

“I have a problem in existing without creating, so my solution to exist is to create.” -Dimitris Papaioannou-

Lorette ENACHE*

Abstract: Dimitris Papaioannou avoids calling himself a choreographer or a director, just as he avoids calling the artists he works with - actors or dancers, and his creative techniques, as he himself describes them, are outside any usual norm. The terms he uses describe a spontaneous, living, instinctive process rather than a predetermined plan, the artistic vision being the one that unites these processes, only after the not at all precise and planned probing of possibilities. Emotion, in the case of his performances, is transmitted to the spectator through conscious or unconscious identification with the message conveyed by the image/sound/movement. The strong impact comes from this kind of maximum condescension he uses on stage, the way in which the spectator is practically forced to absorb sensations and information located on many levels at the same time. The rigor with which each element participates in completing the scenic picture requires attention to which all the senses must participate. And this necessary attention becomes an absolutely natural phenomenon, thanks to the perfect measure. Attention becomes fascination, and although, as a spectator, you realize that you certainly cannot be, at the level of understanding, in sync with the unfolding, the integration of the processes unfolding on stage, whatever the type of inner translation, takes place, at one level or another, consciously or not in what form, but certainly consciously at the level of emotional impact.

Keywords: dance; dance; choreographer; choreography; art; performance; scene; theater; theatre; avant-garde; emotion; strictness; choreography; creation; directing

On April 4 this year, the Greek-born choreographer Dimitris Papaioannou was named Doctor Honoris Causa by the Senate of UNATC “I.L. Caragiale”, and the day before, a conference of this remarkable personality

* Associate Professor PhD, Faculty of Theatre, George Enescu National University of Arts from Iasi, ORCID <https://orcid.org/my-orcid?orcid=0009-0003-7023-075X>

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

took place, during which he was asked questions by young choreography students and other participants in the event. It was an extremely rare opportunity to meet a contemporary creator with a unique vision and a surprising background. Moreover, Dimitris Papaioannou avoids calling himself a choreographer or a director, just as he avoids naming the artists he works with - actors or dancers - and his creative techniques, as he describes them, are outside the usual norm. The terms he uses describe a spontaneous, living, instinctive process rather than a predetermined plan, the artistic vision being the one that unites these processes, only after the not at all precise and planned probing of possibilities. Papaioannou exudes in real life as well as on stage, total harmony, bodily and inner, total confidence in his art and a special generosity in listening, understanding and sharing part of an interiority so precisely structured that you can almost see, listening to him, all his years of study and work and his complete dedication to this way of living, in which creation is the only breathable air.



© Julian Moomert, Sursa: <https://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/recent/ink>

Dimitris Papaioannou was born in Athens in 1964 and his early art studies were in sculpture, painting and illustration. He then turned his attention to performance art as a director, choreographer, choreographer, performer, set, lighting, costume and makeup designer. Above all, he considers himself a visual artist, which can be seen in all his productions, in which the image plays an essential role. He was a student of the Greek painter Yannis Tsarouchis before attending the Athens School of Arts, and in 1986 he founded Edafos Dance Theatre, where he staged his first productions, which were a hybrid between physical theater, experimental dance and performance art. In 1993 he

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

made the transition to high caliber theater with the production of *Medea*. In 2004 it became world famous, choreographing the choreography for the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic Games in Athens. In 2006, with the production of *2*, he is recognized as a major creator of avant-garde works in Greece, and in 2009 he began to create on a national scale with the 2009 production of *Nowhere*, presented at the opening of the newly renovated National Theatre of Greece, followed by the production of *Inside* for the Pallas Theatre. In 2012 he created *Primal Matter*, presented at the Athens Festival, in which he returns to the stage as a performer after a ten-year absence. "I tried to reinvent myself and after ten years I wanted to come back on stage. Next came *Still Life*, *The Great Tamer* and *Since She*, with the latter becoming the first artist to create a complete opera for Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch. In 2020 he premiered *Ink*, and his most recent production is *Transverse Orientation*, which premiered in 2021 at the Lyon Dance Biennale and toured more than 30 cities around the world with it. Over the years he has received numerous awards and nominations and his name is associated with the idea of a visionary artist of genius. As he himself says, the pillars of his work are mythology, the mystery of human existence and the concept of archetypes, and the means of expression cover all areas of the arts - image, sound, body expression, gesture, etc.

