

OLGA DE SOTO

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Olga de Soto's lecture performance *AN INTRODUCTION* was presented on 7 April 2011 in the frame of SCORES No3: uneasy going and the performance *Débords*. Some reflexions on *The Green Table* – a *Tanzfonds Erbe* project on 22 March 2013 at the Tanzquartier Wien.



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The choreographic work that I have been developing for the past fifteen years raises the question of memory and trace from various angles and approaches.

¹ *πFo Incorporating what remains here in the in my heart* (Centre Pompidou – Paris, 2004 – 2009).

My approach involves two main axes: The first axis focuses on the study of physical memory and has been set in part in the creation of an evolutive project that I have been developing in four stages between 2004 and 2009.¹ The starting point of the project was a previous work, *Éclats mats*, and its initial objective was to take its choreographic work, the paths identified or abandoned, to a deeper level in conceptual, gestural, visual and sound terms and to explore the material and the bodily states in greater depth. I wanted to question the impressions left by certain events and physical experiences, while continuing to question myself about how contact, supports and the observation of sights, physical touch and sound can reveal our own body to each of us. I also decided to work within a peculiar temporality, transforming the different stages of work in a modular work in order to have enough time to put our physical memory to the test. Each chapter was created in succession, starting from our remembrances of the previous ones. They were grouped together year after year and shown progressively, in order to form a whole.

The second axis is devoted to the history of dance and is governed by the study of perceptual memory – mainly that of the spectator. At the end of 2002 I received an invitation from Culturgest, in Lisbon, to create a short piece in tribute to *The Young Man and Death*, Roland Petit's legendary ballet based on an argument by Jean Cocteau which was first performed 25th June 1946 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris. I knew I did not want to pay tribute to this work. Nevertheless, aware that I could not understand the real impact of this piece, I decided to go in search of people who had attended its premiere in 1946, to try to get answers. In an effort to better understand the effect of this work, it seemed to me essential to situate it within the historical context of its creation, a little over a year after the end of the Second World War. The questions I wanted to address in



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my project, and for which *The Young Man and Death* turned out to be a good pretext, notably had to do with the definition of live art, its impact, its usefulness, and the traces it may or may not leave on the audience. The work dealt with topics common to all of us – life, love and death. And the date of its first performance and the time that had passed since, then almost sixty years back, allowed me to put the true subject of my research, memory, to the test. The result of my research took shape in the show *histoire(s)*, first performed in 2004 at the Kunstfestival des arts in Brussels.

As I progressed with that project, I thought of other works that I consider fundamental to the history of dance, and in particular of *The Green Table*², the legendary work by Kurt Jooss, first performed in 1932 at the Theatre Champs Elysées in Paris as part of the first choreography contest held by the *Archives Internationales de la Danse* (AID), and for which Jooss was awarded first prize. *The Green Table* is a ballet inspired by mediaeval *dance macabre* and is strongly influenced by the post-war climate. It is considered one of the most politically engaged works in the history of dance of the 20th century; it is a pacifist work in which the choreographer denounces the rise of fascism and war. It is also the first complex ballet to have been entirely notated using Labanotation. Ann Hutchinson Guest, who I had the chance to find and to interview in the context of this project, notated the first score in 1938, at the end of her 3-years studies in Dartington Hall.

During recent years I have been working on *The Green Table*, mainly motivated by the themes handled in the work, its socio-political content, the context of its creation, the political commitment of its author and the

² *The Green Table. Dance macabre in eight scenes.* Choreography and direction: Kurt Jooss; music: Fritz Alexander Cohen; costumes: Heinz Heckroth; dancers: Kurt Jooss (Death), Ernst Uthoff (The Standard Bearer), Walter Wurg (The Young Soldier), Rudolf Pescht (The Old Soldier), Lisa Czobel (The Young Girl), Elsa Kahl (The Woman), Frida Holst (The Old Mother), Karl Bergeest (The Profiteer), Lucie Lenzer, Mascha Lidolt, Hertha Lorenz, Trude Pohl, Heinz Rosen, Peter Wolff, Hans Zullig; scenes: *The Gentlemen in Black, The Farewells, The Battle, The Refugees, The Partisan, The Brothel, The Aftermath, The Gentlemen in Black.*



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consequences of it, the fact that it is an extremely charged and complex work – on several levels – the fact that it deals with death, and the fact that since its first appearance it has virtually never ceased being performed, even today. But, unlike the work developed in *histoire(s)*, for which I principally focused on researching and compiling the statements of spectators who had witnessed the creation of the ballet in 1946, here I have collected the traces left by *The Green Table*, both through the people who had seen it at different moments of history and in different countries, and through the dancers who had performed it and who had transmitted it, for it is also a study of the question of the evolution of the transmission through the successive revivals this ballet underwent.



