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## **A Feminist Archeology of Collective Memory in Turkey.\* A Retrospective Look on Works of Movement Atelier with a Focus on *AHHval / cirCUMstances***

This article contextualizes the Turkish female dance collective Movement Atelier (1999) within the modern dance field and experimentalist theatre scene of contemporary Turkey, analyzes a specific work of theirs *aHHval* (En: *CirCUMstances*) to illustrate their style and embodied counter-politics; and in the final section it draws parallels and make comparisons between Movement Atelier's and certain choreographers' works from the international modern dance scene to provide a comprehensive backdrop for their unique style.

### **Background: Modern Dance in Turkey**

Turkey has a relatively young history of ballet when compared to countries that established such traditions before the 20<sup>th</sup> century; like Russia, France, Italy, and Denmark. Institutionalization of dance through the state has been a long process with many controversies in Turkey (established in 1923), ballet in particular starting with the visit of Dame Ninette de Valois (Ballets Russes dancer and founder of the British Royal Ballet) to Istanbul in 1947 to start a ballet school in Turkey through the invitation of the then Minister of Education, Hasan Ali Yücel. Ballet (like opera) was considered to be an important part of creating the necessary modern façade for the secular Republic of Turkey. However, state support was irregular (and sometimes erratic, based on the political conditions of the times) in this fast developing Muslim-majority country. In 1957, the first graduates of Turkish Ballet School became the Ankara State Ballet Company; and up until around the mid-1960s, they became a fully professional ballet troupe. This happened mostly because of the individual efforts of Dame Ninette de Valois, who worked like a ballet missionary in Turkey. In this establishment period, Turkish ballet was almost only defined by

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the Anglophone canon (which again de Valois herself established<sup>1</sup>), and only after the mid-1970s did Russian ballet started impacting the Turkish ballet scene after the artistic control of de Valois on the field started fading away.<sup>2</sup>

In her 1977 memoir *Step by Step*, Dame Ninette de Valois proudly writes about her efforts placing Turkey on the map for internationally touring dance companies in such a short period of time<sup>3</sup>. The only documentation of which specific companies visited Turkey in this early period can be found in a single paragraph within Jak Deleon's 1990 book in which he mentions the touring of Martha Graham's dance company to Turkey in 1962, where Graham's company performed 6 shows<sup>4</sup>. Modern dance started to emerge after the early 1970s in Turkey, and the frontier Turkish choreographer in this field was Duygu Aykal, who had trained under Kurt Joss in Germany at Essen Folkwang Ballet School<sup>5</sup>. Leonide Massine in Royal Ballet also trained Aykal through three-week intensive Dance Composition Courses for three terms at the Upper School in Royal Ballet between Autumn 1968 and the Summer of 1970<sup>6</sup>, which she took through the initiation of Dame Ninette de Valois. Despite her early death at the peak of her career, Aykal managed to establish modern dance as a sub-branch in the Turkish State Ballet, and was a very successful and philosophically-minded choreographer. After late 1980s, independent and experimental dance groups and festivals started to emerge in Turkey<sup>7</sup> due to a combination of an increase of people with various trainings in dance, and an accumulating number of graduates from conservatories in the country. Starting with the late 1990s, state sponsored and privately funded international dance, theatre, and opera festivals started gaining visibility in the public life of urban centers (predominantly Istanbul) and many internationally known choreographers such as Pina Bausch toured to Turkey<sup>8</sup> during this time period.

Since the early 2000s, there has also been an emerging feminist wave in the field of theatre in Turkey, with feminist theatre companies like Tiyatro Boyalı Kuş (2000), established by Jale Karabekir<sup>9</sup>

1. Beth Genné, *Creating a Canon. Creating the "Classics" in Twentieth-Century British Ballet*, in «Dance Research Journal», vol. 18, n. 2, 2000, pp. 132-162.

2. For more information on this foundational period see: Deniz Başar, *From Petrushka to Çeşmebaşı: Tracing the Legacy of the Ballets Russes on the Turkish Ballet*, University of Toronto, June 2018, online: <http://www.academia.edu/36837459/>, Zeynep Günsür, *Modernization Through Dancing Bodies in Turkey*, PhD dissertation, Boğaziçi University, Istanbul 2007.

