

unsung tongues

reflections on Jule Flierl's *Time Out of Joint*

Jule Flierl's *Time out of Joint*, which premiered at Sophiensaele on March 8 2023, choreographically proposes ideas around lapses, language, and lineage with/in political history. With performers Maria Walser, Mariagiulia Serantoni, R. Parvathi and Sonya Levin, the piece explores questions of the voice, utterance and sound in the complex, absurd and sometimes tragic arena of the body politic.

Commissioned by the choreographer to write about the work, I have experimented with a double-voiced text that shares my experience of the performance on the left hand side, whilst at the same time offering a more poetic reading of the piece, attempting to read the dance as though it were a book on the right hand column.

i didn't expect to enjoy this performance as much as i did. perhaps this sounds unprofessional, but so much of a performance experience depends on the context in which you see it. i was exhausted, it was freezing. i had just come from a very difficult dinner/conversation. my stomach was bloated and i knew i had to write about the piece which always puts me on edge. and of course, i arrived to find one of my nearest and dearest friends in the middle of an anxiety hole. so let's just say the situation wasn't set up for a great night.

but entering into the Festsaal of Sophiensaele, i saw a bunch of my Stream pals already seated and the jolly familiarity of our little writing collective uplifted me. we were also there to support fellow Stream writer and dearest friend, R. Parvathi who was performing that night. when she sidled up to us before the show to say hello, looking fabulous in a smart blue suit, i immediately cheered up. the audience was seated on either side of the stage, and the lights were pretty bright. Parvathi greeted us warmly but also slightly awkwardly - had the performance already begun? no. yes? maybe. while i waved to another friend, Parvathi somehow vanished. we sat down and settled in, i think the lights must have dimmed to let us know it was starting, but in my memory of the work, the lights were pretty bright the whole time. almost too bright as one friend mentioned, complaining about their eyes feeling sensitive after the show. (yet the photos from the dress rehearsal look dark). another friend was bemoaning about how vulnerable and exposed she felt being placed and lit up "on-stage" as an audience member. i didn't mind, i felt present and part of the performance. i was ready to be pulled into theatre and leave my weird damp personal life behind.

the story begins with the audience as a cup, a valley, an alley of watching trees. in the middle of the story is a black table in the middle of the stage in the middle of the audience. before it starts, the story begins casually enough. the microphones hanging around the space promise us more stories to come, paying homage to all that is unsaid. then, the story begins all over again with an audience member who is actually a performer standing up loudly, but not with her voice. her body is loud. and the heels of her opinionated, shouting boots announce the beginning with an authoritative voice as she stomps down the tiered seating. and so, the dance starts itself with the feet applauding themselves, commanding our attention as her arms clutch at sentences (which simply refuse) so instead her hands and eyes grab us, silently stating: hear ye hear ye! the story continues with the unuttered awkward lapse of language. the performer is announcing endlessly the exact thing she cannot say. her whole body cannot say it, so she jolts and exclaims exactly that. she convulses consonants and spits out limbs and sounds from the corner of her tilted smile. she stretches out the moment just before the joke arrives and so the joke is never not arriving until we are quite uncomfortably entranced. eventually, words come out but i can't remember them, i only remember her virtuosic body dancing out something very stiff, very important and very ridiculous - bleeding pomp.



the opening solo by Maria Walser immediately grabbed me as she stood up suddenly from the audience seating to announce something important, and yet no words came out. only then did i spot Parvathi sitting casually in the back row of the audience, and i assumed the other two performers were also seated around us. Walser descended the tribune and made her way onto the stage with a skilfully executed dance, chucking her arms and legs about in this comic, but loosely controlled way, whilst also on the verge of saying something. a dance of anticipation, of dramatic pause before enunciation, a dance composed entirely of that moment before the speaker says the final thing that will win the applause. her dance felt to me like juggling words instead of balls, but in slow motion with a lot of force, and instead of throwing the balls up, you're throwing them horizontally. later, another friend who had also seen the piece, spoke about how she loved this opening too, seeing Maria Walser's dance technique and training come out in this super lazy way. that's how she put it - "lazy". she added that this skill disguised as laziness was also present (but in a very different way) in the closing solo by Sonya Levin, which involved more talking and improvised interactions with the audience. but i get ahead of myself.

