béjart's interest extended are indispensable for a more thorough understanding of his career.

At the same time, perhaps the most important sources were the creator's autobiographical writings (not only the first volume available in Hungarian but also the as-yet unpublished second volume, which I translated during the course of this work). Almost every dance work by Béjart is self-reflexive in some way; his choreographies unfold in their entirety only if we know their creator's life, thoughts, experiences, and readings.

The majority of the relevant literature is available primarily in French and English. Therefore, during the work, I translated a significant amount of specialized literature. In addition to presenting the oeuvre and its connections, it was necessary to search for those unique approaches in the relationship between text and dance within Béjart's choreographies that guided Maurice Béjart along this path.

An equally exciting research task was offered by the examination of the texts of the books written by Béjart—autobiography, novel, essay—from which I attempted to describe the inverse of the phenomenon, namely the rare phenomenon of "the choreographer emerging from the text". I examined Maurice Béjart's working method, along with the antecedents and circumstances of creating his ballets. Linked to this is a more detailed analysis of several works considered fundamental—not always based on literature—compared with autobiographical texts and memoirs.

In the analyses, I did not merely strive to describe what is seen but, in light of the circumstances of the works' genesis (*approche génétique*), decoded the deeper layers of the choreography. This latter approach is particularly important in Béjart's case; the organizing principle of his works can often be deciphered precisely through knowledge of biographical events, readings, cultural experiences, and encounters. My goal in the thesis was to interpret the concept of total dance theater associated with Béjart by moving beyond generalities and to define the phenomenon from a dance-historical perspective relative to multiple, sometimes contradictory, literary interpretations.

III. Results

As a result of the research work, the processing, evaluation, and interpretation of sources, I received answers to the questions raised in the thesis. A significant portion of Béjart's works is either specifically of literary motivation or connected in some other way to his readings and the work of particular poets or writers. It is a consequence of his extensive reading, the intellectual worldview he experienced from a young age, and the spiritual legacy of his philosopher father that the literary texts he came to know became integrated into his creations, so much so that certain authors (for example, Baudelaire) appeared in his works with almost their entire oeuvre.

The "utilization" of literature in these ballets occurred in various ways: sometimes the text of the works provided a starting point for a dance piece, or even appeared and was spoken within it (for instance, in the case of Shakespeare, or Molière and Ionesco) ; at other times, multiple texts were "layered" upon each other (Baudelaire) , and it also occurred that the very content and aesthetic "power" of the text (Mishima) prompted the choreographer to create. In the verbliness used as a means of expression in the choreographies, he assigned a major role to the human voice, the colors of the voice, diction, and language itself.

The examination of Béjart's writings and texts has so far been absent not only from Hungarian but also from international literature. Yet, his novel *Mathilde* (1963) and his drama *A-6-Roc* (1992), with the characteristics of 20th-century contemporary literature and a dance-creator's vision, are interesting and unique manifestations of the relationship between dance and literature.

Furthermore, the investigation of his autobiographies (with which domestic literature has not dealt at all until now), as is already clear from the titles of the two volumes (*Un instant dans la vie d'autrui*, *Mémoires 1.* and *La vie de qui*, *Mémoires 2.*), proved that Béjart was actually preoccupied with a fundamental question, which he formulated as: "In what sense am I, me?"

To this question, he provided an important answer in his autobiographies, also crucial from the perspective of his creative art: he emphasized the plurality of his identity. Thoughts nourished by memories, reflections, dreams, small daily worries, large existential questions, encounters, and solitary meditations consistently return to this proposition. In his biographies, Béjart did not describe the events of his life; rather, he strives to present versions of the happenings as processed by memory and imagination.

"I hope my life is made rather... of cutouts, and yes, such fanciful ones."⁴ The expression borrowed from Balzac (*fantasques découpures*) indicates that Béjart viewed his role as a writer in the same way as his choreographic work, in which he almost never used linear storytelling; instead, he assembled his ballets from juxtaposed fragments and mosaics. In his writings, as well as in the majority of his works, he rejected linear storytelling and the chronological presentation of events.

The phenomenon of a life's "cutouts" can also be examined in the light of Ricoeur's "ipse-idem" identity theory. Proceeding from this, Béjart's autobiographical approach is not a construction of his life's events, but rather a discursive strategy based on his Ipse-identity, which changes to express the

diversity of lives hidden within stories that he considers his own. Ricoeur's thesis can therefore be applied to the plural personality displayed in Béjart's autobiographies: "Man is hidden in his own stories; the self has no qualities; every quality exists in the story."⁵

This discursive strategy, which can also be understood as the staging of successive "selves"—that is, appearing as the literary performance of his life—simultaneously establishes the literary staging of the choreographer's profession. During creation, the choreographer continuously assumes other lives besides his own; his own personality slips into the characters he creates. The similarity between his autobiographical approaches and the process of choreographic creation can ultimately be traced back to the question of performativity. Béjart's profession is a... performative act in the sense that he produces choreographic works which are performed before an audience.

