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Between Body and Spirit: An Interview with Leszek Bzdyl Barbara Świąder

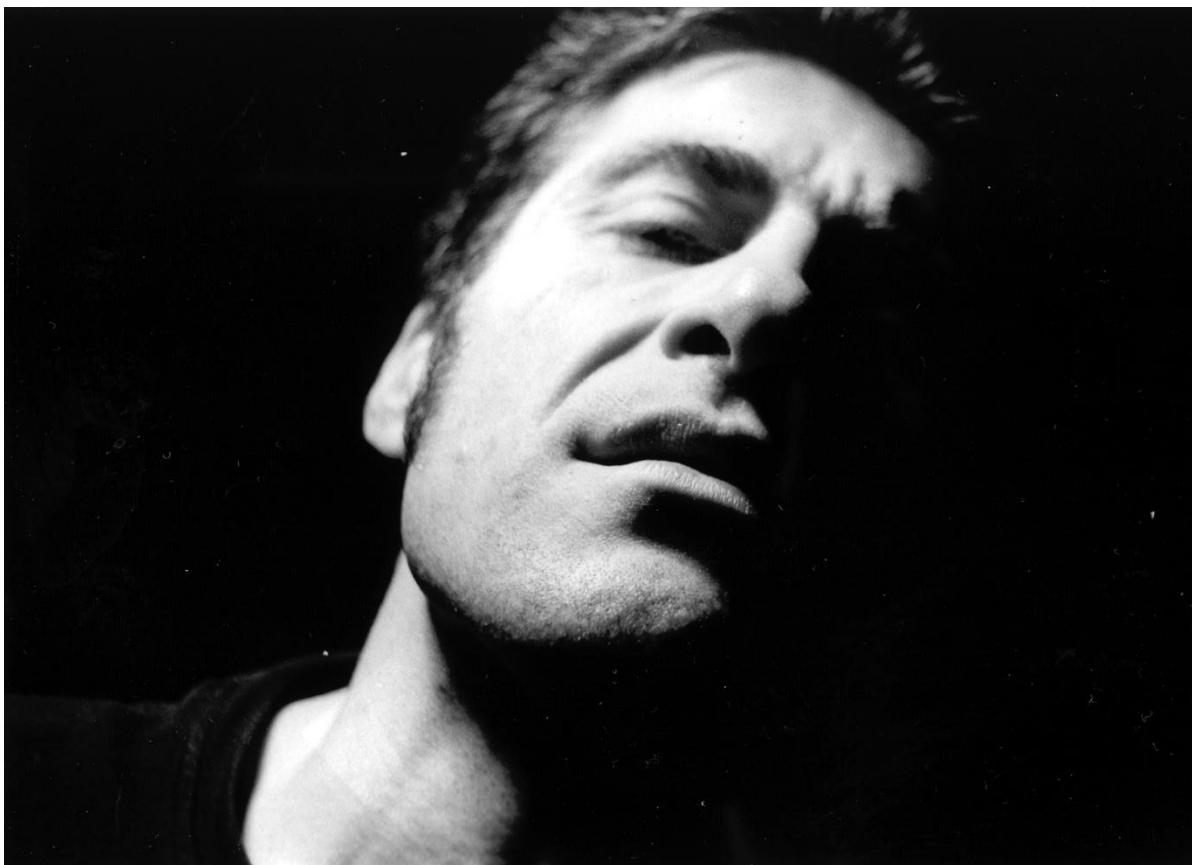
Barbara Świąder: In your work with [Dada von Bzdülów Theatre](#), you reach for a variety of theatrical styles and conventions. For a number of years now you have been successfully eluding artistic labeling, not just as a director but also as an actor, dancer, and mime. Is it a conscious choice on your part?

Leszek Bzdyl: It's a consequence of my bad luck in that I have never had a mentor. I had many teachers whom I admired, but I've never met a "guru," someone I wanted to follow in a creative path. I did not see, nor was I aware of, the type of theatre I wanted to make. I had to make it up, find it in myself. For a long time, what I was actually doing was not congruent with what I had envisioned for myself. I was always worried about stylization—I didn't like it. I've tried to escape commitment to a style, to being named as its representative. Whenever I read descriptions of my work, I found the author "off" somehow. There was always much more to it than the writer had noticed. I was always in a state of rebellion against one clear image. I saw artists becoming slaves to the constraints of their most successful work. When the public buys into something, artists try to replicate their success by copying or otherwise elaborating on their own work, which was best and original only the first time anyway. For me theatre is a constant workshop, it has to lead to my development as an artist. I am not interested in "performances of a lifetime." In that, I feel kinship to [Woody Allen](#) who has said that he doesn't want to be immortalized by his art but by *not dying*. Theatre Dada is a place to play, not to produce masterworks. It is supposed to inspire new characters and situations, based on what happened before, yes, but with a completely new take on it, regardless of whether it will be for better or worse.

B.Ś. Your ensemble is still considered a hybrid—a dance troupe and a theatre putting on a spectacle, a dance, and a performance, maybe a happening? You are perceived to belong to the sphere of alternative theatre but also to the contemporary dance scene. You could perform at almost any Polish festival . . .