The subjects I have tackled in this project therefore include the spectators' and dancers' memories, the critical perception, the interpretation, the transmission and the many questions about Kurt Jooss's company at the time – a company that came from Germany, won a choreographic contest in France and then found themselves forced into exile in England. For Kurt Jooss was confronted with the first anti-Semitic laws, which threatened three of his colleagues, and led the whole company to flee Germany in 1933. The transatlantic exile also interested me, as some members of the company, the dancers Ernst Uthoff, Lola Botka and Rudolf Pescht, decided to settle in Chile, invited by the University of Santiago, after visiting the country during one of Ballets Jooss' tours in 1940, and founded the National Ballet of Chile, in 1945. So the story of the show for me is also one of flight, exile and adopted countries.

I wanted to interrogate the perception of the work through the prism of the viewer's gaze, seen at different moments in history and in different countries. I have looked for people who have seen the piece performed by Jooss's company. I have situated my geographical research in France, taking France as the place of international recognition, in Germany as the place of origin, and in England as the haven. I have also looked for spectators who saw *The Green Table* performed by Ballets Jooss in 1940, in Chile and for spectators who saw the first production by the National Ballet of Chile, in 1948. I have also looked for people who saw it in New York, in 1967, when the Joffrey Ballet performed it for the first time while the Vietnam War was at its height.

It was the rise of Nazism and the Nazis tried to appropriate of »The Table«, yes. The work was premiered in 1932, and it was such a success that they wanted to make use of The Green Table as a showcase of Nazism. But the condition was to fire all the Jewish dancers, Elsa Kahl, Pescht, I think Lola Botka too, all those people. And Jooss was a humanist, he understood straight away. I think he knew, he was warned, people told him, I think people in Stuttgart – I think he was in Stuttgart at that time – someone warned him

³ Michèle Nadal is a French dancer, actress and dance researcher, specialist in Conté notation system. She saw *The Green Table* in Paris, just after the end of World War II. She joined Jooss' company in the early 1950s after a short stay at Folkwang-Schule in Essen.

saying: »Be careful, etc.« until the day when one of his friends told him: »You know, they are planning to come here to arrest you.« And then, overnight, they were gone, I do not know, I have not lived the situation, so I cannot tell you. But they all left, they crossed the border at night, and the day after, they were going to arrest him. So how did he know? He could not... The Germans, the German intellectuals were silenced from the very beginning, really from the beginning. (extracts from an interview with Michèle Nadal, Paris, July 2010)³

When I first began working very sporadically on *The Green Table*, in 2006, I tried to find dancers from the original 1932 performance who might still be alive. I found the death dates of all the male dancers, but not of all the female dancers. During autumn 2006 I quickly came to the conclusion that one of them, Lola Botka, must still be alive, and that she must be living in Santiago de Chile. After weeks of research I made contact with one of her sons, Michael Uthoff, a dancer, choreographer, and director of a number of dance companies. He had danced in *The Green Table* on several occasions and with different companies. He started by playing the same role his father had played in the première in 1932, that of the Standard Bearer, and later played the part of Death. Michael confirmed that his mother was alive, but he informed me that I arrived a little too late, and the state of her health did not allow us to meet. Unfortunately, Lola Botka died just few weeks later, in November 2006.

