

# **T** HE NEXT PLATEAU

"Like a gladiator who feels drawn to the arena, over and over again."  
Such is the statement in the programme leaflet.

The dancer. On one leg, the other leg loosely stretched out at a ninety degree angle. She shifts her weight, pushing her standing foot sideways. Still one-legged, she is slowly creeping towards the edge of the stage. Looping, looping, looping the movement of her hands at the same time.

Why am I impressed? Why am I impressed by the exertion of energy, by the abundance of vitality, by the expression of physical strength?  
Surely, this is not what it is about?  
What is it about?

The subject of physicality, and, by extension, that of exhaustion is one that has been following me all through my career as a dancer and choreographer.

If the dancer doesn't sweat at the end of the show, was it a show worth watching?

I often have the impression that the dancer's obvious exercising on stage represents a kinship with the world of sport and spectacle that cannot be tampered with as the discipline of dance may risk losing its *raison d'être* in the eye of society.

Why are we so thrilled when the calf muscles of a ballerina pop as soon as she rises to *pointe*? Why are we so keen to witness the gradual darkening of a dancer's shirt as it is getting more and more soaked by his own sweat?

I remember how annoyed I had been back in 2010 while watching "Opal Loop" by Trisha Brown at Southbank Centre in London, witnessing the dancers' blasé state, their movements seemingly carried out by disinterested carelessness. It was a style I had not been accustomed to, me, the then aspiring dancer.

And here, at Gasteig, a theatre in Munich, October 2020, I watch a woman, sixty-two years of age, going from one movement tableau to the next, having the techno be exchanged against nervous saxophone music, and back to techno again. Enthralled by her repetitions I acknowledge every one of her steps.

With the undulating patterns of a human shape in front of my eyes, I realise that, despite their obvious entwinement, a clear distinction has to be made between exertion, exhaustion and physicality.

Physicality is an unique language a body can speak, it is the *modus* of expression that a dancer can tap into. It is the "how" of the body's movement, the quality with which a movement is carried out or carried through. Exhaustion is the result of exertion and comes with signs of lacking energy.

Exhaustion can be the result of physicality, but physicality does not necessarily come with exhaustion, or visible exhaustion.

When I started dancing at the age of six, my ballet teacher taught us how we can quickly quieten our heaving chests after a very challenging sequence, so we don't show the audience how badly we are out of breath.

In classical dance, the illusion of lightness plays a prominent role in its teaching philosophy. This is particularly the case for the female classical dancer, whose breathlessness and visible exhaustion might counter the expected display of female elegance.

In modern dance, part of this legacy can still be seen in Merce Cunningham's very robotic choreographies where both the dancer's individual physicality and level of exhaustion are hardly noticeable, if not to say repressed to the benefit of an overarching aesthetic.

In post-modern dance, we enter a realm of bodily discovery, and with that, ways to engage the human body in movement which allow the full expansion of its own resources and capacities, bringing forth a new aesthetic, the "somatic". The "somatic" comes with a unique type of physicality, which at times may, or may not, visibly exhaust the dancer. What is certain, though, is that the display of exhaustion does not sit at the core of the artistic work.

With the onset of contemporary dance, we could witness a demonstration of the exercising body, with a lot of running (Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker) and quick movement changes (Ultima Véz). The dancer's exhaustion was surely not the desired result of a show, but seemed somewhat anticipated.

The 1990s gave us the negation of the body through the concept, the movement as an indicator of an intellectual process, a signifier rather

than a signified. There was no sweat here, but a lot of head scratching instead. The late 2010s had us witness the return of the active body on stage, but which body is it now? It seems more multi-faceted, queered, a vessel for many interests and legacies, and therefore possibly exhausted, possibly sustained.

Yet, to this day, I witness post-show conversations where the display of exertion is a topic discussed. If the exhaustion was not visible, however, or if the dancer later reported to "not be that tired", the expressions of surprise and admiration ("she is such a professional", "he is truly at a high level of excellence" etc.) from those who watched the show become certain elements of any performance-related talk.

So many times I assisted in dance productions where the obvious display of exertion and ensuing exhaustion was more than just a point on a hidden agenda. I would sit through sixty minutes of movements, I would witness their climbing up a step ladder towards fatigue. I would then applaud their reverence to the public, aligned in a row at the edge of the stage, red-faced, barely keeping on their feet, their torsos still pulsating from the tossing, jumping, running.

And I would ask myself: Why don't I just queue in front of a gym and start cheering as soon as a bodybuilder leaves the facility after having completed a weights and cardio session?

Even in audition notices, one can read statements such as "high physicality required". But doesn't this mean: "get ready to be very exhausted when you work with us", rather than: "you need to have a background in acrobatics"?

Back to Gasteig. I don't question her probably very exhausting dancing whilst Louise Lecavalier is working her way from one stop to the next in her solo piece "Stations".

After the show I talk to her. I paraphrase her words: "With La La La Human Steps, I was so pushed to the extreme, it was often so hard on the body, that at some point I reached a plateau. And then I realised that it was not that hard after all. These days, I cannot help it, I just enjoy it. It has become second nature to me."

But it was her peculiar physicality, her tendency to stay in an in-between state of outstretched limbs (never entirely flexed, never entirely folded), her criss-crossing the stage with a sense of empowerment that had me watch her to the last minute.

Her exhaustion, if not to say, her possible suffering, did not catch my interest, even though it might have existed. It could not overshadow the looping, the vitality without bounds that filled the stage. There is this rock energy, this loud-mouthed appropriation of the space when Lecavalier dances, the nearly aggressive aliveness which seems to say to the audience: "I am on stage, the stage is mine, and I am having a great time!".

When talking to people who are not regular dance or performance goers, I notice how the element of exertion is important, how the conflation of physicality with exertion seems to be a given fact.

The body has to be exerted to produce exhaustion and the viewer is subsequently gratified.

The gaze on the body is more on "work-out", than on "what and how does it work on".

It seems as though the gaze we put on a body on display is tainted by expectations for our money's worth, in the literal sense. We need to see the body "working", so we feel that we have received the rightful equivalent of our payment. It appears to me that an untrained audience, conditioned to a capitalist sense of exchange, often has difficulties grasping the idea of a show that does not "show off". It feels short-changed.

Another conceivable possibility is that of the exhausted body as a sign of extraordinary work, of excellence. A somewhat fascist understanding of the Übermensch shimmering through when we observe the never-ending pirouettes of a ballerino, or follow the complicated flow of a contemporary dancer's floor sequence. A Leni Riefenstahl - sequence of "Olympia" (1936) that is being triggered as soon as we cast our eyes on a Meg Stuart/Damaged Goods dancer?

Up to this point my thinking solely concentrated only on the spectator's observation and critical faculties. I neglected the spectators' own body. In light of current research into mirror neurons, the preference for physical exertion to be displayed in dance might lie in the spectators' own need to be activated by the movement they witness.

A spectator's body enters the theatre with an expectation to be moved all the while being seated. And when this does not happen, the spectator is confused.

To the ones who read these lines: are you a spectator?

Do you occasionally or regularly watch dance or performance shows?

Please write me, I have some questions for you: [exigeante@yahoo.fr](mailto:exigeante@yahoo.fr)