

Interview with Stina Nyberg

Intuitively, what is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of your art?

A lot about what I am thinking of right now – a longing for the dance studio, for being there together with a lot of people and to dance! This is partly due to Corona, but it can be like that at other times too. It takes a lot of organization and planning to get to those cherished periods when you are in a process and are doing things together.

I place the art in relation to that. Where things actually happen. When you have time to engage in the things that feel artistic. That feeling can often occur in the studio, but it can also come from a lot of writing, reading, and thinking – and doing other things in other places as well.

That was the first thing that came to mind, for some reason. Perhaps because we are in front of our screens right now and we have not met before.

How would you describe your choreography and your art; what you create today?

I would say that it depends on the project. I have this restlessness when it comes to what I want to do. At times I think of choreography as an excuse to be able to devote myself to themes that interest me. I studied the history of ideas for a while, and now many years later, I have realized that I have taken this weird detour and have circled back to the things that interested me during my studies. And now I am able to take things on again, with a practical approach.

What I read and see, political events, or really anything, can spark an interest in me. I attach a lot of what I want to do, to that interest and subject, and use choreography as an excuse to learn more about it.

What is your process like? That sounded so interesting. How does a process begin for you and how do you take it further? What does that look like?

I tend to use a theme as a node. It can be an interest that is stemming from me finding something to be fun, and that it excites me on a personal level. Something that might be valuable to learn more about and that I see as having a greater societal importance. Something that I am able to share and discuss with others, and that I can continue to dive into and explore.

I try to connect the subjects I want to learn more about with a physical practice, when I work by myself and with my own direction. I collect things I want to read, classes I want to take, or movies I want to watch on different themes and try, in an artistic way, to allow myself to apply other kinds of references to my work. It is research of some sort, but unlike a scholarly context you are allowed to appropriate references, metaphors, and knowledge from anywhere.

I collect quite a lot of material in that way and try, on a parallel level, to relate that to a physical practice. How to connect the theme to the body, and I try to learn from that in a physical way as well. So that the process does not only go from "I have read about this theme" and "how do I translate it into movement?", but also towards "if I move in this way, what can that teach me about this theme? "

I try to go between different ways of learning, which are specific to this medium. You can only learn to dance by actually practicing dance. It is not possible to read your way to learn how to dance. How one learns is a knot that interests me. I can spend a lot of time on that topic.

My work can vary depending on the process, if I collaborate with others early on or at a later stage of the process. I almost always work with others in some way, but I can spend some time on my own. I like to hone in on different references, ideas and thoughts, and collect material. Sometimes I start working with others at an early stage. You bounce ideas back and forth, dance and do movement exercises in an entirely practical way. Where something is headed will often transpire organically during collaborations.

And after that, when you start working with others in the studio, what does your work process look like then?

That depends. During my last project "Make Hay While the Sun Shines", I wanted to work out of a movement practice from the start. I had fewer themes beforehand because of that. I wanted to work with fast cuts between different references, in terms of movements. Things that appear to be one way, are placed next to something else, which clearly looks like something, put next to something else that clearly looks like... Until that creates a third thing. [Shows an overlapping movement with the hands.]

I was focusing on that on my own for a while, and started working with dancers Aurore d'Audiffret and Molly Engblom quite early to try to turn these interests into an exercise that we could engage in. It is a bit like creating games, puzzles, or tasks. You test and you discuss, and change the rules of the game as you go. You test new things, and so on. You talk it through, sleep on it and you might have a new idea of what to try the following day... [Shows a continuous movement with the hand.] And it goes on like that.

How come you started dancing?

I did gymnastics as a child, and started dancing parallel to that. I danced at Kommunala musikskolan in Ö-vik for a while, with whatever dance they offered, which was depending on what dance teacher they had at the time. I started dancing more in High School, after quitting gymnastics at 15. It might not have been a very conscious decision. You are a child and start to do the same sport as your older siblings, and gymnastics is very similar to dance. My friends danced at Kommunala musikskolan, and my older sister is a dancer, so that profession was already in my world of things one can do.