3. Ninette De Valois, *Step by Step*, Howard & Wyntham Company, London 1977, p. 169.

4. Jak Deleon, *Cumhuriyet Dönemi Türk Balesi [Republican Era Turkish Ballet]*, Boğaziçi University, Istanbul 1990. p. 17.

5. Metin And, *Part Five/A Newcomer: Classical Ballet*, in Id., *A Pictorial History of Turkish Dancing: from folk dancing to whirling dervishes-belly dancing to ballet*, Dost Yayınları, Ankara 1976, p. 175.

6. Kate Flatt, *De Valois's invitation to Leonide Massine to teach Dance Composition*, in Richard Allen Cave, Libby Worth (edited by), *Ninette de Valois: Adventurous Traditionalist*, Dance Books, London 2012, p. 65.

7. Jak Deleon, *Cumhuriyet Dönemi Türk Balesi [Republican Era Turkish Ballet]*, cit., p. 99.

8. Arzu Öztürkmen, *Reflections on Pina Bausch's Istanbul Project*, in «Dance Research Journal», vol. 35, n. 2, Winter 2003, pp. 232-235.

9. Karabekir is also known for her long-lasting workshops with women from working class neighbourhoods in Istanbul with the techniques developed by Augusto Boal. For more information: Jale Karabekir, *Türkiyede Kadınlarla Ezilenlerin Tiyatrosu: Feminist Bir Metodolojiye Doğru [Theatre of the Oppressed with Women in Turkey: Towards a Feminist Methodology]*,

and later through second-generation theatre ensembles like Nü Kolektif (2010-2015), and with emerging feminist playwrights after 2005 like Ebru Nihan Celkan. Many theatre works were also created by companies and collectives in this alternative theatre field with feminist consciousness, like Kumbaracı50's feminist erotic puppet show *Haz Makamı (Modes of Pleasure – 2012)*, Tiyatro BEREZE's *Kırmızı Ayakkabılı Kadınlar (Women with Red Shoes – 2013)*, Kara Kabare's *Kamamber (Camembert – 2016)*, Mek'an group's *Apaçi Gızlar (2016)*, or Neslihan Arol's feminist meddah performance *Meddah Geldi Haaanım (Ladies, Meddah has arrived! – 2018)*. One of the earliest and foundational feminist theatre groups that came along with Tiyatro Boyalı Kuş was Zeynep Günsür's Movement Atelier, which was established in 1999. Among the theatre companies in Turkey that have feminist consciousness, Movement Atelier is the only group whose performers are predominantly trained in ballet and various other dance forms, but not predominantly in acting.

After the mid-2000s in urban Turkey, international encounters started becoming more and more common, with many dancers and young people becoming interested in dance by joining workshops, getting parts of their educations in Europe (through exchange programs like Erasmus), or through participation in international modern dance festivals, like Istanbul's very own iDANS (2006-2013). Many important contemporary artists like Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker (in 2013 with her famous *Rosas Danst Rosas*) toured to Istanbul because of the iDANS festival<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, black box theatres started mushrooming in urban areas of Istanbul, which provided a new way of spectatorship and performative perspective for multiple communities of theatre and dance. In this moment, the black box stage became an alternative to proscenium stage for the first time in Turkey. This allowed for new performance experiences for both performers and audiences. Among the mushrooming black box stages, Çatı Dance [En: Roof Dance] and Çıplak Ayaklar Kumpanyası [En: Bare Feet Company] belonged to dance collectives. Çıplak Ayaklar Kumpanyası has especially become the singular modern dance collective in Turkey, with a self-sustained space for more than a decade and a half now.<sup>11</sup>

In 2005, GarajIstanbul, one of the first black box stages in Istanbul, was established with the efforts of a group of collective avant-garde theatre artists working since the 1990s. GarajIstanbul was at the threshold of the alternative theatre scene, along with Dot Theatre (also established in 2005), which was another first wave black box stage that settled in central Istanbul and sits five minute walking distance from GarajIstanbul. Therefore, when Movement Atelier performed *aHHval (En: cirCUMstances)* in GarajIstanbul in 2009, it was an exploration of another potential use of dance – dance theatre – and

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Agora Kitaplığı, Istanbul 2015.