In a video interview conducted by Danza&Danza¹, Papaioannou says: "I try to create something interesting and I try to relate everything to the questions I have about life. Because I don't use text and because I'm a painter at heart, I try to compose images that speak about the things that matter to me. This is how I get in touch with archetypes. In doing so, I go back to my heritage, the ancient Greek myths, which somehow transmitted archetypal myths to the whole universe. I like to arrange things in a way that encourages a dreamlike atmosphere. I don't know if I succeed, but this is the territory where I want to communicate with others. I'm not looking for myth, poetry, necessarily, but I'm trying to explore a universe beyond realism, so I'm going into this fantasy-fusion of the unconscious."

¹ The filmed interview has been published on Danza&Danza YouTube page in 2021-
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEEcWjTXwrA>

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

What is defining in his performances and what works at a level of fascination on the spectator is the striking essence of human nature. Above all, the body of the performer himself seems to be a perfect one, on which no touch can be interfered with. Even when it is deformed. But this naturalness is ancestral, it is the human body “as it is meant to be”, in full functionality and harmony. This is why nudity does not shock or embarrass, it is natural in its naturalness. The body itself seems to be a perfectly tuned instrument, always ready to react naturally to any external action and always ready to make natural gestures, in tune with itself and with everything that happens to it. Whether it's a simple walk or complicated actions involving objects or beings, the naturalness of the movements is not betrayed at any point, and even more, it goes beyond human possibilities, in the same natural tone, through optical illusions, another dimension that Papaioannou plays with in all his productions. The very strangeness of the movements is natural, just as the deformed body is perfectly natural. The architecture of the stage, so simple and perfectly harmonized, includes exactly as many objects as are necessary for the action and the framing of the action in a space. The objects become alive and seem to be part of the very movement of the characters, in such a way that it becomes uncertain whether the human is moving the objects or the objects the human, where the human action begins and where it interferes with the objects' desire for action. Papaioannou recounts how, in rehearsals, the work with the object is purely instinctual, as a director he does not impose a theme, propose a thought or a situation, but lets the performer instinctively manifest himself to the point where what he does begins to fit into an archetype. Then, in terms of linking these moments together to create the final expression, the red thread is not necessarily a narrative one, but can be a musical one, or one of natural construction, like the passage from night to day. Superior to the epic thread is the natural, ancestral thread. What matters less is the story, what is essential is the natural flow, which is, in fact, a story taken up from the beginning until now, with all the elements that create this universe of human experience that has become a certainty, a reality.

Dimitris Papaioannou says that when he chooses the people he will work with, he looks for those who intrigue him, those who, unaffected by previous experiences in dance or acting, know how to “walk normally” and “fall normally”, remain interesting even after dozens of hours of work and exhaustion, endure those hours of exhaustion and, last but not least, do not see

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

a problem in the nudity displayed on stage. "When I'm casting, I'm looking for something I haven't done yet, I don't know what I want either, I just know that I have certain budget limits and that means a certain number of people. So I focus on finding interesting people. Of course, they have to move well, and I have to, when I look at them, be intrigued."

In his performances, water, wind, light, sound, all participate and emphasize the full human experience. In *Ink*, the stage is flooded with rain coming from a sprinkler in plain sight, the plastic in which one of the characters is trapped, by its movement creates the sound of thunder and the presence of an octopus is, as absurd as it may seem, normal and justified, even if taken out of its natural setting. And on a conceptual level, the presence of the octopus also gave the show its title. Papaioannou is always reminded of his good friend Angelos Mendis, whom he calls to see shows in the process of creation, they discuss what he wants to do, and then two weeks later the latter comes back with a title. In the case of this performance, the ink represents the brown liquid that the octopus eliminates in order to protect itself from predators and represents, conceptually, the transformation of ink into idea, the transformation of the spiritual into material. He explains the theme of this show as the clash of generations, the father-son bond and opposition, Cronos and his children.

In *The Great Tamer*, a piece of aluminum becomes, from an ordinary object, a living one, floating on the breath, becoming a feather, becoming a bird. In *Transverse Orientation*, the harmony of light is regulated by touching a broken neon, which is reached simply with a ladder, a bull-marionette drinks water from a bucket, which then, spilled, becomes crystal and hurts, and here, as in *Primal Matter*, the limbs have, by optical illusion, reverse directionality and become functional according to their own will, not according to the nature of the body.

These are just a few examples, which, as absurd as they seem, are told in each performance. Asked in an interview why he uses water so much in his productions, and in particular in *Ink*, Papaioannou says: "I like the way it refracts light, I like the way it sounds, I like the way it manifests itself gravitationally, I like the way it transforms everything when everything

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

around is sprinkled and soaked... The glowing skin fascinates me enormously"².