L.B. Dada is a repertory theatre. When I was establishing it, I was consciously avoiding the label "off-theatre."¹ We have a repertory; our actors work and learn, polish their craft. We are a theatre of the fringe—we are professional, yet we don't consider what we do to be a "product." I suppose, we are functioning as part of a very broadly understood "Off," next to people like [Cinema](#), [Usta Usta](#), [Body Snatchers](#), meaning professionals doing auteur, unique theatre. When it comes to the Polish alternative, who knows what that means, just a handful of ensembles, it seems. It's not like in France, where every city can boast dozens of independent theatres. In Poland we are slowly gaining "off" centers [no pun intended] like Wytwornia or [Le Madame](#) in Warsaw, where professional actors work independently on an "off" repertoire that can translate into an "official" scene. It's beginning to work in a normal way; cheap, experimental work eventually feeds into high-cost state theatre.

¹ "Off-theatre" [*teatr offowy*] is a Polish term for what is typically called in English "alternative" or "fringe" theatre.



Leszek Bzdyl in *Strategy*. Photographer: Dorota Walentynowicz. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Dada von Bdźülów.



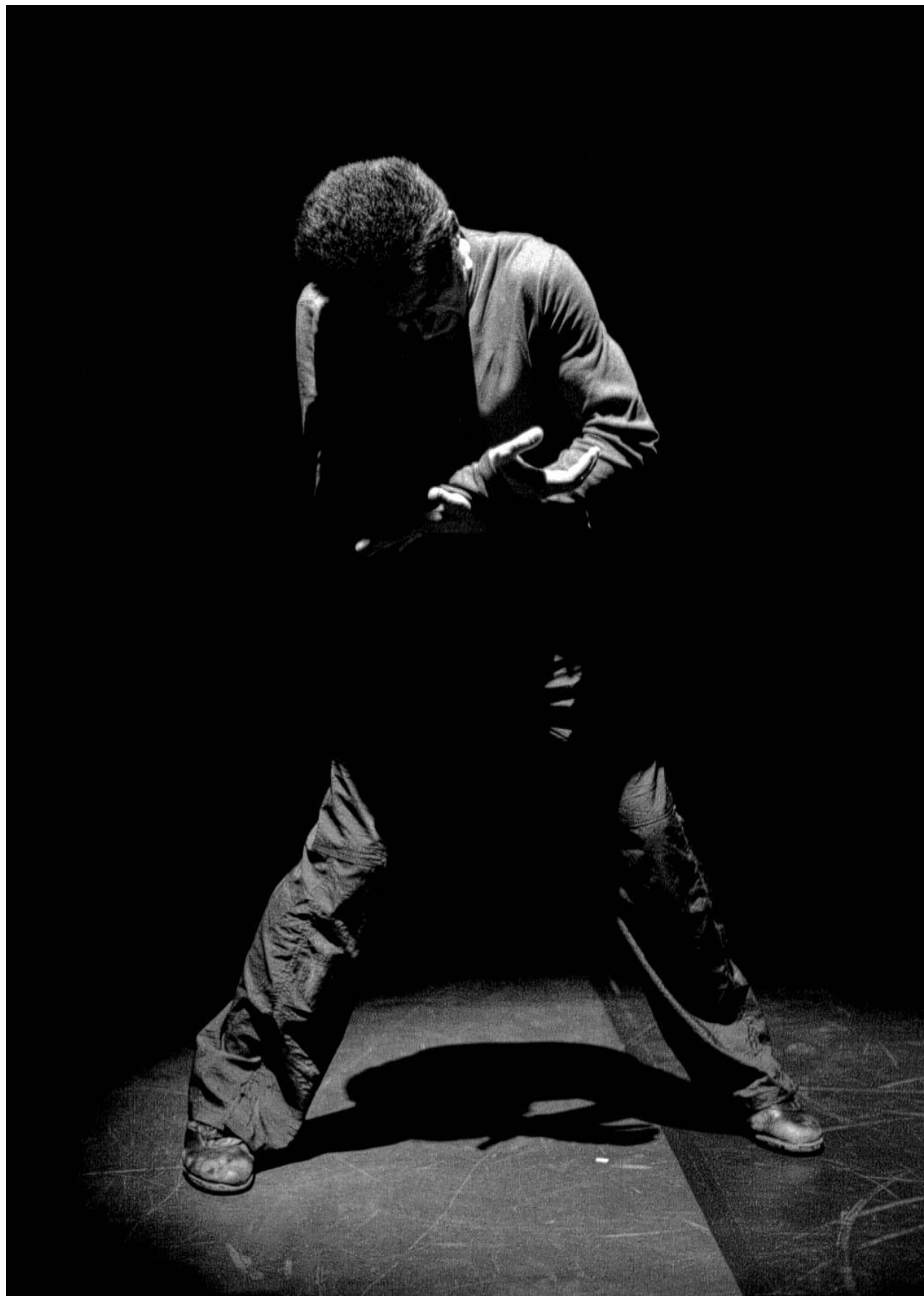
Leszek Bzdyl in *Uff...*. Photographer: Dorota Walentynowicz. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Dada von Bdźülów.



Leszek Bzdyl and Aurora Lubos in *Uff...* . Photographer: Dorota Walentynowicz. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Dada von Bdzilów.

