

In this episode, we speak to Sebastian Varra and Tamora Dinklage - two students from the Zentrum für Zeitgenössischen Tanz (ZZT)/ Centre for Contemporary Dance in Cologne. They talk about their evolving reflections in the pursuit of dance, and about exercising agency as students of dance, within and outside the framework of the 8th Tanzausbildung Biennale Stuttgart 2022.

Sebastian Varra and Tamora Dinklage share their current self-reflections and negotiations with choosing their path in dance, as final year Bachelors students and also in their journey in Schwerpunkt Tanzvermittlung. When speaking about what experience in the Biennale sticks out in their mind, Sebastian cherishes the encounter with a Ballet student from the Munich school which led to the realization that in her young age, she is also highly self-reflective and aware of her tense relationship with the Ballet form. For Tamora, the Biennale brought an understanding of each dance institution in Germany functions very differently and that dance education in the country has a wide range of ethos. [2:22 – 9:42]

Sebastian shares that their school, ZZT, focuses a lot on developing a critical reflective approach among their students, which aren't necessarily crucial in all other schools. Yet Sebastian is struck that the students themselves have profound insights and observations, and reflective questions that seem to come from experience and other knowledge systems. This was observed in the Students feedback and reflection sessions. [9:43 – 12:10]

Sebastian shares that they heard from another participant that the Biennale has enabled discussions, such that something that would not been said before in the scope of their institution's approach, is beginning to be articulated. They say, "There is also something in the air, going from one exchange to the other and crossing through a third one, and then you hear other conversations." Nicola compares this to crosspollination that bees enable, that strengthens the DNA and survival strategy of each flower because they are exchanging genetic material. Tamora feels that she expected these kind of conversations to be better woven into the Biennale's programme and organisational framework, rather than something participants have to actively seek out during meal times and other programmes. [12:11- 14:50]

Adding to the list of things that are missing in the Biennale, Tamora and Sebastian feel the need to mention that there are also students from their institution who aren't present in the Biennale. They point out that Inclusion is a term that seems to be indicated with the Biennale's themes of solidarity, sustainability and encounter, and wonder at how that corresponds with the decision of leaving someone behind. Each institution has very different ways to deal with who can come. Sebastian points out that this decision making is sometimes related to how the institution wants to represent its own work and artistry. [14:51 – 19:38]

Tamora expresses that the framework of classes and workshops is a mixed bag of practices, and yet she finds that their institution does not quite fit into some of the training offered at the Biennale. The ZZT works with contemporary dance. The 4 trainings in the mornings – two are ballet classes which is not their primary focus. The other trainings are titled contemporary classes – but in their perspective are more like modern dance. So there is a conflict between the name of the session and the training given within it. [19:40 – 23:20]

They reflect on the limited opportunities to be in dialogue with the teachers at the Biennale and hear their perspectives. Sebastian says, "Where are we going if we kept so separate? If the step of coming together is not reached, then it is not reflection of why we are here." [23:21 – 25:24]

What are the methods of sharing and exchange to be continuous and sustained? Acknowledging that there is need for safe space as students to speak about the pieces, Tamora asks regarding the Student's reflection sessions, "But why should one speak only about the pieces. There could be so many more layers - I would like to speak to the teachers, or with the choreographers of the pieces." This would enable much more relevant and sustained mingling through the week. Now she has put a lot of hope on one session on the last day of the Biennale. [25:25 – 27:45]

Tamora adds that the wide range of age groups of the students who are pursuing a Tanzausbildung may be of relevance. Many students are very young, and perhaps that leads to a system where the days are more structured as they would be in school. For her it is weird to not be on the same eye level while talking to the teachers. [27:46 – 28:19]

We then played a simple game with Sebastian and Tamora to arrive at some prompts that they could respond to. The prompt Tamora got was: *Behind my mask I am*. While Tamora was mulling on this, Sebastian suggested, that behind her mask, Tamora is a badass, admiring her will. Tamora felt that she agreed. Indeed, it was something on these lines, that she has so many thoughts but words aren't her way to express them with finesse, and sometimes she thinks even dance may not always be the way for her to express those thoughts. [28:20 – 31:40]

The second prompt was for Sebastian: *I witnessed the change in how they moved after..* Sebastian's response: : I witnessed the change in how they moved after they were supported by a cheering crowd, in the context of the performances but also in the context of Myriam (Lucas) 's workshop at the Biennale. The workshop opened people up and Myriam also had the sensitivity to recognize when the person needed a hand, and when something was about to open. [31:41 – 34:15]

Sharing their overall perspective of the 8th Tanzausbildung Biennale, Sebastian feels many things are not addressed, aren't fully transparent. It demands so much from us as students. We express questions in our vulnerability, knowing that those may have consequences for us. Tamora adds that she is disappointed that after using the words Solidarity, Sustainability and Encounter in the title, and the Biennale does not engage with it in every step. Outside in the dance field, there is so much discourse going on that does not reflect here yet. She sees that there is an attempt at beginning, but not at all going through the levels into practice. She is nevertheless, happy to be here and come out of her bubble to get a broader understanding. [34:50 -37:07]