

# Joanna M. CZAJKOWSKA

Sopot Dance Theatre

## NUDITY IN POMERANIAN DANCE AND PERFORMANCE

The body is an essential tool in a dancer's work, so since the nineteenth century, artistic dance began to use so-called leotards, cladding the body thoroughly, or more precisely, the legs, so as not to offend the audience with nudity, but at the same time to be able to expose them. However, as Irena Turska points out, in the twentieth century the meaning of the leotard (often already covering the whole body of the dancer) changed - it became a stage costume, "which not only clothes, but also shapes the figure of the dancer, the leotard not only emphasizes the modelling of the body, but synthesizes it, simplifies it to a spot of colour."<sup>1</sup>

The twentieth century also saw the appearance of nudity as such on world and Polish stages, but it is still not a common phenomenon. It definitely appears more often in dance theatres or performance-type activities than in ballet theatres, because, as Turska explains, "when the body moves, there are spontaneous disorderly, uncontrollable movements of some of its exposed parts, and they are unintentional surpluses of movement

structures. Thus, they can attract the attention of the viewer, interfering with the course of dance reception."<sup>2</sup> Disruptive movement elements are not the only reason. Arguably, the approach to nudity is directly influenced by the aesthetic canon or that of meaning. Whether for the choreographer the body is supposed to be a 'colorful stain' or a real person. Therefore, one can risk the thesis that the presence or absence of nudity in the actions of dance artists is influenced by the form and place of the art they practice.

### Clothed nudity - the body as synthesis

The art of dance appeared in Pomerania after World War II with the arrival in Gdansk of choreographer and dance pedagogue **Janina Jarzynówna-Sobczak**, who founded a private dance school, led to the establishment of the Choreographic Lyceum in Narvik, which in time was transformed into the Ballet School in Gdansk.

From the beginning of her stay, she also worked as a choreographer, cooperating with the Wybrzeże Theatre and the Baltic Opera, where she was the creator, choreographer and manager of the ballet company between 1953 and 1976.<sup>3</sup> This company in the late fifties and early sixties, thanks to the work and vision of Jarzynówna-Sobczak, became one of the most interesting Polish ballet companies.<sup>4</sup>

Talking about her creative method, the artist herself claimed that she used “abbreviation, synthesis, which moved the characters to the plane of general meanings.”<sup>5</sup> The choreographer worked closely with the dancers in creating the performances: she introduced them to the theme of the show, to specific roles, to dramatic tensions, together with the dancers she used improvisation to find the final choreographic shape, and this process involved the dancers repeating a given sequence many times, in different variations of it, to find the final, satisfying form. She herself called the movement language she shaped a “deformed classic.”

Among the works that placed Janina Jarzynówna-Sobczak among the avant-garde artists of the time were, among others, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, *Four Essays* and *Titania and the Donkey*. In all of these works, the dancers appear in leotards that support the entire body, possibly with graphic elements that define the figures. *Four Essays* and *Titania and the Donkey* were also filmed, with the performers dancing in open spaces in almost transparent costumes.

This penchant for costumes that emphasize the silhouette, actually revealing the body of the dancers in the case of this outstanding artist, is the result of her search for a mental shortcut, but also her antipathy to classical ballet costume: “I think I’m the only one who didn’t like those, degenerating the silhouette, stiff costumes, from under which stick out the pretty little pooches of the dancers. But I’m afraid to admit it out loud!”<sup>6</sup> she said in an interview.

## Nudity shaped - the ideal body

Wojciech Misiuro, creator of the Expression Theatre (1987-2000), became Jarzynówna - Sobczak's direct disciple and successor in avant-garde activities. With his education and experience in dance and pantomime, as well as choreographic collaborations in dramatic theatres, Misiuro knew that he wanted to create a theatre that had not yet existed in Poland, a theatre in which the main tool would be movement corresponding to the “rhythm of the street,”<sup>7</sup> derived from everyday and sports movement.