Dada is not a clique of loony friends who hang out together in a basement creating their own reality. We talk *about* reality and come to certain conclusions. There is the founder, the “Padrone,” who offers his thoughts, the rest either agree or not, fill it out with their own stuff, and we’ve got something really ripe there. I’ve always been most satisfied with performances that were a total surprise to me. I was not completely sure what exactly I was taking part in, there were still things I didn’t understand, but everything fit together, and that was what I was after. On the other hand, when I participated in something clearly defined, analyzed, and prepared, when I knew exactly what to expect, in the end there was a letdown. It seemed like I was going through ritual movement. My temperament no longer lets me go over the same exercise; I must always move in a new direction or I become dead creatively. In the same way, I have to push myself as a performing medium, so it [my body] doesn’t get stuck, doesn’t go to sleep. After two years of doing *Magnolia* and *Several Witty Observations (à la Gombrowicz)*, I feel I can’t do it any more, I don’t want to perform it anymore, because I’m just following a lifeless pattern. Now I need time to miss it again. In this profession, I carefully observe myself and I don’t do many things too many times.

B.Ś. You’ve been performing under the banner of Dada from the very beginning, since it was during your studies in *Wrocław University*’s Department of History that you founded the Dada Tractor Theatre. This term, which carries particular cultural connotations, seems to reflect your attitude toward a world in which words no longer serve the goal of communication between people . . .



Leszek Bzdyl in *Uff ...* . Photographer: Piotr Wołoszyk. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Dada von Bdzülów.

L.B. The meaning of the word [dada] has been evolving for me through the years. At first, there was no concept, just intuition. I was rebelling against theatre that was politically under the sign of the Cross, of martyrdom and religious-national struggle. In the eighties, in Wrocław, there was a specific alternative climate: Orange Alternative, Mickey Mausoleum, and Luxus. That was a surrealist-Dadaist movement, a protest against a world which constantly grinds out slogans. Several years later, as a tribute, I put on the play *Strategy*, based on the lyrics of Lech Janerka. At that time all of us were after a certain attitude toward the world that embraced struggle for individuality, for life in color, for the possibility of jumping around like a chess horse, in a nonlinear manner, without dire consequences.

B.Ś. When did the realization of fully using your body as an artist happen? When did you become a dancer?

L.B. That was a slow evolution. It might seem improbable, but I don't think I truly danced until I turned thirty-three. Before then, there was some sort of body movement/play, whether in terms of physical theatre, mime, or Wojtek Misiuro's Teatr Ekspresji (Theatre of Expression), or some other individual experiments of Dada. It was during the play *Old-fashioned Comedy* when I finally felt in full possession of body language I could call "dance." The necessary work happened in Randall Scott's *Father*, where I had to leave my own head and jump into somebody else's choreography. That's when I left behind my tricks and bad habits and I simply began to dance. My acting no longer dominated my dancing. Then there was my duet with Aurora Lubos, *Uff . . .*, where we achieved communication built exclusively from movement. Dancing was no longer serving the event, dancing became the event. The road was long, but the base had been there in my three years of mime training with Henryk Tomaszewski. There, however, the acting sensibility was different, it was about creating a world of illusion. That has a different meaning from dance, which does not create a story; rather, it "paints" space, fills it dynamically with rhythm, and builds an abstract web. The more precise the movement the more abstract the dance.

The body has always fascinated me. When I was a child, I would watch short dance forms—modern, neoclassical—on TV to see all those people in body stockings. I remember being deeply moved by a dance étude with Danuta Kisiel and Gerard Wilk. I was fascinated [by dance] but had no idea what to do with it. We lived right by the Polytechnic dormitories. As a young thirteen-year-old intellectual, I liked to go there and sit on a bench with a book in hand. One day, I saw the dorm door swing open, and a troupe of a dozen young people in black leotards spilled out onto the green and started practicing. Those were mimes from the ensemble Gest (Gesture). I was speechless. As a young man thrown into the Catholic vortex of sin and guilt, I could not make peace with my own body; all the same, sensuality had always had a strong pull on me. My weekly trek from the flat to the church was almost symbolic, since on my way to Mass I often had to pass by young coeds sunbathing half-naked in the windows of the dormitory. I was going through an internal battle for my Catholic soul . . .

I remember vividly one Holy Tuesday when I saw *The Knights of King Arthur* by Henryk Tomaszewski. That was the first time I wept in a theatre, not because of the tragic story, but because of the drama on stage and an eruption of emotions that happens through the use of the body, through that kind of aesthetic. This great artist had his audience in spasms.

Already at the student theatre Tubb II, where I began my serious engagement with theatre, training was based on body movement in the manner of Grotowski: movement on the stage, the body in motion in space, movement improvisation, embodiment, all sorts of physicality in our engagement with an exercise partner. The first performance I authored also attempted physical theatre, a play of movement against text.

B.Ś. You polished your craft at the Wrocław Pantomime of Henryk Tomaszewski and later in Gdańsk's Teatr Ekspresji, which offered a completely different aesthetic, although its founder, Wojciech Misiuro, also came out of Tomaszewski's Pantomime. What did you learn as a dancer and an actor from those two "schools" of movement and performance?



Leszek Bzdyl in *Strategy*. Photographer: Piotr Wołoszyk. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Dada von Bdźülów.



Julia Mach and Katarzyna Chmielewska in *Eden*. Photographer: Małgosia Śmiejkowska. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Dada von Bdźülów.



Anna Steller in *Juicy Flesh*. Photographer: Przemek Wiśniewski. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Dada von Bdźülów.



Julia Mach, Katarzyna Chmielewska, Ula Wróbel, and Anna Steller in *Eden*. Photographer: Małgosia Smiejkowska. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Dada von Bdzülów.

L.B. Those were all different phases of getting some experience under my belt: first, underground student theatre, then craft polishing at Tomaszewski, finally, the thrill of acting at Misiuro's—a quick succession of being immersed in very different things.

