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**Reviews: Bolshoi 'Bright Stream', ENB 'Giselle', Review of  
'Agency: A Partial History of Live Art'.  
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*Agency: A Partial History of Live Art*, Theron Schmidt (ed), Bristol: Intellect, 2019.

I have sat on the boards of many arts organisations, always wanting to lend what support was in my power to their often-quixotic dreams. I have rarely been critical of the actions or ideas of artistic directors or curators. My counsel was frequently sought by creative leaders who were under siege, frequently by other board members from the conventional world of business or the cautious one of the third sector. These board members were often alarmed about the direction of travel, whether it was into a financial morass or a popular press scandal opportunity. Both cases fit the public reputation about the arts, that no one there can be trusted with either money or morals. When appropriate, I have explained patiently and politely that underpinning the business model for all organisations in the arts is the certainty of going out of business.

The trick is to do so slowly, and that takes great ability. An arts organisation that takes ten years to do it has been very well run indeed. In the case of this anthology of work of the Live Art Development Agency (LADA), it is now twenty years since a modest Arts Council grant was awarded on the back of some strategy papers about the future of art, noting an emerging practice that was slippery to define but engaging and inspiring. This collection is a celebration of the feat of survival and more. It is also a tribute to the meaning of LADA to artists and audiences engaging with it. As such, this collection reflects much of its early energies, the challenges posed by the work it curated and a notion of action as art.

One of the positive aspects of this is the notion of shared community built up and expressed in the pages of *Agency*. Few of the contributions fail to acknowledge the importance of LADA and its directors in their creative development. This, of course, is a specific kind of agency, the provision of support, advice, funding and opportunity for artists whose work might otherwise languish. This is not remarkable (most organisations of this kind and longevity will have plenty of those connected with it with similar tales to tell), but it does indicate something of the complex of systems to be navigated by those with an uncompromising practice, a need to find a support network for it and then an audience.

The collection actively avoids attempts to define what Live Art might be. Indeed, a number of contributors go to great lengths to critique and reject the term, in keeping with the sense of the artists collected here that they have been part of a grand project to challenge the ordinary and everyday through their art, even if it belongs to the world of art. In many senses, they have a point. The cultural conversation about LGBTQ+ issues might never have come about if not for the contribution of Live Art and its transgression of boundaries, often pushing art propositions out of conventional spaces and into the world. Others have sought to invade the institutional with the transgressive, to reinvigorate art spaces with the power to shock. This has had the effect of deflating the once controversial, liberating those in need of role models or acknowledgement of their otherwise deeply kept secrets. There is, in this book, an intentional cross-reference between a marginal art practice and a marginalised life. The suffering endured through art is an extension and expression of suffering and, as pointed out Dominic Johnson's contribution, it has a long history in art-making, of which Live Art is simply one manifestation.

Efforts to break the notion of the physical endurance aspect of Live Art are attempted in the organisation of the collection into five parts, themed to focus the interlocutors on a starting point about live art making. Including 'Bodies' (of course), but extending to 'Spaces', 'Institutions', 'Communities', and 'Actions'. This doesn't always work. When the artists aren't talking about the organisational issues around making work, they sound like savvy business professionals discussing the changing dynamics of the policy scene around them, or the practical manoeuvring around sorting out logistics and the supply chain. Nearly always, there

seems to be a return to the transgressive. This is more interesting and revealing, dealing as it does with the art-making process itself.

Despite the attempts by many contributors to refute a definition for Live Art, or even for the interests of LADA, the importance of transgression, especially its physical manifestations, begins to emerge rather rapidly and remain as an unavoidable trope. How this works within institutional culture is keenly observed, for instance, by Mary Paterson who notes the enthusiasm of another generation for 'doing PhDs' (note the verb), and her suspicion that 'it feels like these PhDs are a means for academic culture to encroach on practice, rather than the other way around.' (p.139). Frankly, she has a point. Whilst this collection might be a celebration of twenty years of a hitherto marginalised practice and those artists who have been genuinely brave enough to confront the subtle and not-so-subtle manifestations of this across twenty years, there is also the inference running throughout these pages of wistful nostalgia for shocks gone by. As it matures as a practice, Live Art of the sort discussed in this book must surely count its victories in the conventionalisation of its practice. The boundaries have been pushed and subsequently broadened, and within the community of interest of Live Art there is more and more that doesn't feel transgressive any longer. This affords the emergence of a different concept of the role of art. For the artists collected and represented in this collection, there is a sense that their art, beyond the transgressive, is about freedom and the dynamics for achieving it. That this utopian project was ever formulated is laudable in itself. That it has lasted for twenty years is a tribute to the unwavering beliefs and energies of its various leaders. But the claim of *Agency* is that a vigorous Live Art practice has been achieved without succumbing to the theoretical deadness of academia or the creative stasis of convention. I'm not so sure this is what we can understand by the contributions to this anthology. There is a further lesson here about the agency of art itself as the form for personal freedom. The consequences of this might well be played out in whatever future LADA has awaiting it.

