

In this episode, we speak to three teachers and facilitators involved in dance education in Germany. Dr Constanze Schellow teaches Cultures of Knowledge and Transmission at the Centre for Contemporary Dance in the University for Music and Dance Cologne (Zentrum für Zeitgenössischen Tanz). David Russo is a dancer, choreographer and dance instructor at the Ballet Academy of the University of Music and Performing Arts Munich (Hochschule für Musik und Theater München). He is also part of the artistic team of the 2022 Biennale. Dr. Eylül Fidan Akıncı gives workshops on dramaturgy and dance history. At the 8th Tanzausbildung Biennale Stuttgart 2022, she curated the Symposium: “Come Together?: A symposium on theory and practice”.

Constanze, David and Eylül bring up memorable aspects of the Biennale and what the points of exchange here does for individuals and institutions. For Constanze it was to witness how the students of Cologne who she teaches negotiated representation and stepped into their agency during their performance. David cherishes an event like the Biennale presenting one with options for paths that a trained Ballet dancer has ahead of them. For Eylül it was the chance encounters with students and their performances each evening. [2:16 – 10:04]

David talks about how empowering it may be for students if they more often experienced a horizontal hierarchy of working with educators and choreographers, being asked for their opinion and views, being valued. This was discussed specifically in relation to Ballet and contemporary dance, and opened up to themes brought up in the symposium. Constanze comments on the distinction between dance techniques from what can be done with it, breaking and thinking beyond stylistic categories, the value of encountering peers both as students and educators with openness, thinking together about what specific spaces of performance create for the people who engage with it. [9.27- 14.50]

David compares this with his Family – where things are simple and yet cannot be around one another all the time. We need compromise in order to not split apart. [14.52 – 15:40]

Parvathi shares that there seems to be a recognition among everyone across dance styles in the Biennale that the other who is unlike themselves, is also a critical conscious thinking being. [15:41 – 17:00]

To Nicola’s question about what value this meeting adds to the teachers’ practice: David shares that the Biennale offers educators exchange, tools and resources for practicing empathy, and a common touching point. But this also brings up the frustration of going back to your own institution and confronting old problems that may have been solved if everyone had participated in the Biennale. Eylül points out that the Biennale’s design is to make inadvertent patterns in the institutions visible. But this does not work without participation. Many institutions are calcified and seem to not consider certain aspects such as discussion and academic reflection relevant to attend. [17:00 – 22:15]

Constanze expresses that in the contemporary dance field, it is assumed that certain issues aren’t relevant to us anymore. But all value systems are relative. “Contemporary dance is thought to be characterised by diversity. But what does it actually mean to accommodate difference? This is not explored enough. She also points at the fine balance of holding on to one’s own specificity while maintaining ways to help others relate to it. She felt that teaching a class at the biennale would be special because one would never get such a diverse group. One could learn from it and take it back to the one’s institution. David then talks about his continuous toil in Munich to keep the Ballet classes accessible for everybody but not transformed because of the audience.

Constanze shares an anecdote about her son going for hip-hop classes, and then quickly catching on to what didn't feel right – that he wanted to be taken seriously, not being played kids music to, but what learn what he knew to be hip-hop dance. [22:18 – 28:00]

Eylül points out that this shows how pedagogical training needs to be much more integrated in the German system. That this could include regular pedagogic discussions through workshops or special annual programmes, even if it is not the main focus. David thinks that the boundaries and islands that dance professionals put themselves in, can only be stronger if we bridge and connect with one another. Constanze agrees and adds that this is why she perceives herself as a 'practitioner of theory' and without diminishing academic precision, keep her practice accessible while also showing them why they should do this [28:00 - 30:52]

Eylül feels that most often, while there is an education of execution and making, she finds a component of reflection to be missing. Though no one is a complete marionette now, she says, "I think we need to make a case for educating thinking dancers... They need to learn how to read choreography, connect it dramaturgically, and understand one's place in it...There is an assumption that learning dance excludes theory and excludes analysis." [30:53 – 32:22]

David responds, "There is a professional component in dance education, and educational component in dance education. Though both are present in every institution, the balance needs to be paid attention to". Through the institution's focus, students have to be made aware that these two components are constantly playing with each other. [32:23 - 33:20]

Constanze's shares that when looking at how students understand theory, one finds that it not seen for what its – deeply embodied and related to social situations. Teaching theory as well ends up being about writing concepts, relating it to one's work, fitting in fancy philosophies in a technically good way. But this is an old school idea of technique. In the practice of thought and articulation, ...every text cannot be separated and broken down into just some analytical content. When it comes to reflexive thinking, it is not limited to critical theory and analysis." She wishes to inculcate the question for dancers – Just like I evoke a bodily practice, how to evoke a speaking and writing practice? [33:21 – 36:20]

Parvathi points out that perhaps this reflection and critical thinking are taking place on other platforms. Going by typewriter notes, students seem to be quite aware and think critically about what is happening in society and the world at large. Eylül feels that it is still possible to find ways to bring this into the classroom. [36:21 – 37:10]

After a caveat that what he may be saying is controversial, David says that although we criticize authoritarian teaching, he knows that good old teachers were also "very involved in social and personal matters. They encountered students and knew their family conditions...asking the student, participating in their opinions. Pedagogic approach was very attentive to the teacher...We tend to replace old systems with a new one instead of taking the old one, improving it and keeping it alive. There was so much good there...I think it is possible and I think it is also part of the duty...Also with children. You have to be interested in the child, not only in his dance education. Because the child does it for themselves, but they do a lot for the teacher also. The teacher is an inspiration for the student." [37:11 – 38:58]

Eylül adds that especially with young children, there is a deep love, bonding. It is also a transactional relationship like that of a parent, model. It is a responsibility and an opportunity. David adds that in

protecting the learning environment and ensuring certain things to not happen in the studio, has also led certain teachers to keeping distance and not getting involved any more – it has become too risky or painful. We need to be transparent with students and parents, show the hard work we do with each other and see if it is still possible to dig that deep. Certain rules that are simplistic blanket rules of no touching for instance, are making it difficult for the teacher to identify with their role. They are reduced to merely giving instruction or knowledge, but actually it's a relationship. Students also have institutional mistrust. Collectively this leads to teachers being busy checking themselves if they are doing the right action or allowing the right things, "and this blocks the enthusiasms and engagement, discourages passion for the teacher in their work. [38:59 – 42:29]

Constanze shares "I keep thinking about that consent question and it's a tricky one but in the end for me, it's a certain relation. within the institutional framework, someone is a teacher and someone is a student. It is also our role to not trust so much that an institutional role gives us certain rights in every situation, every day against everybody. Diana (Thielen) said it beautifully that there are no 100% safe spaces, but that is no excuse to try to make our spaces as safe as possible.... We may establish these routines we set up because we believe they have a value, but still be aware that that may not work for everybody, every day and forever...That's the perspective I like to take on this consent questions, not to take it too much as restriction or obligation that makes me feel uncomfortable in my own skin. I am okay with being fragile as a teacher also. "

David and Eylül agree, saying, that as teachers if we are able to reflect, act and apologize if necessary to the right person ,and ask for help, then we can overcome the tenseness that comes with possibly making mistakes. [42:30 - 45:55]

We then played a simple game with the group to arrive at some prompts that they could respond to. The first prompt for Eylül was: *Sustaining myself looks like...* to which she said 'Stretching'. The next prompt asked Constanze, *If solidarity had a sister, she would be called...'Love'*, according to Constanze. The prompt to David was *behind my mask I am...* to which David replied, 'I'm afraid'. [45:55 – 49:33]