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Sasha Waltz: Living Her Work

Sarah Elgart · Wednesday, September 23rd, 2015

Choreographer and director Sasha Waltz is a force. Her powerful, groundbreaking, and critically acclaimed work has toured the world, drawing crowds in the thousands at venues that include museums, opera houses, non-traditional sites, and proscenium theaters. She has been the subject of numerous films, books, interviews, and articles published worldwide. And yet, Waltz's work seems inexplicably to have not garnered the same degree of critical acclaim in the US as elsewhere. Somehow Waltz's voice has gone overlooked as part of an essential contemporary dialogue regarding both dance and the arts here. So a few weeks ago, when I heard that the iconic German choreographer and director would be speaking at the Goethe Institute where they would also be screening the film *Sasha Waltz: A Portrait,* I cancelled a previous commitment and reserved my spot.

The film, which packs a punch more because of the work documented therein and less because of its filmic prowess, displays an arresting range of Waltz's choreography and performance installations. Like Pina Bausch in her day, Waltz takes the accepted conventions commonly known in the world of contemporary dance – both with regards to actual movement and visual material and to the kinds of venues she uses – and bursts them open on a grand scale. Her work runs the gamut from stage, to site, to opera, to installations and museum inaugurations. Sometimes with only simple movement sequences and other times incredibly complex, she uses the body as a means of engaging in a dialogue with architecture, space, scale, and gravity. Her work seems to draw in almost equal parts from German tanz-theater, contemporary dance, visual art, and performance. Her imagery is at once stunning and deeply moving and conveys deep conceptual searches related to the human condition.

Mud covered dancers writhe on a wall in performance

As Waltz approached the end of a three-month residency at the historic Villa Aurora, I had a chance to meet with her there, speak at some length about her work, and get a tour of the villa, which has a story all its own.

Built in 1928 and nestled amongst the winding hills of the Pacific Palisades just North of Sunset Blvd., the Villa Aurora is the historic former residence of Lion & Marta Feuchtwanger who fled the Nazis from Europe, finally landing in the United States. It's a gorgeous palatial, 3 story space that was inspired by a castle that the original contractor had seen in Sevilla, Spain. With the surrounding landscape being reminiscent of Italy, the Feuchtwangers found and took to it immediately, and Lion, who had just sold his novel *The Lautensack Brothers,* was able to purchase

the house for just $9000 and save it from disrepair. In its day, the house was a central gathering space for writers and expats including the likes of Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Bertolt Brecht, Arnold Schoenberg, Kurt Weill, Fritz Lang and Charlie Chaplin. Today the Villa is a Historic Landmark that houses 22,000 volumes of Feuchtwanger's collection of books, which remain on permanent loan in the house. Since 1995, its also an international meeting place for artists, and housing programs that include staffed offices, internships, and short-term residencies. Waltz was fortunate enough to have garnered a residency there that was supported in part by the Goethe Institute of Los Angeles.

In speaking to Waltz, it becomes immediately clear that all of her work has been informed by a deep personal, intellectual, and conceptual search. Raised in Karlsruhe by a father who was an architect and a mother who curated an art gallery, Sasha Waltz was exposed at an early age to a constant flux of people at receptions and within the family house proper. Initially she believed she herself would become a visual artist, but a workshop with Laurie Booth introduced her to contact improvisation and called her into dance. After school she went to study in Amsterdam at the School for New Dance Development, where she met up with a variety of working artists, many from New York. From 1986 – 1987 she travelled there herself and furthered her education by performing with dance makers including Lisa Kraus, Meg Stuart, and John Jasperse. She then felt the need to return home and begin creating her own work.

"I really wanted to live from my work, so I returned to Germany. And when the wall came down I travelled to Berlin and wrote an application for a grant. I needed more space and wanted an urban life like in NY… And I felt good in Berlin."

Three dancers engage in a dialogues with space at the Neues Museum

Waltz described what was an *"incredible atmosphere after the wall came down"*. And like so many artists, what might have been perceived as desolation to some, she identified as opportunity. *"The whole East part of Berlin… A lot of houses stood empty that were incredible studio spaces. Factories, and huge halls, and you could rent for very little money."*

In 1992, Waltz received a scholarship as an artist-in-residence at the Kunstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, for an interdisciplinary project that would allow various artists to do showings every other week. From there she started a small group of dancers, and soon decided she wanted to make a big, evening length work: *"I found an empty space in the center of Berlin with a huge loft and lots of space. I was there for a whole year creating my work, 'Travelogue: Twenty to Eight'. We got a lot of attention."*