His writings, as "performative discourses," come into being by producing the described stories as a performance. The performative discourse nature is exerted even more strongly in his autofictional biographical text, where the real events of his life recede into the background, appearing almost exclusively on an associative level, and the performative nature of the description approaches real stage performances. Thus, he creates his "word-ballets".

I believe I have succeeded in answering perhaps one of the most important questions raised as a hypothesis at the beginning of the thesis—how Béjart's literary and dance-creation activities are connected—and, moreover, through this research, an image of Béjart may emerge that can contribute to newer interpretations of the relationship between dance and literature. Béjart's literary activity is a rare phenomenon in the history of dance. These texts are expressions of a desire to communicate that searches within verballity for opportunities to extend the universe of linguistic tools.

The quality of these literary creations and the appearance of the choreographer's scenic vision within them have not been investigated at all in Hungarian literature, and only a few international Béjart analysts have examined them tangentially. In my work, I sought to raise new thoughts in this area for a correlation study to be continued and fully realized later within the discourse of dance and literature.

Footnotes

¹ Patrice Pavis, „A kutatás mérlege (Bevezetés a L'Analyse des spectacles-hoz)" [The Balance of Research (Introduction to L'Analyse des spectacles)], in Előadáselemzés [Performance Analysis], Balassi Kiadó, Budapest, 2003.

² Op. cit., p. 87. [https://theatron.hu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/12Patrice Pavis.pdf](https://theatron.hu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/12Patrice_Pavis.pdf)

³ The title of the Hungarian translation of the first volume (1985) (Életem: a Tánc [My Life: the Dance]) does not express this essential aspect.

⁴ „J'espère que ma vie est faite de découpures, et oui fantasques..." Maurice Béjart, Un instant dans la vie d'autrui, 1979, p. 13.

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, A narratív azonosság [Narrative Identity], in: László János, Thomka Beáta (eds.): Narratívák 5. Narratív pszichológia [Narratives 5. Narrative Psychology], Kijárat Kiadó, Bp., 2001, pp. 15–36.

IV. Publications and Conference Presentations Related to the Topic

1. Publications

Major Rita: *Béjart nélkül, Béjart szellemében* [Without Béjart, in the Spirit of Béjart], Zene-Zene-Tánc, 2009.

Major Rita: *A szövegekből előbukkanó koreográfus: Maurice Béjart és az irodalom* [The Choreographer Emerging from the Texts: Maurice Béjart and Literature] = *Táncstudományi Közlemények*, 2013, No. 1, pp. 53–66.

2. Conference Presentations

Major Rita: "*Ím, így en táncol Zarathusztra*" ["Lo, thus dances Zarathustra"], *Hagyomány és újítás a táncművészetben, a táncpedagógiában és a tánc kutatásban* [Tradition and Innovation in Dance Art, Dance Pedagogy, and Dance Research]. Scientific Conference, Hungarian Dance Academy, Budapest, November 9–10, 2007.

Major Rita: *Shakespeare dzsesszben... Hogyan találkozott egy angol, egy francia és egy amerikai 1960-ban Brüsszelben* [Shakespeare in Jazz... How an Englishman, a Frenchman, and an American Met in Brussels in 1960]; *Shakespeare és a Tánc-Mű/Film/Zene* [Shakespeare and Dance-Work/Film/Music] Workshop Conference of the Department of Theory at the Hungarian Dance Academy, Budapest, April 23, 2016.

Rita Major: *J'étais aussi un compagnon errant... - L'impact spirituel des voyages sur l'œuvre de Maurice Béjart*. "Utazás és spiritualitás a klasszikus és a neolatin kultúrákban / Voyages et spiritualité dans les cultures classiques et néolatines" [Travel and Spirituality in Classical and Neo-Latin Cultures]. Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest, May 17–18, 2018.

Rita Major: *La vie de qui? Texte et chorégraphie dans les autobiographies de Maurice Bédart*; RODOSZ/5. Colloque des Doctorants en Études romanes. PPKE Budapest, March 29, 2019.

Rita Major: *Danse multidimensionnelle: Création et l'apprentissage sans frontières dans l'œuvre de Maurice Bédart*; "Reading in Europe today - Reading and Writing Literary Texts in the Age of Digital Humanities" « Lire et écrire le transfrontalier aujourd'hui, dans la fiction romanesque et ailleurs », Cadiz, July 2–13, 2019.

Major Rita: *A világjárás művészete. Utazás és kulturális örökség Maurice Bédart művészetében* [The Art of Globetrotting: Travel and Cultural Heritage in the Art of Maurice Bédart]. Tánc és Kulturális örökség VII. [Dance and Cultural Heritage VII] Dance Science Conference, Hungarian Dance University, Budapest, November 16, 2019.

Major Rita: *Ihlető és ihletett. A transzcendens dualitás gondolata Honoré de Balzacnál és Maurice Bédart műveiben* [Inspire and Inspired: The Idea of Transcendent Duality in Honoré de Balzac and the Works of Maurice Bédart]; "Tánc és transzcendencia" [Dance and Transcendence] Workshop Conference organized by the Department of Art Theory. Hungarian Dance University, Budapest, May 16, 2025.