Pantomime gave me precision. Technique. My dancing still has a lot of pantomime elements. With Tomaszewski, what was important was not to “play” a thing—a glass of water, for example—but to show how your body reacts to that glass. An idea of counterpoint within a body that is a whole. That means if your right hand's little finger is engaged, so is your left foot's toe, and so on. Every part of your body must be sensitive to the space it's in and to changes in that space. Tomaszewski's training comprised a juxtaposition of action and relaxation, action and relaxation. . . . This way of perceiving your body as a whole being infused my dancing in that I create characters that are not about a physical feat, but about a body that is in rhythm, that is reacting to stimuli. A basic rule of pantomime says that until your body achieves its own rhythm, you can't generate a character. Contact of body and ground is of great importance; to make a gesture your body has to first ground itself, support itself. We do not walk because we have a concept of walking, but because there is gravity. The pure physics of movement are important for pantomime.

Everything I gained at Tomaszewski's was then condensed and intensified at Teatr Ekspresji, which gave me a sense of the stage, of the importance of spectacle. We performed a lot, often at prestigious places—stages all around Poland and Europe. When I came to Misiuro, I was twenty-six—the ideal age to perform. I was incredibly prolific, confident in my abilities, even arrogant. But my pathological courting of the audience helped me; so did my strutting around the stage. It all culminated in the play *The Idols of Perversion*. Misiuro saw dance as full of passion, vitality, physicality, the aesthetics of the human body. His timing at the end of the gloomy and sad 1980s was impeccable. All of a sudden the stage burst into color; on it were people not ashamed of their bodies, people exuding sexuality. Bodies were liberated. There were almost too many of them on the stage; they spilled out into the audience. That was exactly what I needed after the neurotic, emaciated characters of Tomaszewski. Teatr Ekspresji stroked my ego, but after a year of play, a different kind of virus attacked us. . . . That theatre was incredible as long as it was in the process of climbing up, as long as it was innocent. Once on top you realized that it was also a product, and we started

selling out on the stage and off. We airbrushed ripped muscles when someone didn't work out enough. Again I felt a rupture between my soul and my body (which Teatr Ekspresji worshipped to such a degree that in a year my chest had grown three times as wide). A certain balance between the Dionysian and the Apollonian was seriously off. I wanted something more, something spiritual, but there was no source available. The theatre was all about SED: senses, emotions, and desires. And I, at that time, was studying Gnosticism [laughter]. And so during rehearsals our disagreements got more and more heated, and I had to leave. What I wanted could not be contained in pantomime or physical theatre; it wasn't enough. I felt that my body was still blocked, utilized for the purpose of technique or aesthetics. I felt a lack.

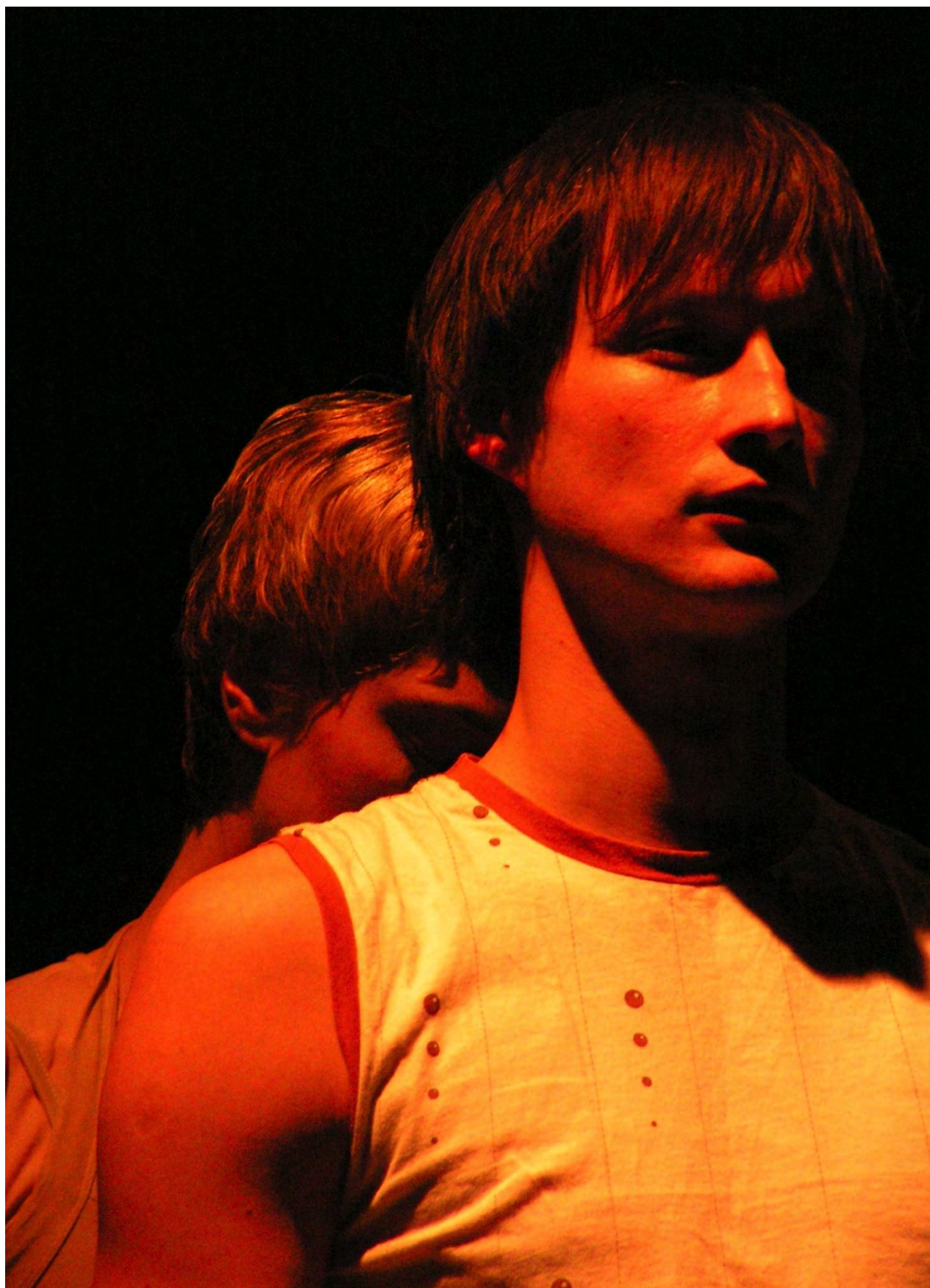
B.Ś. You started thinking then about your own theatre, which came into being in 1993?