The Expression Theatre was a stage of plastic naked male and female bodies - in dynamic movement on stage. Traditional dramatic actors were replaced by 'athletes' (...). They were selected on the basis of attractiveness and physical prowess, and then put through training by a 'master' to achieve expressive choreography (...). The performances were accompanied by opera or rock music, with no dialogue or individual role. Using the language of the super-body, at the intersection of dance, mime and sports, the Expression Theatre addressed in its performances mythical and cultural themes relating to fundamental questions of human existence. In this way, the perfect surface was combined with psychological and artistic depth, as evidenced by the titles of the performances: *The Dead Can Dance*, *Dantonians*, *Idols of Perversion* (...).<sup>8</sup>

As Majewska noted, the actors' bodies, shaped by training in sports, pantomime and dance, were close to the one on the one hand, to Greek ideals, on the other, they resembled ideal models from Bruce Weber and Calvin Klein advertising campaigns. Despite playing with the convention of erotic freedom, the performers' bodies remained enclosed in a specific form.<sup>9</sup> Nudity in Misiuro's performances appeared as an erotic symbol (*ZUN*, *Idols of Perversion*) or power and authority (*City of Men*), sometimes as a symbol of exposure accompa-

nying death (*PASSION, De Egipto*). Always, however, the actors-dancers of the Expression Theatre presented themselves in this nudity in an extremely catty, epic manner, like idealized sculptures.

### The truth of nudity - the truth of man

At the beginning of the nineties, the creators of the Gdansk Dance Theatre (1994-2001) appeared in Gdansk – the American **Melissa Monteros** and the Pole **Wojciech Mochniej**, bringing the methodology of teaching modern dance based on Jose Limon's technique, related to work with body weight and breath. On their initiative, a private dance school, an international workshop and a festival for young choreographers Dance Explosions were established, and they also served as advisors in the creation of an extremely important international festival for the dance community taking place in the Tri-City, the Baltic University of Dance.<sup>10</sup> Although nudity appeared incidentally in their performances, the activity of this duo, had great significance for the environment in terms of the new language of movement, in which technical skills were combined with the preservation of the dancers' individuality.<sup>11</sup> The art and environment created by Monteros and Mochniej, coexisted with the already existing Expression Theatre, the General Ballet School and the Baltic Opera, and the period of the last decade of the twentieth century was full of new initiatives and debuts. Actors of Wojciech Misiuro's theatre took on their own activities: Krzysztof Leon Dziemaszkiewicz, Jacek Krawczyk, Bożena Eltermann, while the following made their debuts: Joanna Czajkowska, Anna Haracz, Daria Jędra, Magda Jędra, Aurora Lubos, Iwona Gilarska, Robert Przybył. Individuality has become a hallmark of Pomeranian dance - both in terms of the artistic path taken and the approach to stage nudity. However, the various approaches of Pomeranian artists have one common denominator - nudity has been humanized.

A harbinger of a change concerning nudity in dance was already the first performance directed by **Krzysztof Leon Dziemaszkiewicz** (then Read My Lips Theatre, now LEON Theatre), which accompanied the exhibition of sculptures *Iron People* by Zbigniew Frąckiewicz at the State Art Gallery in Sopot (1995). The four men, in a dynamic, powerful dance, at one point shed their petticoats, and the audience could watch their bodies in direct confrontation with all possible "movement surpluses." Although all the performers (Krzysztof Leon Dziemaszkiewicz, Jacek Krawczyk, Piotr Pająk, Jarosław Filip) came from the Expression Theatre and presented excellent form, it was not the beauty of the body that mattered here, but precisely this directness and natural wildness of movement. Later, nudity became a permanent element of Dziemaszkiewicz's work: "Leon's group's productions are distinguished by certain fixed stage elements - a combination of psychodrama, carnival, humor, nudity and music. A frequent element of the performances is gender bending, i.e. performance based on changing roles between a woman and a man, balancing on the border between the sexes combined with strong expressive acting of the actors."<sup>12</sup> The artist himself puts it this way: "Nudity is a very natural thing for me and I treat it as a means of affirmation, joy, as a manifestation of spontaneity and independence. I use it (...) in my performance actions partly as a provocation, (...) to spontaneously and unrestrictedly embrace the reality I present."<sup>13</sup> He stresses that after using a scene with nudity, he usually changes the narrative thread absolutely. This, according to the artist, causes him to be accepted unconditionally.