the rest of the performers, Sonya Levin, R. Parvathi and Mariagiulia Serantoni eventually came out of the audience and joined Maria Walser onstage in a choreography that managed to be both sharp and loose, offering a movement quality of rhythmically throwing out sharp gestures and curious facial expressions, like a wonky but exacting clock. the sound of a metronome began and on beat, the dancers threw out poses that fell way short of 'fashion' and landed more in the category of grotesque authority. all the while, their eyes were rhythmically landing on various individuals in the audience, pulling us into their cryptic communication, with a humorous and slightly reprimanding glare.

this collective choreography, which took place around and on the table, successfully performing to both sides of the audience, was rhythmic and hypnotising. it was made more effective by recorded extracts from various political speeches being introduced into the soundscape, situating themes of the work by evoking the performance of political speakers. i was aware of the way that the technique of timing in speech-giving was resonant in the choreography. the science and skill of creating a seductive effect of language, such as when and how to pause or exactly which word to emphasize, was somehow distilled into a choreographic strategy.

then time kicks in, and the other stories sneak punctually onto stage with weird glances. a metronome starts, cosmic ominous Time has entered, and quickly undresses to become Rhythm. Rhythm invites the stories to stutter onto stage in unison. on beat, the dancers become a quietly preaching choir. the story is now a private joke, a public wink, an underhand comment, an unwanted touch. the story is now an octagon, an octopus, eight pairs of eyes circling the stage that is circling the eyes. i am reading a subtle book that pitches itself as humour, but all of the empty gaps make me suspect it is actually a tragedy and it makes my smile sad. the story is really going outside the room now and into the world, so...it's getting pretty big. ghostly voices of real people start spitting down upon us, and i already know i'm not going to catch all the references in this book. but it's okay, i'm sure there's an index and in any case, the performers are very confident and convince me that i'm safe in their unintelligible certainty. they gather together on and around the table, speeching their bodies outwards towards everyone, words echoing in their gestures, their eyes, the shapes of their jaws. an iron laded voice entered the story a little while ago and now the page is stuck on her. so the performers sit around the table to solve it - i mean - dissolve it and by opening their throats, they widen each syllable and let meaning faaallllllll out as their tongues echo other in succession.

after this effective quartet, the dance sort of collapsed on itself, going into different directions. R. Parvathi offered a strong performance, full of vitality and vulnerable authority, introducing a version of herself and providing us with a bit of context around her own context. she shared some personal concerns, such as the ways in which the growing right wing Fascism in her home country of India makes her angry. she managed to speak to both sides of the room in this rousing speech and even got the audience to participate in a chant of resistance. this idea of chanting was present throughout her solo, as the other performers repeated almost every sentence of her speech - doing something interesting with the idea of the singular voice and the multiple voice, possibly proposing ways in which one person's story lives on in the mouths of many.

prior to R. Parvathi's solo moment, Mariagiulia Serantoni took to the mic to shout what sounded like a song or speech in Italian, activating the sculptural set-up of various mic stands and brightly coloured hanging microphones situated on one side of the stage. although brief, this moment brought me into an affective space where memories of being at a rock show and political demos collided. once more i was brought into that tender space of social politics and performance practice.

the four came back to sit casually around the table as Sonya Levin slowly closed the work with an improvised and seductively (sometimes whispered) contemplation on the politics of sexuality. breathing heavily into the mic, provocatively removing her fellow performers' shoes, kneeling on the floor and bending over whilst emitting small groans (which reminded me of either a private moment of masturbation or having seriously bad period pains) - she turned up the volume on whatever discomfort had already been evoked throughout the piece.