A dancer spins in the Neues Museum

Waltz's interest in architecture and civic planning clearly gave her an eye both for dealing with empty spaces and for recognizing opportunity. As is the case in so many cities internationally, it's the artist who identifies an open and unrecognized area, moves in, and begins to make magic. When they do so successfully commerce follows in their wake, and that once remote area becomes a mainstream destination. This is the case with the part of Berlin that Waltz moved into:

"At that moment there was nothing in Berlin, there was maybe one café and one grocery store in two kilometers and it was really through the artists… And then galleries started to open, and it

gave this area a life. I started to regularly do work. In fact I had to move out of the first studio, start a new space, and renovate, and had to move out again and then started to look for a space with two levels – because I wanted to do a two level set – and I knew this person who knew of this incredible space, Sophiensaele. It was a beautiful hall that had been totally neglected. Suddenly there was this empty beautiful huge building with a high balcony, a house form the turn of century… It had a theater, and upstairs was a studio, with side rooms. So we decided we are going to start a theater and have a space." Waltz invited Jocehn Sandig, who was working at another art house as a founder and art director, to join her in managing the new space.

These successes gave rise to the founding of her company, Sasha Waltz & Guests, in collaboration with Sandig, who later became her husband. Life and work were merging.

Two dancers in a moment from a work by Sasha Waltz

The move to the new space proved pivotal for Waltz*: "We started it alone with two other artists presenting theater. So I did the first piece there, opening the space with this piece with 'Allee der Kosmonauten'. I based this piece on these interviews with people living in a housing complex from the 60's and 70's, during the time of the GDR. We started from scratch and had to buy the chairs, sound system, paint the walls… With this piece I got invited to this festival where a lot of theater works were shown and this gave us a lot of publicity. We kept on touring and it was a very fruitful time."*

This period of life and work laid the foundation for the rest of her career. By 1994 she had done an American tour. Her choreography and direction extended into producing opera, site-specific works that she calls "dialogues", and museum "inaugurations." Everything continued to get bigger.

A dancer scales a wall of the Neues Museum

In addition to dancers, the "Guests" referred to in her creative team include costume designers, architects, composers, singers, and more, although *no* visual artists. Given that Waltz nearly became a visual artist herself, its not surprising that her imagery and production design is often her first point of departure in the creation of new work: *"The set design was always the first thing I thought of. Most of the time I have an idea that I want a wall falling, or I want to slope it, but the conception is very, very, important for me. There is one time I collaborated with a visual artist but it was very difficult, he was not very cooperative. My last set design for the opera was with an architect who was busy with the Neues Museum. Somehow it feels that working with an architect is good. I have worked with one costume designer for more than ten years, I have long-term relationships and then I meet new artists and work with them. They ask questions that make me ask myself also questions… It just changes your perspective."*

When I asked Sasha what made her want to come out to LA and what she had hoped to accomplish here, more than anything she seemed to crave time to stop and *just be.* With an active career, huge works that continue to tour regularly, and the need to balance a family that includes two children, one on the verge of young adulthood, this is completely understandable.

Waltz at work with some of her "guests"

“I felt that I had been working so much that I needed an opening. I felt very drained, and that I had to recharge myself with new experiences. So I said this year was a year where I don’t create new work. Also to have this period here where I am looking back at what I’ve done, to look at my life from a distance… Now I’m also thinking not only about my work, its maybe a time in life where I really have done a lot and I’m thinking and asking myself what do I really want to do? I’m questioning… Does it have a social relevance? Now I want maybe to do something that is more concerned with the body.” Waltz claimed the time in LA to rest, reflect, open herself to new influences and nourish her “inner self” before stepping out again.

Although today due in part to financial constraints she no longer maintains Sasha Waltz & Guests in a conventional manner with permanent company members, she keeps the same structure and continues to tour and provide ample regular work for a large number of these dancers – many of whom she has worked with for over twenty years. She also maintains three rehearsal masters, and an office with about twenty-five people.

A dancer swimming underwater as part of a museum installation

Seemingly unstoppable, Sasha Waltz continues to live from her work, allowing it to inform her life and vice versa on every level, with even her children participating at times in performances. A truly visionary artist she is unafraid of challenges or of asking tough questions either of herself, of her collaborators, or of her audiences. Waltz’s work is simultaneously otherworldly and deeply, deeply human. And as evidenced in the teaser for the film by Brigitte Kramer, *Sasha Waltz: A Portrait* deals with the most important years of her international career, her work seems to get better, bigger, and more profoundly and uniquely her own.

https://youtu.be/ZQTKmYPOCBM

This entry was posted on Wednesday, September 23rd, 2015 at 11:10 pm and is filed under Theatre, Film, Dance
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