Starting from my archaic spontaneous actions in clubs, in the Sphinx Club, in the Spatif Club or still in my student days, nudity has always been for me a means to draw attention to myself and direct the perception of the viewer, the audience, mainly as a means of spontaneity and provocation to reject any canons of judgment. Starting with my first performances: the Read My Lips, where nudity is definitely used in

a very ostentatious way, through *Live-act* or the *National Drag Queen*; all these performances had an undertone of a very personal message (...). They were not subject to any template, that is, neither a political pretext, nor a moral pretext, nor a rebellion against someone or something.<sup>14</sup>

The language of movement used by Dziemaszkiewicz has evolved over all the years of his work - from physical theatre, where choreography combined processed natural movement and sequences composed of strong, exertional dance, to the currently used movement reduction, performative a turn toward inner experience, where the body undergoing artistic treatment is more a body in action than in dance.<sup>15</sup> At the opposite pole to the artist described above, are the creators of the Dada von Bzdülów Theatre - **Leszek Bzdyl** and **Katarzyna Chmielewska**. They started working together at the very beginning of the nineties, and although they came from different techniques (Bzdyl was a mime artist, he appeared in the Tri-City at the invitation of the Expression Theatre, in which, however, he did not stay long, Chmielewska graduated from the Ballet School in Gdansk). Thanks to their cooperation with the Gdansk Dance Theatre and the inner need for development, they began to shape their own theatrical and choreographic language. Bzdyl's previous theatre experience, as well as a period of study at Katarzyna Chmielewska's P.A.R.T.S school, were of great importance.<sup>16</sup> Working with natural body weight, contact improvisation, and the release technique, in which the body moves with the most economical effort possible, and the joints remain relaxed, full of 'air' yet with anatomically correct body structure, brought new results. "The group has managed to develop a unique style, drawing from the Polish (and world) theatrical and literary tradition (Witold Gombrowicz is the unofficial patron of the group), as well as the avant-garde Dadaist movement, from which the group's name derives. In its work, the group uses movement, dance, text, and its particular distinctive feature has become the play

with theatrical and dance conventions, as well as such artistic means and procedures as pastiche and grotesque, bringing original, intertextual performances, rich in interdisciplinary references and allusions."<sup>17</sup> Dancers appeared naked in such performances as *UFF...!*, *Barricade of Love*, *Non-Existent Duets*, *Red Grass*, *Factor T*. Leszek Bzdyl said that he treats nudity as "an expression of freedom, and at the same time a stage sign inscribed in the narrative. It seems to me that I don't use my body for any kind of manifestation. Nudity in the stage space is either inscribed in the necessity of the dramatic statement, or it is a sign. It is significant for the transformation of the character, it is a transition from state to state, or it is a counterpoint for stage actions."<sup>18</sup> In the Dada von Bzdülów Theatre, the undressing of the artists is thus an effect of the work on the performance, a kind of transgression of the character, although, as Bzdyl notes, the effect of transgression can also be achieved in another way - through close contact and direct exposure of the viewer to the corporeality (not necessarily completely naked) of the dancers.<sup>19</sup> Here we see how important and significant in the viewer-dancer/performer relationship are the place and distance of the action. Given Chmielewska and Bzdyl's language of movement, nudity also appears in a more »accidental« guise, when during the dance the costume reveals bare breasts or intimate area, which often happened, for example, in the *Magnolia* performance - it is then treated as a natural consequence of the free body in motion.

