

What markets for young dancers? The Venice Biennale projects

A sketchy portrait of the dance sector in Italy

From an external point-of-view the dance, as a high quality and professional form of performing arts and not as recreational activity, appears not really popular and diffused in our theatres, towns and, more broadly, in our personal experience.

The last annual report edited by the Ministry of Culture describes the dance sector as underdeveloped (*Relazione sull'utilizzo del FUS*, 2008 p. 45) (1) and not so able to exert any appeal to a wide audience (2) (p. 48). Only opera records a lower number of performances; nevertheless it manages to attract a much wider audience, more than 2 millions people.

Also from the per capita yearly funding figures show a poor picture: public funds for dance production score around 0.5 euro per capita, against an average of 11 euro for cinema, 4 for theatre, 1.5 for opera and 0.7 for circus (p. 46). Certainly this unhappy situation depends upon low audience involvement, but also upon the very low level of state support: in 2008, only 1,7% of the whole State Fund for the Performing Arts, about one tenth of the funds granted to music, cinema and theatre and one-thirtieth of that absorbed by opera (p.13).

This situation is partially counterbalanced by the allocation of Regional funds; in fact thanks to the constitutional law in 2001 (*Legge Costituzionale 18 Ottobre 2001, n. 3*), the Italian Regions play an emerging role for the promotion and the organisation of cultural activities. As a consequence, the dance sector is not equally present in the Italian territory: the North-West and Centre regions are the most important areas for dance production, distribution and promotion, holding each 30% of the total exhibitions; the North-East is also relevant with 23%, while the South and Islands hold, respectively, 11% and 7% (*Relazione sull'utilizzo del FUS*, 2008 p. 50) (3). Also the average tickets price appears really different in the various areas, ranging from a € 15-20 average in Lombardia, Liguria and Lazio to € 10-15 in the North-East, Centre and South areas, down to the minimum € 7 in Sardegna.

According to the catalogue published by *Ente Teatrale Italiano*, roughly 200 professional dance companies work in Italy, many of them receive State supports, 28 are the Dance Festival with regional or national relevance and 3 are the biggest Institutions working in the dance sector: the National Dance Academy, its connected foundation "National opera of the National Dance Academy" and the Venice Biennale (*Relazione sull'utilizzo del FUS*, 2008 p. 163).

The hard path of a young dancer

The situation described above shows quite a difficult path for accessing the performing arts market on the part of dance companies in Italy: low state support, insufficient regional action, and a mixed sector where classical ballet and contemporary dance in all its various forms coexist (contemporary dance was in fact admitted in the realm only in 2002!). Moreover the aspects examined above could be seen as the peak of the iceberg, while the educational and training period are the roots, which appears problematic as well.

Training is carried out by the Dance Academy bases in Rome, but also by other organisations, such as ATER and many private schools of uneven qualitative level. In any case, at the end of a serious educational period, a young dancer is not yet considered a professional: this is due to the young age, the limited experience (despite the high technical level attained), and the tight link with the "maestro". This is even much stronger in the contemporary dance sector, where styles and techniques are under a continuous process of research and elaboration.

Young dancers manage to enter professional companies after a very high number of auditions, but quite often work is only part-time and does not reach the threshold required for social security payments, although is not as low to allow unemployment benefits. Many dancers integrate their engagement on stage with training activities carried out in private schools. The lucky few are those working in opera houses,

after having won an open selection.

The Venice Dance Biennale and its educational projects

Consistently with the described trends, dance was the last section being introduced in the Venice Biennale programmes. Its venetian start was in 1998. The first artistic director was the choreographer Carolyn Carlson, who was able to identify and attain different important goals: to promote the production and diffusion of new works (through the creation of the *Venice Biennale Dance Company*, which intensively toured Italy and Europe), to support the Italian dance production through specific commissions to both renowned and emerging choreographers, to promote innovative artistic research all over the world hosting its outcomes and products in the Dance Festival; to encourage international co-productions, and to support dancers' permanent training (*Accademia Isola Danza*, the first academia oriented only to modern and contemporary dance, was created).