10. *iDANS 06 Promo*, uploaded by iDANS Festival, 2013, online: <http://vimeo.com/68609910>. Accessed September 8, 2018.

11. For more information on this turning point through black box stages in theatre field of Turkey after mid-2000s see Deniz Başar, *Performative Publicness: Alternative Theater in Turkey After 2000s*, MA thesis, Boğaziçi University, Istanbul 2014. For details on modern dance scene in the alternative theatre movement of Istanbul, see the pages 166-167 and 198 and 221-222 in the same thesis.

space itself<sup>12</sup>.

Within the context of this backdrop, Movement Atelier has been an interesting intersectional phenomenon in the performance field of Turkey. Its emergence was dependent on the momentum of the moment, but it also enlarged the alternative theatre field itself through its uniqueness. The company has created a movement language of their own with a «primarily focus on [female] body's own history and memory»<sup>13</sup>, and their works circulate around themes like gender-based hypocrisies of modern-day Turkey and the collective amnesia of Turkish society in the face of many catastrophic changes over the last century. Movement Atelier uses oral histories, literary texts by prominent women writers of Turkey, and social science documents that theorize about the public culture of Turkey as their starting points to develop dance/performance works. The powerful, fragmented, but harmonized nature of their performances trigger a vast landscape of connotations for the audiences of Turkey about their collective public memory of their country through an intergenerational feminist perspective. Their works almost inevitably unfold with moments of «autonomy and resistance»<sup>14</sup>, confronting the official Turkish masculine history. Their political standing is revealed through «interruptions» of the expected, or «by addressing the biases [...] impose[d] on us»<sup>15</sup>; here «us» meaning the citizens of Turkey.

### An Analysis of aHHval/cirCUMstances (2009)

I will focus on *cirCUMstances* (2009)<sup>16</sup> to analyze the nature of their feminist physical/dance theatre works. The following quote is how the collective describes their work in *cirCUMstances*:

Years of jumping rope, playing dodge ball and selling hand-made necklaces made out of sea shell. Debating the death penalty in the universities while impatiently awaiting our new “bay-ram”<sup>17</sup> clothes. Nurturing ourselves only with domestic products, and participating in torchlight festivities. Trying to shape our breasts with teacups. Voluntary dim outs, waiting on huge lines for gas. Some learned to read with the words: “Strike Here”. As gun shots were fired in front of the local Soup-Shops, we turned on our electric-radios and waited for them to warm up. Birds rested on telegraph lines. We wore hoop skirts and crazily munched sun flower seeds. We had neighbors with classic names like Nebahat, Müzeyyen or Münevver. We continuously wrote compositions and hunted flies with plastic gadgets. We screamed “All You Need is Love” while properly humming “As Night Falls Sorrow Becomes Me Again”<sup>18</sup> according to tune...

(Certain times happened, certain times didn't. Disabled needles were stuck and impeccable scars appeared. Certain lies were told, certain games were played).

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12. Deniz Başar, *Performative Publicness*, cit.

13. Hareket Atolyesi, online: <http://hareketatolyesi.blogspot.com/2008/11/hareket-atolyesi.html>. Accessed July 3, 2018.

14. *aHHval/cirCUMstances*. Directed by Zeynep Günsür, 2012. Online: <http://vimeo.com/33778447>. Accessed July 2, 2018.

15. Sander Bax *et al.*, *Introduction*, in Id. (edited by), *Interrupting the City: Artistic Constitutions of the Public Sphere*, Valiz, Amsterdam 2015, p. 13.