An artist associated for years with the theatre of Chmielewska and Bzdyl, who at the same time developed her own creative path, is **Anna Steller**. In her independent work, she has moved from dance theatre to performance, and the language of movement she has used has evolved from dance in release technique to movement reduction and physical action. "As a performer, she mainly focuses on the transparency and sincerity of her message and on radical artistic solutions. The interdisciplinarity of dance and performance is an area she has been exploring for years, trying to understand and convey important content and concepts to the audience."<sup>20</sup> The artist has

collaborated many times with Magdalena Jędra as the **Good Girl Killer** collective, and Krzysztof Leon Dziemaszkiewicz. She says the following about the use of nudity in her works (including *Displacement*, *Danger Zone* with Read My Lips Theatre, *You're doing it all wrong*): “Nudity arises out of necessity, it has no other connotations, it is only an element needed to visualize the artist's specific ideas.”<sup>21</sup> She also adds: “In my work, it is usually related to something that lies deep inside me, and it is only through the use of nudity in which I am simply just a person that I can convey content that is important to me.”<sup>22</sup>

Artists who also use nudity as an expression of essential content that cannot be shown through the clothed body are **Joanna Czajkowska** and **Jacek Krawczyk**, creators of the Sopot Dance Theatre founded in 1998. The artists, who have been working closely together for a quarter of a century, have developed a specific model of it - they take turns creating group performances, with the director of a given title taking the final say on scenic solutions. Duets are created rarely, the performance is then always a product of the ideas of both. Krawczyk, who was formerly an athlete and then a long-time actor-dancer at the Expression Theatre, who has a diverse experience of corporeality, talked about this in an interview: “In the Expression Theatre earlier, according to the director's point of view and vision, corporeality was exposed, its sporting and energetic qualities emphasized. I try to look for a certain melancholy in my works, suspension between the world of good and evil, poetics”.<sup>23</sup> Thus, nudity or partial nudity in the performances directed by the artist appears in various scenic and thematic circumstances - as the exposure of a character, his transgression, sometimes emphasizes eroticism (*2FACES*, the *Discreet Charm of Picasso*, *manRay*, *The Barbarian*), the exposure of nudity, however, is always a stage sign shown in a certain aura of understatement, poetics. Joanna Czajkowska, who previously (in the nineties) worked with Read My Lips Theatre and Gdansk Dance Theatre, as far as the language of movement is concerned, is comfortable with Limon and release techniques,

and her preferred theatrical forms are dance theatre, physical actions, and performance. She herself diagnosed her approach to movement language as follows: “Dance or dance technique was not the clue, rather we (Sopot Dance Theatre) used there structured everyday movement, sports movement, physical movement, which was later seen in our performances, such as our first performance with Jacek Krawczyk *Niunia seriously thinking about life*, *Square. Version 6*, *Empty Body* or *Lechistan Pany Arka*, where the scenes were based on gestures and physical movement, but there were also dance sequences. This happens when I recognize that the eruption of movement in a given structure will properly convey the theme or content.”<sup>24</sup> About her approach to nudity Czajkowska says this: “For me, the body is a container and transmitter of thoughts, emotions, the whole inner cosmos. I use nudity only when it is really important and relevant and when it gives the viewer something that the performer's clothed body would not be able to give. Regardless of whether I'm talking about intimacy, love, weakness, pain, truth, the naked body expresses it all.”<sup>25</sup> And so nudity in her performances appears in exceptional circumstances in which the artist reveals herself as a human being (*Magnification - Zoom Out*, *Introspection*, *Object of Inestimable Value*, *OCTOPUS. Talk to me* in collaboration with Krzysztof Leon Dziemaszkiewicz), or as a cultural sign (*Object of Inestimable Value*, *Ono/Lennon were right, but wrong*).

