

## They Don't Do Those Here: DOUBLE VISION's Residency in Vienna

By Pauline Jennings, with contributions by Sean Clute

It was another chilly yet magical day in Vienna on January 7, 2009. I was trudging eagerly through the narrow snowy sidewalks to the Museumsquartier, home to the Tanzquartier and one of the largest cultural districts in the world—60,000 sq. ft. of art and culture to be exact! I was to begin Daily Professional Training, a daily three-hour class that featured new guest instructors each week at the Tanzquartier, Wien (TQW).

I had arrived in Vienna only a week earlier and was thrilled, yet a bit anxious for what awaited me, this being my first journey abroad and my German being quite rudimentary. Sean Clute and I had voyaged to Austria hot on the heels of what had been an amazing six months and on a commitment to tour as much as possible for a year. We are the Co-Artistic Directors of

DOUBLE VISION, a San Francisco based intermedia dance company which we co-founded in December 2003. Nine of us had just wrapped up a five-week U.S. tour that took us to vibrant art scenes in 11 cities from LA to NYC. Now here we were in Austria, busily booking a European tour. Sean had been honored with a two-month U.S. Fulbright award and artist-in-residence at the Museumsquartier and I had been granted professional status at the TQW. Additionally, we were invited to lecture and perform in Vienna, Zurich, Prague and Pecs while abroad.

I arrived at the TQW early and began doing my favorite tendu warm-up that I had learned years ago from Molissa Fenley at Mills College. I noticed odd glances from classmates as they one after another filed in, laid down on the marley floor, closed their eyes and rested. Another American spotted me and approached me chuckling, then whispered "They don't do those here." Before I could ask her why, Robert Stein entered.

There is no perfect way to describe the force that is Robert Stein, a man I grew to respect greatly for his uncompromising and unique approach to choreography and performance art. He stated that he was neither a dancer, choreographer nor a shaman, but planned to teach us and himself how to be all three of these during the next two weeks. Given the application process to take the daily training, I had anticipated a rigorous, technical class in contemporary movement. Suffice it to say, Stein's class was already not what I expected.

Training at the TQW is highly experimental and broadly based in personal interpretations of Postmodern dance (Judson era), Release Technique, Contact Improvisation, Butoh and other techniques. My daily training included first the fake-Shaman class that involved activities like attempting to die, contemplating personal sources of pain, belly dancing, and hip-hop improvisations as reincarnated animals. I also took a class in Feldenkrais taught by Georg Blaschke, which involved a daily sit-down anatomy lesson, followed by leading each other around by the crotch, then a break-neck routine (with no prior stretching). Another class, led by the British dancer Stephanie Cumming, was a more conventional dance class based in release technique. The daily training grew out of what Austrian choreographers wanted to explore, not what a director or other outsider deemed to be important. Classmates remained consistent throughout these diverse classes—they were not there to learn new techniques but to acquire a different awareness from each instructor. The transient nature of instruction was rarely agreeable to me. At least once a week I contemplated never going back to the TQW and instead finding a place where I could just do some ballet. Yet the unexpected and fun nature of the classes kept pulling me back each morning. The TQW forced me change my approach to dance training; I went from focusing on efficient, goal-oriented progress, always asking myself, "What do I need to improve my technique and choreography?" to a more nebulous and fun "What physical, emotional and mental processes will I experience today?" The TQW made me thirsty for play; an experience that had been missing from my training for far too long.



Photo by Rick Mellor. L-R: Emily Gorman, Wendy Marinaccio

Stein also introduced us to the Choreography Platform Austria (CPA), a three day festival held in Graz, a small medieval town, two hours outside of Vienna. Headlined by Stein, it was a festival full of cutting-edge performances, lectures, discussions and evening parties, boasting three days and fifteen works with many NYC curators in attendance. With excitement in the air, candid conversations about the state of contemporary dance, and an enormous, packed theater, I immediately noticed that everyone was there to support experimentation—which is drastically different than what I'm used to back home. I had a telling conversation with a curator from one of the most cutting-edge theaters in NYC. She listed which pieces she'd like to bring to the U.S. but wouldn't because they were simply too experimental to market and would not generate enough income.

There was no discussion of good versus bad dance, only what these new perspectives and unique views meant to the observer. One performance that particularly struck me was Krööt Juurak's *Once Upon*, a piece during which she never addressed the audience, but simply played with some seemingly random toys she had spilled out into a pile onstage. It was one of the most riveting and unique performances I have ever seen. In the *Distribution of Similarities*, Andrei Andrianov and Oleg Soulimenko compared shopping receipts of identical grocery items they had purchased in Russia and Austria, and later picnicked onstage whilst discovering that they each drank vodka differently. And my early TQW mentor, Stein and his partner Frans Peolestra, known collectively as United Sorry, performed the work *How low can you go?*, which promised to lead the audience "into a ritual of darkness, without being afraid to look the devil in the eye." Their performance was a revelation—hilarious, beautiful, insulting, maddening, and poignant. In between personal confessions, Peolestra played a mini-keyboard, surrounded in candlelight as Stein rolled around in disheveled shorts and heels and belted out a familiar reggae tune that went "So low you can't get under it, fuck my soul!" It was fresh, unique and I loved it.