Very important for those who want to understand the mechanisms that go into the creation of such a production is that, as he himself says, identifying a particular technique, a particular style, a particular process, is really impossible, because the process is absolutely personal. The questions of young choreographers and of those interested in how such a result can be achieved were answered as concrete as they were impossible to apply, because they are related to a complex inner path, cultivated with its individual references, nurtured over time, through culture and experimentation. And although it appears to be a choreographic act, Papaioannou emphasizes that there are no dance steps or choreographic movements, but bodily expressions integrated into a so-called action, which is, in fact, a dilation of juxtapositions and situations that rest on concepts, not on a story with a beginning, a development and an end. And yet there is a beginning, an unfolding and an end, which lead, in a chatarsic way, to sensations, not to coherent mental processes. The way in which the spectator may or may not recognize the references is secondary, the recognition is done on an instinctive level, accessing the collective unconscious. And this is exactly the creator's intention. Papaioannou says that it is very difficult for him to say what exactly was the starting point for each performance and what, exactly, it is about: "All I try to explain is the environment." On *Ink*, he says: I know I started from something very tender in my heart, but I found the darkness. As I was working, out of me came the darkness and the horror of desire." Even on a personal level, he prefers to experience, observe and then draw conclusions: "I'm always the last to know what it's about. I do something and then I watch, I propose something and then I look at what it looks like and then I understand something about myself. But while I'm doing, I'm the last to know what it's about." ³

The emotion, in the case of Dimitris Papaioannou's performances, is conveyed to the spectator with the conscious or unconscious identification

² The filmed interview has been published on The Coronet Theatre YouTube page- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXxotG2IBUo&t=18s>

³ The filmed interview has been published on Biennale de la Danse de Lyon YouTube page in 2023- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eai0v8Kwry4>

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

with the message conveyed by the image/sound/movement. The powerful impact comes from this kind of maximum condescension he uses on stage, from the way in which the spectator is practically forced to absorb sensations and information situated on many levels at the same time. The rigor with which each element participates in completing the scenic picture requires attention to which all the senses must participate. And this necessity becomes an absolutely natural phenomenon, thanks to the perfect measure. Attention becomes fascination, and although, as a spectator you realize that you certainly cannot be, at the level of understanding, in sync with the unfolding, the integration of what unfolds on stage, whatever the type of inner translation, takes place, at one level or another, consciously or not in what form exactly, but consciously at the level of emotional impact.

Analyzing from a choreographic point of view, both his two-character and group performances, the rigor is the first that shocks, especially the fact that the result of this kind of rigor is something extremely far from mathematics. The group-characters are created on the idea of the fragmentation of a single clear movement, as, for example, is the moment of the central character's undressing in *Nowhere*. The joined hands of the group-character on either side of the central character act as two hands in perfect agreement. The movement, however, in order to be evenly distributed and to reach the center in a fluid way, creates the sensation of a snake, a tentacle, a non-human element. It is only through the rigorous transmission of the imposed from one performer to the other that one can create the natural undulation without feeling fragmented. In a different register, but on the same theme of undressing/dressing, the rigor of the movements in *Primal Matter* is again essential, because the two characters, when interacting, depend on each other, in this scene a shirt transfer directly from one arm to the other. The second thing that shocks is the naturalness of the movements done under optical illusion, with false limbs or using another performer's limbs, oriented in reverse. What impresses, however, are the details of the gaze, the slow-motion gestures, the dilation of key moments, which emphasize their intensity.

Analyzing from a theatrical point of view, the emotional charge is both individual and collective, and even if one does not start from the premise of creating dramatic situations, the action is always supported by thought and intention, by the correct location in space, even an abstract one, and by the

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

realistic relation to the abstract, which humanizes and creates in the spectator's mind the space in which the impossible becomes possible.

“I have a problem in existing without creating, so my solution to exist is to create.”⁴ Dimitris Papaioannou insists, in all his interviews, as he did at the UNATC conference, on translating his creative force precisely through his organic need to create. The impulse to live identifies with the creative impulse and the constant search for meaning with a search for the origins of humanity, through which she believes she can identify in the most real way possible.

Web References:

- <https://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/>, Dimitris Papaioannou- Official Site

- <https://dustmagazine.com/aligning-with-archetypes-the-universe-of-dimitris-papaioannou-2/>- Dust Magazine, Aligning with Archetypes. The universe of Dimitris Papaioannou, Dimitris Papanikolaou, 2020

- <https://ccmagazine.es/en/an-interview-with-dimitris-papaioannou-about-transverse-orientation-his-new-masterpiece/>- An interview with Dimitris Papaioannou about Transverse Orientation, his new masterpiece, 2021

⁴ The filmed interview has been published on Campania Tatro Festival YouTube page- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWzcdsG4nxQ&t=34s>