The connection between the language of movement, theatre form and nudity can also be seen conclusively in the case of Amareya Theatre & Guests, which moves at the intersection of Japanese butoh and physical theatre. The undisputed leader of the group is **Katarzyna Julia Pastuszak**, and the theatre's long-time members are Agnieszka Kaminska, Aleksandra Sliwinska, Natalia Chylinska. “Nudity in butoh is also an aspect of costume and another form of shedding the social body. (...) When the body appears nude in butoh, it is usually partially covered, often smeared with mud and whitened. Nudity is stylized in butoh, and the costumes are metamorphic. They change along

with the dance....”<sup>26</sup> Nudity used in this way is very characteristic of the first period of Amareya Theatre's activity (e.g. *Xenos*, *Anatomical Theatre - Mystery of Life and Death*, *Dream of Icarus*) however, with the development of the company, also the way of exposing the naked body has changed, and performers sometimes play completely naked (e.g. *Nomadic woman*, *2 Improvised Duet*, *Kantor\_Tropy*, among others). “Amareya's first Eastern inspirations led to the formation of the phenomenon known as Polish butō - an original aesthetic, combining Japanese influences with the Polish tradition of theatrical avant-garde. It can be said that a dramatic theatre actor translates the experience of the body into signs, while a butō actor/dancer makes this experience itself visible - the conflict takes place in the space of corporeality itself. In the case of the European, and especially the Polish, butō tradition, it is an attempt to use the body as such for artistic activities, with the dancer here becoming both the performing subject and the matter, working on his own body and allowing the viewer to witness these activities”.<sup>27</sup> So the artists have moved from stylized nudity, to the truth of the naked body, which, through the themes they take up, often shows the human being in suffering or borderline situations.

To sum up: nudity, as a stage phenomenon in Pomeranian<sup>28</sup> dance, has transformed from the symbolic presentation of nudity in the clothed body, through the posed body with model ideal shapes, to nudity as a theatrical sign and personal confession. Important elements are the artistic form and the language of movement preferred by the artists, and consequently the place of presentation. And here, as surprising as it may seem, the proximity between the performers and the viewer of their art matters, though not explicitly. What is important is simply the authenticity and intimacy of the message.

# Janina Jarzynówna - Sobczak The Baltic Opera

ballet theater -  
going beyond classical thinking about the dancer's body



"Tytania Lotosa"  
kadr z filmu

# Joanna M. Czajkowska, Jacek Krawczyk Sopocki Teatr Tańca

dance theatre



"manBy the Barbarian"



"Magnification - Zoom Out"



"Tytania i Lasiol"  
Opera Bałtycka  
Aleja Boniatnicko, Janusz Wojciechowski



"Crimy Eweje"  
Opera Bałtycka  
Aleja Boniatnicko, Zygmunta Jarmari



# Wojciech Misiuro / Teatr EKSPRESJI

movement theatre

language of movement: sport, everyday movement, pantomime  
body architecture / dynamic stillness



ZUN  
Teatr Ekspresji  
Andrzej Chorab, Bożena Eltermann, Krzysztof Leon Dziemaszkiewicz

## Krzysztof Leon Dziemaszkiewicz Teatr Patrz Mi na Usta i Teatr LEON

physical theatre, performance



## Katarzyna Chmielewska, Leszek Bzdyl Teatr Dada von Bzdülów

dance theatre



"Non-existent dance"



"Non-existent duets"



"Magnolia"



"Barricade of Love"

## Anna Steller

dance theatre, performance



"Displacement"

Katarzyna Pastuszak  
Teatr Amareya and Guests  
butoh based physical theatre



"Kantor Tropy Collage"