'*Giselle*', English National Ballet, Sadler's Wells Theatre, London, September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Most 19<sup>th</sup> century ballets were faithful to their cultural origins. Part of the attraction of ballet as it emerged as a spectacle was this representation of the leisure of the aristocrats. From a little bit of French Court dancing emerged a form that presented for the public an idea about how their rulers lived, a glimpse into an other-worldly existence of exaggerated manners, elegant gestures and controlled physicality marked by restraint and order. The subject matter was often metaphorical and provided a pretext for the *divertissement* that bested narrative as the point of the form. Rarely did the narrative determine the movement, rather this was communicated through mime in the set up for the next set piece.

A notable exception to this is *Giselle*. Famously amongst ballet heroines, the eponymous central character is not a princess but a peasant girl, with a mother who disapproves of dancing and warns her daughter off about its dangers. None of it is set in a court, and the aristocrats are rather ignoble when they do appear. The ballet's theme is a cautionary tale for girls: don't fool with the nobility or with dancing as they will both kill you. Corelli and Perrot's original includes one of the most famous set pieces in all ballet, but it isn't a chocolate box, orderly celebration of patterns or tasty ensemble work. It is the famous Mad Scene, the precursor of all of the mad scenes to come in dance as a theatre art, especially from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Their disproportionate popularity with choreographers must clearly have a correlation to a deep fear of unfettered expression of women's

physicality explained as the evidence of a state of mental distress. In *Giselle*, this comes as the truth about her local boyfriend emerges in the most ghastly and embarrassing way: the arrival of a hitherto unknown rival as part of a royal hunting party seeking refreshments. A fellow peasant shops the lad as the disguised heir to the dukedom, an angry scene breaks out amongst the nobles, and Giselle herself succumbs to grief and shame, finally plunging the sword that is the evidence of her lover's nobility into her own chest. Her flailing limbs and dishevelled hair are a stunning exception in a repertoire otherwise characterised by balance and control.

*Giselle* is extraordinary for this if nothing else, but there is also more to it. It is also about class warfare. Albrecht, the thoughtless son of the powerful duke, fancies a peasant girl despite being betrothed to the princess Bathilde. He deceives Giselle into believing he is just another rustic youth. She gives her heart to him, and thus his deception is one made with the consciousness of knowing there is no possible future route for their relationship. He is entirely aware of the consequences should the truth be known, which is why he goes to such trouble to conceal it. In Gautier's original scenario, from 1841, the ballet finishes with the forgiveness of Bathilde in the moonlit graveyard that is the setting for the second act (surely a metaphor for the July Monarchy of Louis Phillippe). This doesn't survive into modern productions, long ago replaced by Albrecht's penitential dancing to the point of fatal exhaustion in order to release Giselle's spirit.

This leads us to the third of its unusual features. *Giselle* is about revenge. This is inflicted by the spirits of young girls deserted or deceived before their wedding bells had had occasion to chime. Their early death from grief leaves their spirits with the energy for dancing and a taste for vengeance. The Wilis, as they are known, may be lovely to look at, but young men wandering through the forest after midnight are warned they are likely to be danced to their deaths by some delectable spirit-maidens.

The subtext of *Giselle* in times significantly different to its first incarnation has been impossible to resist. The prospect of some wrathful young ladies inflicting damage on feckless aristocrats whilst traversing various states of mental distress has been too seductive for the likes of Mats Ek for instance, whose asylum setting retained Adolphe Adam's familiar score.

Akram Kahn's *Giselle* was commissioned by the English National Ballet in 2016. Kahn ditched the original score for Vincenzo Lamagna's interpretation of it (though not much of Adam survives to my ear). The most serious impact this has is on volume: not for Lamagna the trite little motifs of the July Monarchy, but the booming, bass-driven vibrations of amplification for the live orchestra that often displaces the action onstage in dramatic presence. Kahn has also retained the power dynamic, shifting the distance between the young lovers to immigrant factory worker and owner rather than peasant to noble, a decision that pays off handsomely in the second act when the action shifts to an abandoned factory rather than the traditional graveyard. However, in all these transpositions, the most important is in understanding the quality of movement, and how that defines more than character, but culture. It doesn't matter if we struggle to get the literal sense of dramaturgy underpinning the action, but it does matter if we can't understand who the characters are and what their relation is to one another through how they move.