Accademia Isola Danza was one of the most important and experimental project carried on inside Biennale. A group of choreographers trained yearly about 30 young dancers from all over the world. At the end of training project, lasting 4 months, a public performance was realized. Over the years *Accademia Isola Danza* gained an ever increasing success: the third year (2001) the requests were 300, 3 the days dedicated to the audition, 175 the dancers coming from various countries; the fourth year (2002) the number of requests increases, 400 were the dancers examined. Another very important result was that nine of the young dancers attending the training project entered in the *Venice Biennale Dance Company* and took part at all the Carlson's productions.

Accademia Isola Danza brought to an end in 2002, when the Carlson's artistic direction terminated, but her efforts will sprout soon. Her important intuitions, in fact, were recovered by the last artistic director of the Dance sector, the Brazilian Ismael Ivo. Since 2005, Ismael Ivo has been at the steer of the dance sector, realizing five different edition of the *International Dance Festival of Contemporary Dance*. During the last two years, aside to the main program of the Festival, he gave life to several projects addressed to young creative dancers and choreographers, and aimed to develop their creativity giving them the possibility to work aside to great choreographers and to enhance their skills in order to successfully undertake the professional career.

Arsenale della Danza it's a three-year project kicked off in 2009, which "*invites contemporary dancers into an intense physical learning-by-doing process of research and exchange*" (4). For four months a group of 20 dancers (5) attends an intense program of activities organized, and daily overseen by Ismael Ivo, "*to support the individual to investigate and to find innovative way for art expression to emerge*" (6). From a methodological point-of-view, two are the main principles: "*learning-by-doing*" and "*engage yourself*". As a consequence the pedagogical architecture, aimed to stimulate and to accompany the creative process, is divided into several activities: daily classes that offer to the dancers a comprehensive view of dance through teachers from the international scene representing the increasingly wide spectrum of today's techniques and styles (7); weekly on-stage activities (*Open doors* (8) and *Out doors* (9) appointments) and a final performance; there is collaboration with students coming from the *Venice Architecture University* (10) in order to foster the dialogue with other artistic disciplines. Following the principles and the aims of the project the dancers' selection, in 2010, were based upon a mixed evaluation related to technical skills and to dancers' inner potential, within a sort of contemporary *maieutica* (11). The experience was challenging but highly rewarding for each of the young dancers involved.

Marathon of the unexpected. The 7th edition of the *International Festival of Contemporary Dance* was open by *Oxygen*, a dance performance realized by the dancers of *Arsenale della Danza* under the direction of Ismael Ivo, but also the closing day saw an important event for young dancers and professional companies: *Marathon of the Unexpected*. *Teatro Piccolo Arsenale*, one of the *Venice Biennale's* theatres, hosted for the whole day 21 different performances in a row, in a successful and remarkable day devoted "*to promote new and innovative projects from a choreographic point-of-view*" (12)

This event, organized for the first time in 2010, “*dedicated to the most experimental experiences in the field of contemporary dance, with the intent to give visibility to the original creative talent of young authors (13)*”, recorded a big success. Roughly 100 were the dance companies and individuals answering the announcement of selection, 21 the projects selected which included 16 Italian organisations, 3 coming from foreign countries (Taiwan, Holland and Slovenia) and 2 co-productions (Italy-Japan, Italy-Holland). They were invited to present a brief (no more than 15’) original choreographic work, never publicly performed before. Free access and the late disclosure of the project created deep curiosity and managed to attract a wide audience to the performance.

The small theatre was always full, with continuous overlapping of the audience, “*made principally by a young professional but also journalist and critics (14)*”.

Choreographic collision.