Regarding CPA, Sean writes: "Austrian contemporary dance is perplexing. It is like watching someone achieve nothing, without trying, yet with skill and technical prowess. Following nearly all 15 performances, I wondered why or if the performance was dance. The 'dancers' would ebb and flow between effort and idleness, intention and aimlessness. The heart of the quandary, 'what is dance today' is one being questioned and redefined with a spirit of playfulness in Austria. However, it felt like dance itself, was somehow lacking in, well, dance." I couldn't agree more with this statement and must admit that the lack of dance was beginning to make me question my reliance upon dance in my own choreography. Sitting in the audience watching piece after piece of non-dance I began to feel incredibly old-fashioned. Self-doubt and an internal struggle with the question of not only "what is dance today" but "what is relevant and contemporary dance today" began to set in.

Later, at an after-party hosted by the critical dance journal CORPUS, Sean and I found ourselves enchanted by enigmatic contemporary choreographers. Being that everyone was toasty from Marillenschnaps, we entered into a lively conversation that started out something like "what is going on with dance in San Francisco? Last time I was there in the 80s it was all contact improv and release technique mixed with some politics." We wanted to answer the question, but were more eager to find answers to our own regarding dance, or the lack thereof, in Austria. Sean sought out Krööt Juurak to discuss the performances and asked whether Austrian choreographers have a regard for the audience. She paused and replied "it isn't that we do not care for the audiences, rather the audiences care for us. They want to know what we are thinking and feeling." An interesting reply, one that revealed a major cultural difference between how we approach art-making and people like Krööt do. Is this why Austrian dance appears "foreign," undance-like, effortless? Would DOUBLE VISION dare create a work that does not have elements of entertainment or virtuosity, thus risking small ticket sales for true experimentation?

Sean's response to this unspoken dare: "This April I think DOUBLE VISION is taking this risk. Pauline's choreography captures some of the nothingness I felt in Austria. The nothingness is like being alien; having an



Photo by Rick Mellor. L-R: Cecelia Peterson, Wendy Marinaccio, Jennifer Mellor

awareness yet lacking the vocabulary needed for comprehension. I am not sure if people will like it, in fact, I am not sure if I even do. But the work, similar to work at the CPA, is capturing something new, something outside the conventional, blockbuster, contemporary dance. The complex and virtuosic movement travels but goes nowhere. No doubt this is artistic risk, but no risk is without reward, right? But witnessing *Hysteresis* is not about liking or disliking it—it is about experiencing something different, something new.”

The uncertainty expressed in Sean’s statement is logical. Prior to Austria, we entered into every project with a firm approach and concept. We knew how to make work entertaining, crowd-pleasing. That’s not to say we sacrificed our personal artistic concerns, but we cared what the audience thought and that informed the product. But something happened to me in Austria. Everything I witnessed there, from class to performance, shared the similarities of honesty, purity of idea, intrigue and a lack of inhibition or concern for critical reception. How many of us in the U.S. can say that we approach art-making, production and marketing without concern for or fear of our audience, critics, funders, friends and family? Being concerned about such things has been ingrained in me. It was frightening to think of letting go.

Before leaving Austria, Sean and I premiered several new works at the Museumsquartier. One of these works was a collaborative dance I created with Caitlyn Carradine, the American who had first told me not to do tendus. I was terrified. What would they think of my dancey-dance? But then something happened—I decided to not care and to just go for it. What came out of that performance was the seed for what is now *Hysteresis*, a complex, virtuosic piece full of movement invention, responsive systems, and an overarching feeling of being alien. It is quite literally an abstract autobiography of my two months in Austria.

So what changed in me that night of performing at the Museumsquartier? I found that I had emerged from my two months of experimentation and self-doubt in Austria with a renewed conviction to question everything I’d been taught about making “good” dance. I was filled with a ferocious determination to create work that was contemporary, unique, and mine - uncensored by fears of audience reception or critical review. I have tried to ignore the “right” spatial patterns, use of time and accepted structural devices such as narrative, climax and conclusion. To do this I have assembled an amazing team of collaborators and dancers—many of whom have been working with DOUBLE VISION for over five years. They have welcomed this project and the risks Sean named with open-arms and have offered continued support through what has now been a grueling year of weekly rehearsals and meetings. As the premiere approaches, I believe what began as a personal pursuit on my part has become a shared challenge for the entire team. Ultimately, we are trying to show a clear, unhindered idea that will offer the audience a genuine experience. Austrian choreographer, Sabina Holzer, echoed this shared and long-held pursuit in a recent email, stating: “I hope I am strong enough to go my way with all my concerns, needs and dreams.” For the sake of dance’s future relevancy and growth, I hope we all are.