The beginning of the first act looks like a mess. The suspicion that the choreographer is struggling to develop the themes with dancers so differently trained to those who might normally work with is hard to avoid. There are a few attempts at folk dance, reflecting the passing action of the original, but eventually, what emerges is the context for that lack of shape. At two-thirds of the depth of the stage, a large wall looms over proceedings, and it is

as it swings forward we begin to understand why the movements of Kahn's factory workers so lack structure. The arrival of the oligarchs, including Albrecht's betrothed, changes all that. As the wall rotates forwards, we see the physical contrast between the unruly migrants and the strict, limited action of the landlords as they glide into place to patronise the workers. The scene between Bathilde and Giselle, where Bathilde gifts her necklace to the poverty-stricken peasant, for one a trifle, to the other unknown riches, could come straight from the repertory. Again, the movement quality becomes the most important aspect of the exchange, and it is impossible not to notice what attracts Albrecht is the freedom of action Giselle embodies. Bathilde's stiff, overconstructed gown with its five foot stays contrasts with the jersey dress that enables Giselle to move so quickly around her, and yet the power over Albrecht's future is still retained by someone almost incapable of movement beyond a slow walk. It is power indeed.

The ghostly second act, where it becomes clear that Giselle has died carrying Albrecht's child, is where the production truly sets itself free from the history of the ballet and makes its own case. The simple addition of some thin canes emphasises the threat of the Wilis, ably led by Stina Quagebeur as their queen. They are now armed and directly threatening. There is also an interesting use of pointework. Kahn hasn't eschewed them as he might reasonably have done for such a contemporary production, but held them back for the second act to indicate the other-worldliness of the Wilis. This is made all the more mysterious by reducing the amount of bourrée that might traditionally accompany standing straight: modern dancers need less of such a trick to stay upright, and so the odd bourrée emerges like a twitch. The effect is uncanny.

The denouement between the jealous and deprived Hilarion and Albrecht offers a fight scene that seeks to exploit the difference in the way of moving and James Streeter, as Albrecht, retains this classical elegance all the way to his demise at the hands of the Wilis. Tamara Rojo, the ENB's artistic director who commissioned Kahn to make the work, gives a bravura performance as the heroine. This she is in more ways than one, noting it takes some confidence to offer a commission for a classic work to a choreographer who had never made work on this scale before. She offers a physical power to match the demands of the work, and thus remains faithful to this ballet's history whilst drawing out its subversive subtext.

*Bright Stream*, Bolshoi Ballet, Royal Opera House, 8/8/2019

Shostakovich's score '*Bright Stream*' (1934), a ballet set on the eponymous collective farm of the title, has had two separate lives. The first was its original incarnation as part of an effort to provide Soviet themes for the Bolshoi Ballet's repertoire. This policy was often observed in the breach, but works like '*The Red Poppy*' (1929) and an earlier collaboration between the choreographer Lophukov and Shostakovich, '*The Bolt*' (1931) were attempts to inject socialist realism into the Russian ballet tradition. As such, they reflected issues like the treatment of workers or the social dynamics of change, often focussing on the energy of the emerging new society that was the USSR and its idealist purity. Shostakovich also wrote a score for the Kirov, '*The Golden Age*' (1931), about the travails of a Soviet football team abroad holding on to their proletarian ideals in the face of all kinds of nefarious temptations. '*Bright Stream*' was a further effort to present the newly emerging society to itself through art. A comedy ballet, of which there are few, the scenario focusses the action on a kolhoz (collective farm) teeming with happy, smiling agricultural workers. A train drops a state-sponsored theatre troupe into the remote countryside as a reminder of the importance of

culture to the Soviet experiment, and in exchanges great and small, all participants finish the ballet somewhat wiser and more satisfied with what they have.

This first incarnation would turn out to be Shostakovich's last outing in the theatre. This would have seemed hardly likely at the time, as the composer of two other ballets and that year's disturbingly dark opera *'Lady Macbeth of Mtensk'* (1934), all of which had received initial critical acclaim. He had worked with Mayakovsky and Meyerhold on the play *'Bedbug'* (1929) in the late twenties as well as other theatrical offerings. As a composer for the theatre, Shostakovich clearly found the socially dynamic and time constrained rehearsal process inspiring, and the demand for resolution of musical ideas in the context of the action as a satisfying challenge. His works for the theatre were not untrammelled success: his adaptation of Gogol's *'The Nose'* (1930) was staged against his wishes and was a structural mess, but at the time such criticisms were aesthetic rather than political.