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the creepy conference is done so, the stories satellite out from the table into the stage to stamp down all that was lost and lifted. each in their own way, they push the absurd word-worlds down into the ground, burying what will inevitably arise again in some future monster's mouth. but for now, the feet tend to this moment and space. and then my reading stumbles a bit; distracted, the book loses the thing that i thought might a plot. a performer reads out a shouting speech into the mic - am i at a rock concert or a demo? it's in a language i don't understand, which makes the moment both important and unimportant, so my brain briefly leaves the room only to come back and find suddenly we have a new book. a book in a book. the new story is introduced to us by a performer who now offers us a legible meal. she is angry. after almost an hour of cryptic half-utterances, we are now given a clean window. she is pronouncing, announcing, clear as a bell - speaking to us while the others echo, singing back the clarity of her window in case we missed something. the story is now a song, a call and response, a very old song of back and forth, distributing itself evenly as it moves between the me and the us. this book has another shadow book, a double print, a second choral voice just beneath the singular voice. our ears are bouncing between the singular and the choral, and i briefly find a place to rest in.

although, that being said, another friend told me she felt relieved during this moment. this friend felt the rest of the piece to be so intensively virtuosic and performatively demanding that by the time Sonya Levin began sighing into the mic whilst the other performers relaxed around the table into stillness, she was relieved to see the performers in a moment of what she perceived as authentic rest. myself, on the other hand, felt the tension increase in this solo, which i assumed was different each night. the night that i watched she interacted with the audience with a deft skill, making sly and clever little comments to the crowd with the craft of a seasoned performer, discussing (somewhat cryptically and not always audibly) the histories of certain political female figures in Russian history and their relationship to sex and sexuality.

whatever discomfort the audience may or may not have been feeling about the curious, lurching performance composed of oddly-timed gaps, this closing scene punctuated the evening as she asked an audience member to tie her up with the cords of one of the mics.

the dramaturgy of the whole work was strange, as strange as the movement vocabulary itself, which was defined by stops and starts, awkward pauses and stretched out glances. the program notes told us that: "The performers Sonya Levin, R. Parvathi, Maria Walser and Mariagiulia Serantoni invoke and exorcise the spoken and unspoken performance heritage that influential female* political speakers have left them." i felt there was a lot of subtext, a lot of care and consideration given to the different histories and political contexts of each performer, possibly filtered through the choreographic practice of Jule Flierl. i don't know if i could say i have a firm grasp on what exactly that subtext might be, but i don't know if this performance wanted to offer the audience a firm grasp on anything. it certainly made me think of politicians and speeches from my own historical context, and their passionate empty words. in a similar way to the progression of a political rally, the performance felt a little too long for me, and i think for some other folks, too. perhaps an interval would have been supportive, possibly giving more space and structure for the dramaturgy to collapse into. (if that's what the dramaturgy was trying to do). i couldn't quite figure out if the dance was doing or undoing, announcing or un-announcing and for me, this was powerful. there was a strange energy of negation through production and the tension of this discomfort i felt to be provocative in a creepy way. creepy in a confusing way. confusing in a clear way. clear in a comic way. comic, in a tragic way.

*and then! another book slipped
in. stories in stories. whip
turn. the flail of procession
cuts a line in half and now
we're on another planet. hey,
hello. a totally different story
doused in hot sauce, semen
and liberation. in this story,
politics and sex meet under
the table, both are breathing
heavily and whispering terrifying
propositions of what exactly
emancipation might look like,
feel like, taste like. an amplified
cock in a sock features quite
prominently in this story. (i
mean, you can't talk politics
without bringing a big dick in
the room, can you?) my ears
are burning so i can't grasp
everything in this story. a tender
line is drawn and sometimes
crossed and the intimacy
of politics get a provocative
light shined up on it, human
desires hiding in corners of law.
language is stripped, teased
and tied up.
the story ends softly, but just
as abruptly as it began. and
with all the discomfort, humour,
strange gestures and twisted
tongues, glancing faces and
disturbing eye-catches, i'm left
sad. it's a sad book, and i read
my grief in this story that gives
shape to the vicious emptiness
of political vocabulary. the
tongues of this dance bring my
thoughts to the nation-state
attached to my passport and
the injustices folded into those
little pages. i walk out of the
cup both lifted by the comedy
and dampened by the tragedy
through the compressed reality
that this book-dance has
brought to a very quiet corner
of my mouth.*



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Concept, Choreography: Jule Flierl
Choreography, Performance: Maria Walser, Mariagiulia Serantoni,
R. Parvathi and Sonya Levin
Dramaturgy: Luise Meier
Sound, Research: Edka Jarzab
Scenography: Vera Pulido
Light Design: Sandra E. Blatterer, Juri Rendler
Costumes: Giulia Paolucci
Production: Alexandra Wellensiek