My research has mainly developed along two paths: documentary research, dedicated in part to researching and documenting the perception and transmission of *The Green Table*, seeking out iconographic material (photographs of different dancers and groups in several contexts, and films made at different times); analysing the writing and choreographic characteristics of the work; looking for witnesses – dancers and audience members – and interviewing them. And then, progressively, analysing and transcribing those interviews as source material, allowing me to explore the issues they raise about the work itself as well as about its history and reception. Transcription and



analysis of interviews is part of the methodology I have established during the creation of *histoire(s)*, and it has become a fundamental tool in interpreting and arranging the various testimonies I have gathered through time. However, the search, the travel, the displacement, the meeting, the exchange with each of the interviewees, the different atmospheres, languages and accents involved in the process, also play an important role in the project. I am particularly interested in observing the moment and the movement where the remembrance emerges, as well as the very process of emerging, which concerns the retrieval of the stored memories.

The Ballets Jooss came to Lyon to present their show, I think a year or two years after the première – I don't know exactly when – so I must have been about eight years old. And my dance teacher, who also worked with the Germans, would go for classes every summer, she knew them all, so she invited us – she invited me – to go see the shows every evening... I think it must have taken three or four nights... And this was the great company, the real company, the one that took the prize with Hans Züllig, Noëlle De Mosa... It was, well, amazing!

When they arrived on stage there was agreement; we felt that these were not only dancers performing, but that they were people who had the same way of seeing the world. You can feel that kind of thing. I noticed something like it in José Limón's early companies. But it's been rare. We often see dancers who come to do something, and it's better or worse, but this felt unified, like a team. That's what it was, that's what was passed from the stage to the hall. And for me it was a defining moment, I said: »I'll do that, I'll be a choreographer like Jooss one day.« (extracts from the interview with Françoise Dupuy,⁴ Paris, July 2010)

During my research, many questions began to emerge: What traces remain in the memory of the people who created a show a long time ago, or in the memory of those who, through their work, enable it to continue to exist today? What does transmission involve? What does it mean to be a dancer? What are the place and role of dancers in the history of dance? How does a dance piece evolve within its own history? And within

⁴ Françoise Dupuy is a French dancer and choreographer, figurehead of French modern dance. She saw *The Green Table* in 1934, in Lyon.

world history? What is the impact of a politically engaged work in the memory of an audience?

*I realized immediately that it's not what they usually say, that it's a dance about war, but it's a dance about [he takes a breath] the different ways people meet death. And I found the different ways that he had portrayed very, very moving actually. The Old Mother – the way that she meets death, when Death sort of dances with her in an old fashioned, like a minuet kind of dance, to bring back her memories of her youth. And the Young Girl that he waltzes with, that reminded me a bit of Balanchine's ballet *La Valse*, where the same things happens when the Young Girl gets into a waltz with the Death that gets wilder and wilder and ends in her death. That's an unforgettable moment when she lies on the ground and Death kneels over her and then slowly lifts his head and looks at the audience. There are so many things that impressed me. And mostly actually, what brought me into tears, is this wonderful parade of the dead people at the end, when they all follow Death. That's an unforgettable moment. (extracts from an interview with Toer van Schayk⁵, Amsterdam, December 2011)*

Jooss' company kept *The Green Table* in its repertoire for more than thirty years, being part of virtually every programme, as the work had become the main livelihood of the company. In the mid-1960s, and after many requests, Jooss decided to allow performances by other companies. The first production was staged with the Bayerisches Staatballett in 1964 in Munich, and other productions were soon introduced. In the following transmission process there is one person who strikes me as central: Anna Markard, Jooss's daughter and custodian of her father's work. After doing it with her father for ten years, she oversaw the transmission of the work until her death in October 2010. According the information I have gathered, between that first production in the mid-1960s and 2005 there have so far been about 80 different productions by 48 companies on every continent, with an average of between one and four productions per year. Throughout my research I have also noted that *The Green Table* has been performed on some symbolic dates. For example, the piece was performed for a group of representatives from all the countries participating in

⁵ Toer van Schayk is a Dutch dancer, choreographer and visual artist who worked together with Rudi van Dantzig for many years at Het National Ballet. He saw *The Green Table* in 1965 for the first time at Het National Ballet, and danced the role of The Death in the company's production in 1971.

the League of Nations, which took place in Geneva in 1933. It was also chosen for a performance for world peace in front the delegates and officials of the countries present at UN headquarters in New York in 1947. I also noted that new productions have been undertaken, almost systematically, whenever the United States has been involved, directly or indirectly, in war, whether the Vietnam War (1959–1975), with the Joffrey Ballet production of 1967, or the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988); the First Gulf War (1990–1991); the current war in Afghanistan (since 2001), or the Iraq War (2003–2010) . . .