And choreography, how come you started doing that?

That has to do with the fact that I wanted to do fun jobs during my time at Balettakademien. But! There are no jobs, so you have to invent the dances yourself. Something like that! [Laughs.] And it was fun. People in my class and I had this idea about dance as an art form, whereas the things we did at school were mainly focused on training. It forced us to figure out different styles, art forms and ways of doing things on our own. We saw a lot of dance during our education, a lot of performances, and we were dreaming about doing those things ourselves.

And as I mentioned before, I believe that choreography has been a way for me to be able to link a societal interest with a dance practice. To be able to define how they are connected, to be allowed to experiment and do things in a practical way.

Do you think that it is common to have the drive that you have? For those of you that decide to become choreographers, do you think that wanting to express connections to society and having a political perspective on your art is common?

No, I believe that it varies. I don't think that I ever really wanted to become a choreographer. It has mainly been about creating your own performances, your own dances, and your own projects – you create something that turns into a context. I applied for the choreograph program because it seemed like a lot of fun. And then when you have completed your choreography training, then you have become a “choreographer” in one way or another...

I think people look at it in different ways. I don't think that I pictured myself becoming a choreographer in that way when I first started dancing. It was more a dream of being a dancer, and being able to work as a dancer. That is the luxury of not having to decide on being one thing or the other.

I feel that many of us don't really draw a clear distinction between working with others in different projects, working for others in different projects, being the initiators of projects, working collectively in a project and having many different roles within different dance projects.

Has your view of choreography changed over time?

Yes, it has changed a lot from when I was younger and believed that choreography was to create different dances, or above all: inventing steps that you teach. We have a broader idea of what choreography is, and can be, today. There is also a desire within the choreographic field to contemplate on what choreography can be – to expand, experiment and reflect on the choreographic framework.

Have you noticed any recurring themes throughout your artistic work?

I am very interested in history and various historical events. Different processes relating to Swedish public health. Styles such as Vsevolod Meyerhold's biomechanics and dance companies such as the Swedish Ballet (1920–1925), which I work on with the collective called Samlingen. I am also very interested in movement history, both my personal movement history, and in some way also the politics you have experienced as a dancer. I can definitely see a theme in that.

There is also a theme that relates to the limitations of knowledge, on what types of knowledge that counts. What is the inherent knowledge of dance? What does it mean to practice something, in an effort to learn something? That theme includes my own fascination with both magic and science, and what's in between: how close are they to the fascination of the things we cannot understand? That is a recurring theme for me. I have worked with a critical stance towards New Age, while I still love the spiritual. These are things that irritate me because I love them and hate them at the same time. I find it interesting to look into those themes.

What happens when you work with something in your practice, that you have conflicted feelings towards?

It often turns out to be really tough! [Laughs.] You have to approach things as a way of dealing with them. I am able to be critical, and simultaneously understand that I am able to be critical, because of my Western education, my skepticism, my academic education or something else. I try to investigate different reasons for why I think the way I do. It is often others who point out and make you aware of those sides that you have, and then you might think: "What the hell, I'm probably wrong in this...!". Approaching that through choreography and testing different roles can be fun. To try to perform different roles and have that discussion with your audience.

You do not have to come to a conclusion, or give an answer. It is okay that I do not know what I believe. But you can do something that deals with the in between. Is it okay to laugh at this or is that rude? Is it humoristic, or is it really sad? I like when things are placed in the in between, and that we allow ourselves to be there. [Smiles.]

The theater can be a safe and insular place, it is meant for fictional experiences. It allows you to pretend without any real consequences, and that can probably be perceived as both meaningless and ingenious. It is an insular club for the enlightened, in a way. It is a limited room for a specific part of the population that visits the theater. And the things you do there may not always have an impact on society at large, but on the other hand – it is a room for experimentation and magic, a place where one is aware of the fact that we are all pretending together and perhaps a place where we dare to dream of a different world.