The change would come about two years after the premiere of both *'Lady Macbeth of Mtensk'* and *'Bright Stream.'* An editorial appeared in Pravda, apocryphally penned by Stalin himself. It declared Shostakovich's earlier opera 'muddle, not music', and began the process of proscribing his early work as 'formalism', the enemy of socialist realism and incorrigibly Western and Modern. Agrippina Vaganova, the famed head of the Kirov School in Leningrad, promptly waded in to denounce *'Bright Stream'* and it was, like all of Shostakovich's works, swiftly removed from the repertory along with all his other works for the theatre. Most of them would be forgotten.

The second life of *'Bright Stream'* began after the end of Soviet times. Shostakovich's life had long since ended, and his ambivalent relationship with the regime had seen him rehabilitated and garlanded as a great Soviet composer. The damage to his reputation in the West this perceived collusion with the authorities brought has been subsequently tackled by musicologists claiming to find traces of rebellion buried deep in the structures of his scores. For his part, from the late nineties, the then-director of the Bolshoi Ballet, Alexei Ratmansky, was seeking to do much the same as his predecessors had done more than sixty years before in introducing new work into the otherwise staid repertory of the Bolshoi. Like Petipa pondering the failure of the first version of *'Swan Lake'*, he figured the fault might not lie with Shostakovich's scores but their context.

Far from the accusations of formalism made by Vaganova and others, Ratmansky thought he heard only the innocent sounds of the Russian countryside: cows, bells, peasants dancing and dogs barking. It is hard to concoct an account of *'Bright Stream's'* score that suggests anything other than strong rhythms, brassy marches and the interplay of characters working at cross-purposes to one another. Ratmansky's discovery of these qualities in the score coincided with a post-Soviet society struggling with its new identity. As the then-recently elected Vladimir Putin had said, 'Whoever does not miss the Soviet Union has no heart. Whoever wants it back has no head.' In the absence of an identity for the new Russia, a nostalgia for the Soviet Union began, a cultural trend that has barely changed since given there has been little to replace it in the cultural memories of the young, and the giant achievements of the Soviets that still define so much of the Russian landscape, physically and culturally. But, as is the case with Western excursions into the past, nostalgia frees us from the sense of worrying about an uncertain future, and can present the past as a safer place than today whilst eliding its tricky (and sometimes deadly) politics.

Ratmansky's production of *'Bright Stream'* (2003) has not been without its critics from this perspective. Setting a comic ballet in a collective farm just a few years after the bloody horrors of collectivisation seems to some tasteless. The fate of Piotrovsky, the scenarist of *'Bright Stream'* also haunts a contemporary remounting of the work. A playwright then a

screenwriter, eventually rising to become the head of Lenfilm in Leningrad, he was shot in Great Terror in 1938. The happy peasants welcoming the travelling players with flowers and receiving gifts (a dress for a Stakhanovite milkmaid, a phonography for the village elder) could surely not have been true to life if true nonetheless to the intensions of Socialist Realism. Homans (2011) found the work offensive as much for its triviality as for the gory history it rewrites (but doesn't nostalgia always do that?). It certainly resets a stage, and as such presents a challenge for the viewer with history in mind. Ratmansky's choreography is of necessity new (the original being lost to us), but Piotrovsky's scenario has been closely followed and Ratmansky plumbed the score for clues as to who has talking to whom and why. Homans overplays her argument about Ratmansky's superficiality: it is difficult to make comedic ballet, and one of Ratmansky's strengths is his ability to create humour from movement as much as situation. The duet between the trouser-suited ballerina impersonating a man and an old crone from the village makes much of the strength/weight imbalance. The pointe-shod danseur from the troupe dresses up in a tutu to lure an old man away from trouble, and in doing so demonstrates some solid technique. The conspiracy of the locals to get a couple back together is skilfully executed, but the context is still hard to get away from. For all the laughter and gentle humanity of the inhabitants of '*Bright Stream*', we are still looking at a distortion of Soviet experience. The final scene is played out against a backdrop that intentionally resembles the fountains at VDNKh, the Soviet exhibition centre still standing in the north of Moscow and its intimation of the bounty of produce that is/was the Soviet Union. Would that it had been so. It is hard not to wish that it had been like this, and not the bungled, distorted and disgraced system that had to resort to banning ballets about ordinary people seeking to live up to a regime's ideals.

Homans, J., 'Back In The USSR', *New Republic*, September 28, 2011.

Sporton, G., 2006, 'Power as Nostalgia: the Bolshoi Ballet in the New Russia', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 22, Part 4, No. 88, pp.379-386.