L.B. For two years I trained with Teatr Ekspresji and experienced a kind of evolution: from typically pantomime-based eurhythmics, plasticity of movement, to something more all-encompassing, an "almost" dance. That was enough to give me the foundation for looking for my own expression, which meant shedding the excess of miming, rather, trying to combine the movements into a phrased dance. When Kasia Chmielewska came to my session at Teatr Ekspresji, she already saw something resembling dancing, not pantomime. She was trying to escape ballet, and my ideas intrigued her. The serendipity of her being my first partner in my own ensemble was crucial; without her, I would most likely have gone in a different direction. After leaving Teatr Ekspresji, I knew I was done with professional theatre: no more bureaucracy, administrators, and institutional politics. For a while I thought I should teach, since I seemed incapable of working with directors. I started teaching fourteen-year-olds in Gdańsk's Youth Palace and I simply fell in love with them. Among the thirty people who went through the training, eight worked with me for several years, and six are still working professionally. These young people were creative, sensitive, pure, and heartwarming. It was a return to innocence and honesty for me. After six months, Kasia Chmielewska and I sent out a call for adult actor-dancers and several interesting people showed up. We had our Dada, small and large. Everything started falling into place just kind of spontaneously. In 1993, luck had it that we were supposed to go to Berlin to a theatre exchange to represent Gdańsk. There were a lot of major ensembles there from prestigious schools, and we were just a small amateur youth group. The theme of the festival was Tabori, whose *Peep Show* amazed me, and that's how we put together our first show, and that's how we became a theatre.

From the perspective of experience, I now see that founding a theatre means about three years of training, and three years of gaining ground "in the market," working on new shows notwithstanding. My teacher at the Pantomime Theatre, Marek Oleksy, once told me: "You'll be a mime in three years; first you have to learn how to speak." He was right. Our theatre made its mark only in 1996, with *The Man Who Lied and Never Was, Never Will Be, So It Isn't*. Later we did *Lapiti vs. The Rest of the World*, and *Old-fashioned Comedy*—the performances I consider best of that period for their full realization of our unique language in the form of a large spectacle. We were poised to take off, but the economy in Poland crashed and everything changed. There was no money for festivals, audiences had no money, and in reality there were no places to perform anymore. We all had to look for work, some of us got into international productions, and others partnered up with outside dancers.

B.Ś. Dada's plays form a certain creative path; from large spectacles in elaborate staging to pure dance and abstracted movement.

L.B. Already in *Lapiti* and in *Comedy* our movements began to crystallize. We became more confident in what we were doing, but also the audiences were ready for that form of communication. Audiences were changing. Doing those things earlier would have been like shooting at a target that wasn't even there. In reality, we stealthily crossed the line between the theatre of literature, characters, and drama into a theatre without roles, where all we had were stage beings. It was impossible to achieve it in one big leap, just like we had to take the world in slowly and not gag ourselves. We always have to be aware that our work should go to the next level.



Julia Mach and Filip Szatarski in *Eden*. Photographer: Karol Pisarkiewicz. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Dada von Bdziulów.



Kasia Chmielewska in *Magnolia*. Photographers: Iwona and Jarek Cieslikowscy. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Dada von Bdźülów.

B.Ś. Dada's almost thirty plays compose different phases of an ongoing dialogue you're having with your audience, which touches on tangible subjects. Your starting points in creating new staging are usually literary works. Tabori, Schwab, Vian, Müller, Gombrowicz – that's just a few of the writers you engage with.