I'm wondering how you go about choosing your ensembles or coworkers? On the exploration of knowledge and everyone having their previous experiences, how do you think about that beforehand, and before you decide who to involve?

There are so many talented people within the dance scene, as well as other people that I wish I could work with. It is more a question of how many you can afford to pay, for how long and so on. And some balancing back and forth between continuing to work with people you have worked with for a long time – with a built-up trust and collaboration – and on the other hand not always working with the same people. There is something about other people teaching you new things, that creates a different kind of art.

This might be a little bit of a leading question, but do you think that the people you work with should have a different way of looking at knowledge or science from yourself?

No... Well... That depends! Perhaps regarding certain aspects... I can't say that I challenge myself in that regard. I chose not to work with people who were entirely into New Age during my project "Horrible Mixtures", which focused on spirituality and dealing with my own skepticism towards New Age. I did workshops, attended classes, and visited Stockholms spiritualistiska förening. I saw a medium and so on. But on an artistic level, my main collaboration was with my friend and colleague Andros Zins-Browne.

I had a long discussion with an old classmate who thought that I should work with someone that was more part of the New Age movement. But I did not really dare to go there, which is partly due to me being skeptical of that movement.

I wanted to question my own critical stance, and have concluded that I now know a bit more about what it is that I am critical of and in what way. I am generally not that "open" as a person. I am not someone who devotes myself to different themes, I think. [Laughs.]

Speaking of collaborations. Has any of your collaborations over the years been extra special to you?

No, not that I would point out like that. But my collaboration with Maryam Nikandish, that I attended Balettakademien with, has been very important to me. We found each other during an early professional mindset, we have held each other's hands in some way and helped each other.

It is extremely important that someone sees you and believes that the things you do are important. And from time to time over the years someone who believes that what you do is good and important will appear. But you are mostly in the hands of each other. So, having colleagues and friends, who can say that what you do and who you are is important, becomes vital for being strong and for daring to go on.

What have the reactions to your work been from your audience? Has there been any debate or other reactions? Maybe emotional reactions?

I worked with The Knife for some years, I did choreography and performed on stage. That is on a completely different scale in comparison to the dance productions I generally participate in. They will get thousands of comments when posting on Facebook, which was a strange experience, but they had management that took care of that. You just had to stop scrolling through the comments after a while. You realize: "Yes, of course, people have opinions about this" and expectations of what they think it should be.

What do you think was provocative in those cases?

It was that we were a bit amateurish, cheerful and funny. The Knife has an image of being mysterious and tough. And then we did a show that was like "Jump around in colorful overalls and dancing to fun music!". [Smiles.] We were also very transparent with the fact that the show wasn't performed live. That was a theme that we had worked on, and especially in relation to electronic music: "What does it mean to play live or not?". Most electronic music is processed anyway. You can trigger it by pressing a button, but it is already composed to some extent. Not performing live turned out to be more provocative than I had imagined.

Even though that's always how it is?

Yes, but you still go to see something that feels like and is experienced as a live performance, and you feel disappointed if it seems like they just played a record.

Was it meant to be provocative?

No. We meant to investigate and be critical of the stereotypical image of a guy who is dressed in a black polo, standing by his synth, and who is barely visible.

Our intention was like this: "Let's make it fun! Let's dance! Let's make it communicative!". We wanted to show a different side of the electronic duo and that they are not just a duo, they are rather an eleven-person-band-and-dance-group.

We thought of it as being generous, but many experienced it as provocative.

People might not have been prepared for the generous aspect?

No, and there might also be different opinions on what generosity is. Some may find what I believe to be generous, as a bit annoying. And you have every right to think that the performance was bad. I also don't know if it was good. It was a thing that we wanted to try, that we had worked on together, and we did the best we could. But that is not to say that the dance was good, or that the choreography was interesting. That's up to you to decide! [Laughs.]

What are your thoughts on your art going forward, for the future?