The last, but not the least, initiative, oriented to informal education and training was *Choreographic collision*, a project addressed to young students interested into performing arts, both from an artistic point-of-view as a critical one. A group of emerging choreographers and Arts and Philosophy university students was guided through some of the main performances, many meetings and two workshops with world-wide known choreographers, in order to stimulate a critical point-of-view on the contemporary dance and to train young and talented choreographers. The idea was to cope with “*the delicate and complicated task to train young and talented choreographers (...) and “the lack of residence dedicated to choreographers where they could train and compare with professionals of international level (15)*”.

Conclusions

The several initiatives carried out by Venice Biennale are addressed both at being a reference point for younger dancers’ permanent education but also to offer them opportunities, stages and channels to be more effectively introduced inside a national and international circuit. In 2010, the artistic director Ismael Ivo received an important prize, Premio danzainfiera – L’Italia che danza, for his “extraordinary contribution to the culture and training of the contemporary landscape” due to the value of his venetian projects.

Notes:

(1) In 2008, the dance shows performed in Italy were only 6.590, the 2,5% of the total live-show and cinema exhibitions supported by State Fund.

(2) The number of people attending dance exhibitions, although the total amount of shows decrease of the 3% from the previous year, recorded a reduction of the 10%, even if the cost of the ticket was lower than the one of the previous year.

(3) With North-West regions I mean, Valle d’Aosta, Piedmont, Lombardy, Liguria, with Centre, Toscana, Marche, Umbria, Lazio, with South Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria and with Island Sicilia and Sardinia.

(4) <http://www.labiennale.org/en/dance/arsenale/>

(5) In the last edition the formation included 20 dancers aged between 18 and 29, seven of whom non-Italian, and coming from France, Austria, Slovakia, Portugal, India and Russia.

(6) <http://www.labiennale.org/en/dance/arsenale/>

(7) I.e. in 2010 the leading master invited were: Francesca Harper, a leading interpreter of many offerings by the Ballett Frankfurt and an expert in the Forsythe method, Kenji Takagi, an exponent of German Theatredance and for a long time a dancer for Pina Bausch, Geyvan McMillen, a pioneer of contemporary dance in Turkey, Josè Navas, Daniel Léveillé and Sophie Corriveau, protagonists of the most innovative Canadian and Quebecan dance, Ryuzo Fukuhara, one of the protagonists of the butoh of Min Tanaka, Inaki Azpillaga, the interpreter of many choreographies by Wim Vandekeybus for Ultima Vez.

(8) Open Doors was a programme of public demonstrations and lessons developed around the cycles of masterclasses held by leading protagonists of dance worldwide.

(9) Outdoors were several appointments where the dancers of Arsenale della Danza took part to other small festival, event or ceremonies in Veneto and Italy made in order to consolidate the relations between

the Biennale, dance sector, the territory and its actors and institutions.

(10) 12 students from the University IUAV of Venice, chosen through a selection process from those enrolled in the degree courses for Theatre Sciences and Techniques, Design and Production of the Visual Arts, Architecture, will participate in a workshop that ended with their collaboration to the creation of the sceneries of Oxygen.

(11) *"The group of dancers selected in the two editions of Arsenale della Danza, was really different; the first year the dancers were older, 30 years-old in average, and more trained, while this years the dancers where younger and unripe but with a big potential. (...) Ismael Ivo has the talent to extract the own artistic nature form each of the young dancers working into Arsenale della Danza"*. June 2010, extract from Valeria Galluccio's interview. She took part to *Arsenale della Danza 2009* and to the final performances of *Arsenale della Danza 2010, Oxygen*, which opened the *7. International Festival of Contemporary Dance in 2010*.

(12) Extract from Andrea Bonadio's interview, which was the cultural operator responsible for the coordination of *Marathon of Unexpected*.

(13) <http://www.labiennale.org/it/danza/programma/marathon.html?back=true>

(14) Extract from Andrea Bonadio's interview.

(15) <http://www.danzavenezia.com/progetti/choreographic-collision/>

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