L.B. The starting point is always a text, either belletristic or theoretical. Earlier on our productions had more features of a stage play. The staging was initiated by the text. With time it became more based on the intellectual underpinnings of the interplay between actors. I infuse myself with the author's words so that the material we're working on becomes richer and fuller. Plays come out of a certain intuition; they want to be *about* a subject. This intuition makes me look for authors with a gift for filling out the meaning, coloring the words. The author makes the pebble of an idea start rolling along. The writer asks us to enter a world in rehearsal, a world that has its own gravitational pull. He shows us a coherent vision of a world, which gives us characters, their movement, their psychology. We then must keep these characters on a short leash so they stay within the boundaries of that world. We must not allow a gesture that would break their reality. The integrity is not so much aesthetic, but dramatic, intellectual, and psychological. Since I was a kid, I've always devoured fiction—I get lost in it, I love chasing after it. And so my inspiration is literary first, but I consciously reject narrative. I run away from narrative structure. Rather, I depict a world without a beginning and without consequence. The way it is in a moment. A world that is in flux, which we're trying to surf like a giant wave. When we're weakened we go under, when we get stronger we pop up. Putting together all the pieces of a performance is like trying to achieve the state of "reality surfing." I cannot present the audience with a thesis; since by the time the performance is done the thesis is already stale. We have to be constantly attentive to ourselves and to others. We must keep trying to find our place in the blur of our world.

Our play *Eden* is devoid of any action, any lure. It is an hour and a half of watching the story of time disintegrating and floating away. Working on the play, I had a strong sense that people want to take a break from all the surrounding noise, although I was concerned about whether they'll be able to last through it. In the six performances we've had, only two people walked out; the rest allowed themselves to be hypnotized and flowed away together with us. Now, I am working on a performance that would concentrate on the clash between a rather pompous discussion about "reality" and the mortal vitality of a male. When I read the recent works of Baudrillard or Bauman, I have a feeling that they are seized by nostalgia for the world, as they understood it at one point. Yet it turned out that there are no lasting answers and so now reality is slipping away from them again.

B.Ś. Teatr Dada von Bzdülów comes closest in its expressive language to the German dance theatre tradition. What is your sense of your ensemble's roots, whom do you feel kinship with? Which tradition do you consider to still be vital and relevant today?

L.B. Of course, it is German theatre which is culturally and intellectually our closest relative. Kurt Joos, Pina Bausch, expressionistic dance. That's where Henryk Tomaszewski also started; he was in the sphere of German influence. In Poland before World War II that aesthetic of dance had its native performers; after the war it was lost. Pantomime survived; it was probably considered by the Communist authorities to be an innocuous form of expression. Still, the roots of both traditions were the same.

More and more, I realize that Brechtian tradition and the effect of distancing is crucial to our work. We also break down the structure of a theatrical performance; we challenge the audience to abandon sentimentality and any identification with the stage, to be conscious of themselves as people watching us acting things out for them. When I examine our work, starting with *Old-fashioned Comedy*, in terms of how we treated temporality, literature on stage, how we constructed the text of our performances, I realize how much we are a part of the whole postdramatic movement. I'm reading Lehmann about postdrama now, and I see that we've done a lot already in that vein. Pina Bausch established a movement that later can be seen to lead in many directions: the experiments of Peter Wilson, English physical theatre, Romeo Castellucci and his Societas Raffaello Sanzio. . . . All of these are actions that involve dance to some degree, but mostly, they are about a dialogue with the audience, or with some idea. It is not the dancer, her technique, virtuosity, or sensitivity to music that is at the center. We are admiring a *character* that is moving from a distinct state of

mind, or a dramatic point. This is closest to contemporary theatre; it demands a similar kind of perception. Today, we need to look at theatre from the perspective of its symbols, its space and rhythm, and not only literature.

B.Ś. The early 1990s were a time of an incredible dance boom in Poland. Just a few years after the collapse of the Communist regime, dance ensembles, festivals, and workshops were popping up in whole bunches. What do you think was the reason for that eruption?

L.B. I think it might have been a moment of spontaneous expression of bodies that had been liberated from the Communist gloom and oppression. They were finally able to show and to convey that there exists this something called Pleasure. There was also the thrill of meeting peers from the West: the excitement of interacting with teachers from beyond the Iron Curtain, of speaking English. On occasion that seemed enough to call the workshop a success [laughter]. In the late 1980s at the Open Theatre Festival in Wrocław, half the theatres were dance ensembles from all over the world. We were all mesmerized by them. I remember a discussion with a Dutch ensemble that showed a particularly raw, animalistic dancing. One of the dancers suggested that we didn't have that kind of movement in Poland, because we were a repressed society. . . . A state of physical oppression, societal taboos, could be seen in us at first glance. At that time the condition of Polish theatre was pitiful. There was no viable opposition anymore, so what was there to talk about? There was confusion about what to show and for whom? So that whole dance craze was a kind of antidote. Everyone started dancing and talking incessantly about their dancing. Not too clear why and for what purpose. That wave of excitement had to crest and eventually fall. No one talked about art but everyone danced. Even if he didn't consciously dance, sooner or later he found out he had been dancing nevertheless. There was a need to think about what dance was, anyway.