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Irena Turska, *Spotkanie ze Sztuką Tańca* [Meeting the Art of Dance] (Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 2000), 38.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>3</sup> *Encyclopedia of Gdansk*, Gdansk Community Foundation, accessed December 1, 2022, <http://www.gedanopedia.pl>.
- <sup>4</sup> Irena Turska, *Almanach polskiego baletu 1945-1974* [Almanac of Polish Ballet 1945-1974] (Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1983), 36.
- <sup>5</sup> Janina Jarzynówna-Sobczak, and Kanold Barbara. *Rozmowy o tańcu* [Talk on Dance] (Gdańsk: Polnord, OSKAR Publishing House, 2003), 21.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibidem, 67.
- <sup>7</sup> Zofia Tomczyk–Watrak, *Teatr Ekspresji Wojciecha Misiuro* [Wojciech Misiuro's Theatre of Expression] (Gdańsk: BROWAT Publishing House, 2003), 12.
- <sup>8</sup> Jadwiga Majewska, entry "Teatr Ekspresji Wojciecha Misiuro," accessed December 1, 2022, <https://culture.pl/pl/tworca/teatr-ekspresji-wojciecha-misiuro>.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>10</sup> Katarzyna Pastuszek, entry „Gdański Teatr Tańca,” accessed December 1, 2022, <http://slovníktanca.uni.lodz.pl/gdanski-teatr-tanca>.
- <sup>11</sup> Joanna Czajkowska, "On Different Ways of Education in Contemporary Dance in the Tri-City" (MA thesis University of Gdansk, Department of Theory of Education, 1999), 147. Under the supervision of Dr. Maria Szczepska-Pustkowska.
- <sup>12</sup> Paweł Leszkowicz, *Art Pride. Gay art from Poland / Polska sztuka gejowska* (Warszawa: Abiekt.pl, 2010).
- <sup>13</sup> Interview with Krzysztof Leon Dziemaszkiewicz, online, October 27, 2022 (author's material).
- <sup>14</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>15</sup> Self-analysis of the artist's work.
- <sup>16</sup> P.A.R.T.S - School of Contemporary Dance founded by renowned choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, <https://www.parts.be/>.
- <sup>17</sup> Julia Hoczyk, entry "Teatr Dada von Bzdulow," accessed December 1, 2022, <http://slovníktanca.uni.lodz.pl/teatr-dada-von-bzdul%D3%A7w/>.
- <sup>18</sup> Leszek Bzdyl, Mikołaj Mikołajczyk, and Maria Stokłosa, "Naked truth in dance theater," interviewed by Majewska Jadwiga, *Theater* no. 9/09 (2012), accessed December 1, 2022, <https://e-teatr.pl/naga-prawda-w-teatrze-tanca-a143439>.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>20</sup> Biography of the artist, accessed December 1, 2022, <https://cialoumysl.pl/artysta/anna-steller/?f=21-c-u-2022>.
- <sup>21</sup> Interview with Anna Steller, October 5, 2022 (author's material).
- <sup>22</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>23</sup> Interview with Jack Krawczyk, September 29, 2022 (author's audio material).
- <sup>24</sup> Joanna Czajkowska, interviewed by Katarzyna Wysocka, *Gazeta Swietojańska*, accessed December 1, 2022, <https://gazetaswietojanska.org/polecane/teraz-jeszcze-bardziej-zmierzam-do-konkluzji-w-ruchu/>.
- <sup>25</sup> Statement from the lecture at the FNAF 8 conference, Academy of Fine Arts, October 10, 2022.
- <sup>26</sup> Sondra Fraleigh, *Butoh: Metamorphic Dance and Global Alchemy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 56.
- <sup>27</sup> Jadwiga Majewska, entry "Teatr Amareya," accessed December 1, 2022, <https://culture.pl/pl/tworca/teatr-amareya>.
- <sup>28</sup> Pomeranian dance is diverse and constantly evolving, with some artists changing their life paths over time, changing their profession or place of residence, but there are also younger generations, in some of whose performances there are scenes of nudity (e.g. *Solo for four helmets and lost time* by the Hertz Haus group, choreographed and directed by outside artist Anna Piotrowska). However, in my text, I present those artists in whom nudity is not a one-off or accidental affair, and who reach for it consciously as a means of artistic and personal expression.

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