When I first saw the Green Table it would have been 1967. I was in America. The war in Vietnam was raging. And in fact, we had lost one of our dancers the year before, a fellow – I didn't really know him. He had been there in 1965 and then he had been drafted. His name was Don Richard. And he had been drafted, I arrived, it was Christmas holiday, he came back to see his mates [. . .] big celebration that Don was back. And at the end of that little holiday he went back to Vietnam. I think he'd been there for maybe a week, he stepped on a mine . . . he was gone. And so I mean not even a body that one can bury. So and that had been one of our number. So . . . it was intense. I mean and we were . . . it was the 60s, we were passionate, you know, about life and these things . . . And these were people sent over there to die. For what? Over there? Why? And of course, it's youngsters who are going. I mean it's not the people around the Green Table. It's the ones from the population; those are the ones who are sent. So we saw it in that context. [. . .] And here was this ballet of this wonderful man from in between the First World War and the Second World War; when this ballet was created, and now here we have Vietnam and nothing has changed. So that was, that was basically the perspective.

Extracts from the interview with Christian Holder,⁶ London, March 2012.

During the process I also recollected information concerning *The Green Table's* numerous revivals, with the aim of interrogating the evolution of the work through time. I decided to look for the names of all the dancers who would have danced *The Green Table* from its creation until today. I also looked for dancers who worked with Jooss at different times, notably dancers who played the role of

⁶ Christian Holder is a British dancer who saw the first production by the Joffrey Ballet in New York in 1967. He has performed the role of Death over twenty years, in several productions by the Joffrey Ballet as well as being guest-dancer in several companies around Europe.

Death. I have gathered testimony from dancers of different generations who played the same role in the piece and who worked with Jooss himself, to try to understand if and how the time and the socio-political and cultural context of the performances have had any influence on the method of approaching the work, of investing oneself in it, and of investing in it.

I want to tell you something, so that you understand what that whole experience signifies for me, to have gone to work in Germany in 1951. I mean, I had spent six years living in London, with the German bombardments, listening to the planes, listening to the bombs dropping close to our house and all of that. For me, the Germans were the enemies, in other words, I was afraid to go to this country, also because for me – and I can imagine that this is comprehensible – they were our worst enemies, my enemies, because I had to go to sleep every night in a bunker, and all of that.

*When we started doing the first tours in Germany, we saw fallen cities, we saw all the traces of the allied bombardments. Some of my colleagues had suffered from famine, during years, living underground, like rats. And there, I began to understand the extent and the significance of war. I had my own experience, but I was never touched directly, never hurt. I had never suffered from hunger, I was very afraid, yes, but no more than that. It was a big lesson in what war signifies. So, to go on tour in Germany with *The Green Table*, in that country devastated as it was by war. . . you cannot imagine what it was. I mean, I am not religious, but during each performance we lived a sort of religious experience, between the public – an absolute silence – and backstage, where each of us – and not only on stage, but also behind the stage – nobody spoke – everyone knew. Everyone knew that *The Partisan* had to pass the flag at a specific moment to someone who was going to go on stage. There was. . . we all had tasks backstage, and it all took place a sort of ritual, in silence and.. well, it was an experience so profound that I never lived something similar with any other ballet, in any other company, at any other moment.*

(extracts from an interview with Joan Turner Jara⁷, Santiago de Chile, May 2012)

⁷ Joan Turner Jara is a British dancer, dance teacher and political activist, student of Sigurd Leeder and widow of the theatre director, poet and political activist Victor Jara, symbol of the struggle for human rights and justice across Latin America. Joan Turner Jara saw *The Green Table* at the Exmouth Market Theatre in London during World War II. She was a member of the *Ballets Jooss* during the end of the 1940s and part of the 50s. She danced the role of *The Partisan* for many years first at the *Ballets Jooss* and then at *Ballet Nacional de Chile*. She is the co-founder of *Escuela de Danza Espiral* in Santiago de Chile where Sigurd Leeder's technique is still taught today.