I am thinking of where it is headed! I can long for being able to work in a different way, that you are able to visualize how long your projects will be, within which places, and within what processes you will work. I tend to think: "What would it be like to work on a project that runs over a period of five years? A project that takes place somewhere else or works with other kinds of expressions?".

I long to work with something that is more political, from time to time. I always start working on things that I find important from a political standpoint, but I talk about them as if they are in a borderland or on-the one-hand-on-the-other-hand kind of thinking. I am not sure that I will ever get there. I really like the expressions of political pieces! But I find it difficult to do them myself. [Laughs.]

What would a political piece by you look like?

That's what I don't know! I would have done it already if I did! That's what I do not know. That's why I've never done it. In a way, I think that all I do is political. Perhaps the biggest political matter is who you work with, how you work, what you do, in what ways, with what funds, and how you try to take care of each other in a group – those are incredibly important political issues. But also, the themes and interests you talk about, where do they come from? And what all of that leads to is political in the end.

I find it difficult to do something that is directly political. But I appreciate seeing pieces that are. As an audience, I feel like I can either handle it, or not. I don't need someone to weigh in whether they are for or against it, since I can make my own subjective reading by seeing different political performances.

This is a big question, but how do you see your art within a current context? We have touched on politics and a bit on issues that have been provocative and so on, but generally?

Hmm, I don't know! I was editing interviews earlier today, interviews with the dancers I am working with in this project [Make Hay While the Sun Shines]. It's fun to do an interview myself, now that I've just read theirs.

What I find interesting in those interviews, or what turns out to be important, are these arches that link the very personal – the dance teacher you had in Dalarna – and the major political aspects of talking about the structural facets of the stage. And how that in turn can talk about art's role in society. Or: "What does the abstract mean? Who has the right to talk about the abstract? ", And so on. Those connections between the personal and the political, are perhaps art's potential, in some way. We get stuck in the minute details and focus on how small or occasional events, situations, people, materials, smells and things that happen make up life. But they are rather shaping entities, together.

With that said, I'm also afraid that I'll turn into some kind of culture lady [smiles] who can be incredibly fascinated with "the bend of the elbow in different directions", and that I get so incredibly focused on these matters and think that they are so important... and that "this elbow's motion holds the politics of the entire universe."

I realize that attitude can be privileged in itself – to have the time and enough income to be able to devote myself to specialties in that way. But I'm really happy about that too, I don't want to be without it! I love creating art and choreography. Due to the fact that you are able to devote yourself, not only to survival, but to the metaphysical or political speculations and that you are able to invent things that don't exist but maybe should exist...?

That you are able to deepdive into if you will learn something from pressing your ribs against each other instead of reading a book. [Laughs.] It's really out there, and at the same time I believe that there's a need for it, and that is also the whole point of doing this.

It can be a lot like either-or. But I have also embraced it this way and don't necessarily see anything wrong with it. We do not have to think one way or the other, or be headed one direction or the other. Everything is contextual and structural and dependent on who says it and in what context.

Many years ago, Maryam Nikandish and I did a show where we performed as lions in a cage. We were both feeling really cool. We practiced extensively on exactly how to be lions. We wore gold suits and felt really powerful. We performed it at some point and that was pretty successful, and then we performed at a music festival, the festival in Gagnef. It turned out to be so difficult with all the drunk guys who were like: "Oh, how fun. Two girls in a cage, we've seen that one before!". We had not really anticipated all the sexual connotations. We would suddenly get a look that would completely turn our entire agency in that situation, and all of a sudden, we were vulnerable and could not really say no to any of that, because we were performing as our characters. The only thing we could do was to roar like lions, back at them.

It is so easy to do something that has a certain political purpose, only to realize that you just shot yourself in the foot when you try to put that in a different context. Or that you might have missed the mark and criticized someone from a perspective that is just so wrong... You think that you are shooting from a point of disadvantage, but you did not do that at all. That happens.

But that is also why you do things – with a purpose of testing and experimenting. That is what is fun about the performing arts and the opportunity to have different roles, and to adapt different anticipated roles and ways of being.

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