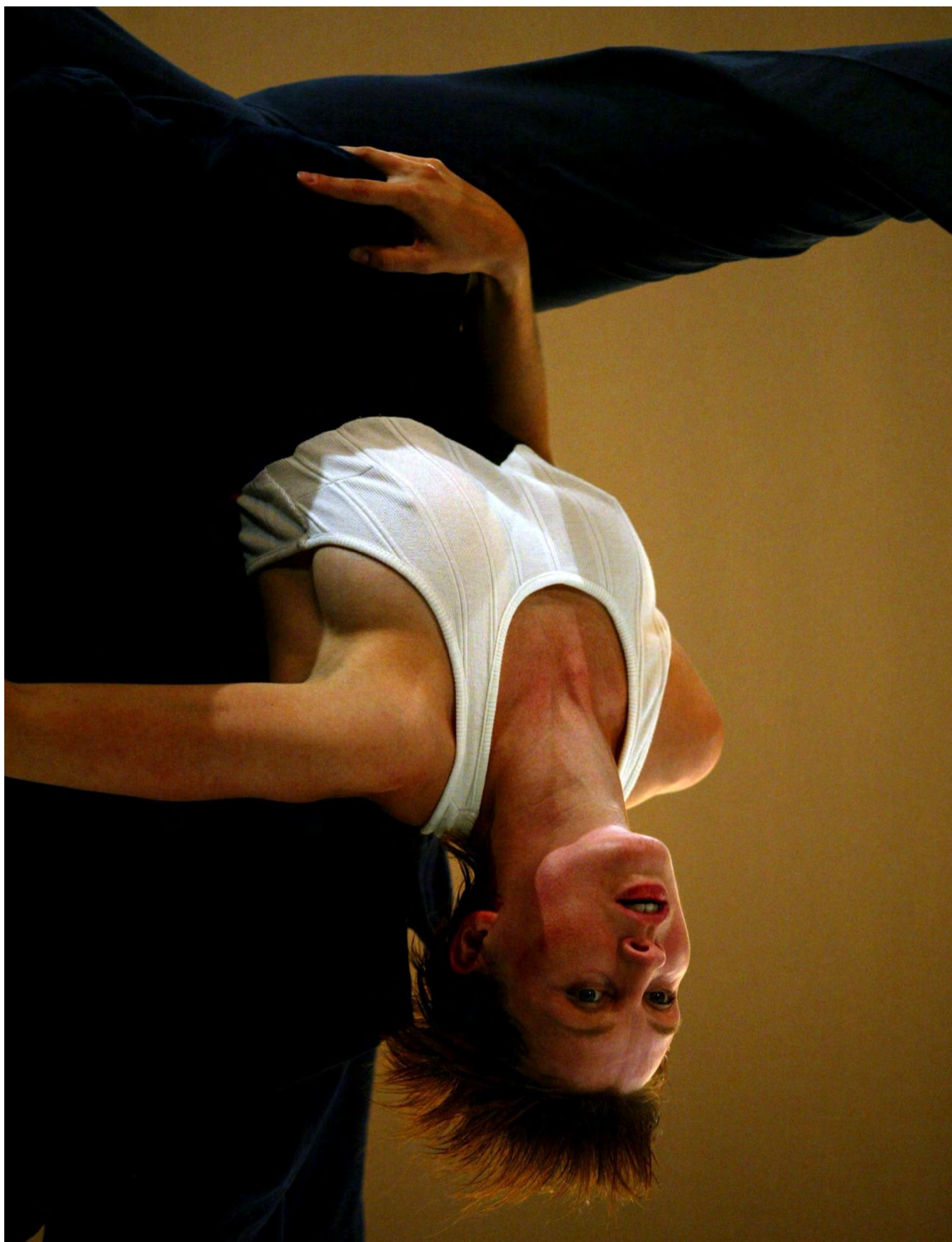
Kasia Chmielewska and Leszek Bzdyl in *Magnolia*. Photographers: Iwona and Jarek Cieslikowscy. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Dada von Bdzülów.



Leszek Bzdyl in *Several Witty Observations (à la Gombrowicz)*. Photographers: Iwona and Jarek Cieslikowscy. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Dada von Bdźülów.



Rafal Dziemidok and Kasia Chmielewska in *Several Witty Observations (à la Gombrowicz)*. Photographers: Iwona and Jarek Cieslikowscy. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Dada von Bdźülów.



Kasia Chmielewska in *Several Witty Observations (à la Gombrowicz)*. Photographers: Iwona and Jarek Cieslikowscy. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Dada von Bdzülów.



Kasia Chmielewska in *Several Witty Observations (à la Gombrowicz)*. Photographer: Piotr Wołoszyk. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Dada von Bdzülów.

B.Ś. Indeed, what is dance to you?

L.B. There are a million definitions, and I really don't want to add to the score since we're already approaching the absurd. I know what dance is in the medium of theatre: it is a heightened sense of emotion, which requires expression through body movement in space. The body begins to dance when it is so stretched to the limit in its space that it can't be still anymore. That's my simple-minded theory. Perhaps it's wrong. . . .

Coming back to the subject of Polish dance, in time all of that activity – the festivals, the workshops – began to chase after its own tail; they didn't come up with anything new. We had performances on top of performances; still we were lacking an open serious discussion on dance. What is its relationship to philosophy, literature, theatre, and sociology? We need a meta-discourse. This Polish dancing must become a multi-layered experience. Otherwise, I'm afraid, it could become a hermetic art that matters only to a circle of initiates.

B.Ś. Do you believe Polish dance is at a standstill?

L.B. What I see is a collapse of formal structure in theatre, a collapse of abstract theatre. There is a chance for recovery in its association with contemporary visual arts and improvised music. This could produce new codes, which in connection to the body would be anchored by their visual quality and musico-formal experimentation. This would shift dance toward the fine arts. I also see a lack of theatre concerned with the aesthetics of the body – theatre that would care about what happens between a dancer's shoulder blades. This kind of work perfects the details of body movements and shows the smallest impulses that pass through the body. The spectrum of activity in an art form should be as wide as possible otherwise it will slowly die.



Leszek Bzdyl and Kasia Chmielewska in *Magnolia*. Photographers: Iwona and Jarek Cieslikowscy. Reproduced courtesy of Teatr Dada von Bdzülów.

Right now in Poland, we've got the search; we're tossing the deck of cards. The crisis of 1999–2000 convinced a lot of people that there was no future in Poland, and a whole "army" of trained dancers left for other European cities: for dance schools, for professional ensembles where some secured contracts. That meant a lot of Polish ensembles going bust. Thinking in terms of groups that worked together for years, that knew one another, that worked out their own language, was over. Economically, it proved unsustainable. Trying to keep an ensemble going proved artistically and financially frustrating. Now we're at a stage where independent, experienced artists are trying to create a new playing field—smaller flexible groups that are put together for specific projects. That's where I see the future going. We're done with the master-apprentice ideal; a partnership, collaborations, a meeting of like minds, is the new model. The new model has the effect of a distinct new quality—experimental, adventurous, sometimes bizarre—but always interested in new avenues of communication, of becoming part of a European dance community. I'm waiting for the moment when an "army" of educated young dancers will come back from the West, since only a handful of them will be able to work there to their full potential. They are still aliens there, only here can they build their distinct identity. They are going to be experienced yet hungry for work. I can see the signs already, certain places and a few people who indicate that a very interesting era is upon us. We are finally passing the novelty aspect of contemporary dance. It has become its own established genre, the media are finally talking about it in nonsensational terms; it's perceived as a component of Art in general. It's pretty standard, in other words.

B.Ś. Do you think that Polish dance has been able to create its own identity recognizable within the European dance scene?

L.B. I believe that our cultural codes are very specific, and yes, we are experienced as a kind of revelation in Europe. Dada is usually described as "raw emotionality on stage." Audiences perceive us as real living persons, not stylized figures. When Poles are engaged in foreign companies it is usually for their mistakenly conceived Slavic traits. (The Czechs, also Slavs, are so different from us. . . .) A sense of

emotional connectivity that we can offer is attractive to the audience. In performance, it is a technique, a language that we worked out by ourselves. No one ever believes me when I say that Dada is self-taught. I think that underneath it all, our bodies have all been influenced by a Grotowski sensibility, the experiments of Kantor, and Polish dramatic theatre, which always has been very physical and psychological. We do not have barriers; no talking heads. The Polish actor in general avoids artificiality. In effect, in our theatre there is a strange mixture of a conscious psychological effort with the unaffected acting of characters that wear their emotional lives on their sleeves. We employ body movement in our performances a lot. That is not the trend in Europe right now, but America loves it. Europe is fixated on conceptualism. The audience is put through the ringer trying to solve ciphers and hidden meanings. Anthropological theatre [such as that practiced by Grotowski, as well as Grotowski-influenced theatres like Gardzienice and Odinteatret] on the other hand, has been stuck in the same stage for thirty years. I do ponder sometimes whether European dance theatre is not indebted too much to the Grotowski method. I see on European stages the sort of exercises I did in my training years ago. They are at the stage of discovery, we've already moved on. Of course, it's still there, but at a different stage of development.

B.Ś. You belong to a very elite group of dancers who also work as choreographers in dramatic theatre. You've done choreography for over 40 plays with directors such as Piotr Cieplak, Jerzy Jarocki, Jacek Głomb. As a choreographer, but at the same time an individual artist, you come into a situation of a ready acting ensemble, you defer to the vision of the director . . .

L.B. I began my collaboration with dramatic theatre in 1993. Since then I've seen great changes. In the beginning, the thought of a choreographer coming into the theatre to work with "serious" actors generated chuckles and jokes about pointe shoes. They saw me as sadist who would torment them. Now they know that I am a partner in collaboration, someone who is particularly sensitive to one aspect of the performance. The director puts together the world of the play, takes care to stay consistent with an idea, a vision. My role is to solve problems in the sphere of the movement of their bodies. It became a new reality for Polish theatre since now we have several choreographers working regularly with dramatic ensembles: Jacek Owczarek, Rafał Dziemidok, Witek Jurewicz. People from the world of dance penetrate the world of theatre and are infusing it with a different sensibility. At the same time, they are benefiting as well, making their own acting deeper, and thus changing the nature of the dance world as well. It's obvious that there are some things that will not be done with actors that we do with professional dancers, for example, the physical risk aspect, the total consciousness of every movement that we strive for in Dada. We don't push them just to push them off the cliff. Rather, we are after that marvelous moment of flying off the cliff yourself unaware of the ground under your feet. A desperate quest to outdo the limits of one's body is not attractive to me as a subject. I'd rather not expose myself in this way. (It probably has something to do with my anxieties and neurosis.) Still, the theatre is an elastic place; it will accommodate many different experiences.

– *Translated by Eva Sobolevski*

Leszek Bzdyl is the founder and artistic director of the [Dada von Bzdülów Theatre](#) in Gdańsk. He has performed professionally on stage since 1987 and in 1993 founded Dada, where he directs, choreographs, and performs in most of the productions. So far, Dada has premiered nearly forty productions, including those mentioned in the interview, as well as, more recently, [Play It, or Seventeen Dances about Something](#); [Invisible Duets](#); [Le Sacre](#); [Caffe Latte](#); [Red Grass](#); [FRUU](#); and [Enclave 4/7](#). Bzdyl has cocreated more than a hundred theatre and dance projects, including, in addition to his projects with Dada, acting in and directing plays for dramatic theatres, as well as choreographing and/or providing stage movement direction for productions at theatres all over Poland. He also teaches modern dance and physical theatre workshops.

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