16. My analysis here is based on the recording of the performance: *aHHval/cirCUMstances*, cit.

17. A word that refers to national and religious celebrations in Turkey.

18. A song in the style of classical Ottoman music, sung by famous singers like Müzeyyan Senar and Zeki Müren.

Post scriptum: The work deals with the re-writing of the history from a civil and personal angle. With history we mean the “past moment” which includes even the past hour, and with civil and personal angle, a form of playing in which we include autonomous apprehension and resistance.<sup>19</sup>

This description is as accurate as it is poetic. Everything mentioned in these two small paragraphs are embodied in various ways through the movement and text of the performance. The minimalistic use of language seen in this description is used as an aesthetic tool throughout the performance, which results in poetic honesty. In this section, I will analyze the movements’ syntax and vocabularies, along with soundscapes accompanying the scenes under thematic clusters (with the exception of opening and closing scenes which will be noted chronologically in the text).

Through the performance of *cirCUMstances*, domestic and urban settings are cited with very few objects and gestures. A domestic setting, for example, is cited with a table that has an ashtray and white lace tablecloth on top, accompanied by two chairs and a coat hanger with a red umbrella on it. All of these objects are semiotically very readable to Turkish audiences who might have the exact same objects with the same arrangement in their homes. Urban settings are cited with the same type of minimalism: through holding an umbrella or by performers trying to run away from rain while the sound effect of heavy rain is heard in the background. The stage is cited as itself through the use of microphones and direct address of performers to the audience. Scene transitions are seamless with very creative touches like the use of film-frame type of still visuals that are created by multiple performers posing within the continuity of one action, as if each performer is actually the same body in different temporalities. This minimalism, smoothness in transitions, and overlapping citations of-the-domestic, of-the-public, and of-the-stage serves as a major tool to excavate the collective subconscious of the audience.

In the opening scene of the performance, this memory excavation is visualized in a cited domestic setting: two performers move the table at the front of the stage and reveal a sleeping woman in fetal position underneath the table, who must have been there before the audience arrived. This image – hiding under the table – reminds us of the common game of home-making by children, who invent structures such as tents out of table cloths or pillows to hide under or within. These spaces provide a womb or a protective shell within the physical reality of the family home, which might at times be hauntingly bigger than the reality of the child. This is the reason why when the woman in fetal position wakes up, she stares at the audience in fear. Following this, the sound of rain starts rumbling and intensifies in the sound system of theatre. Before holding the umbrella above her head to protect herself from the rain sounds, she first holds the open umbrella in front of her for a moment, protecting herself from the gaze of the audience.

Throughout the performance, the interbreeding of masculine-gendered public and feminine-

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19. *aHHval*, in «Hareket Atolyesi», 11 Sept. 2009, online: [http://hareketatolyesi.blogspot.com/2009\\_09\\_06\\_archive.html](http://hareketatolyesi.blogspot.com/2009_09_06_archive.html). Accessed July 6, 2018.

gendered private spheres of Turkey with each other creates absurdities, or (in a Brechtian rhetoric) the defamiliarization effect, which creates countless moments of uncomfortable laughter among the audience. Many famous and nostalgic commercial jingles since the 1960s (like Etibör biscuits to Efes beer), famous state-discourses repeated in media and schools, and slogans of left wing resistance movements are revived along with the intergenerational personal testimonies of the performers. These testimonies are mixed with the histories of private and public life in Turkey, infused with what was repeated in daily life and in media for different generations. For example, the songs that were played on the radio from *You are my sunshine* to *Olur mu böyle olur mu? Kardeş kardeşi vurur mu?* (En: *How can this be? Can a brother shoot another brother?*) are quoted, the latter being a highly political song from late 1950s which was sung against the Menderes regime before the May 27, 1960 military coup. A famous phrase that marked one of the first large-scale civil disobedience acts in Turkey against the Menderes regime: «555K — on the 5<sup>th</sup> day of the 5<sup>th</sup> month at 5 o'clock at Kızılay Square» is quoted along with the song, which were both used for mobilization purposes. The referred memories include the infamous 1<sup>st</sup> of May demonstrations in 1977 where 34 people were killed by possible state-related provocateurs who started shooting at people from on top of a hotel roof facing where the demonstration was taking place in Taksim Square<sup>20</sup>. Intermingled with all these political and public memories presented through personal reminiscences of performers, are also phrases that were repeated in domestic life of the nation like mothers telling (or shouting) to the their children: «don't step on the floor bare feet, you will get a stomachache!». There are movement choreographies that go with these testimonies, which broaden the meaning of the testimony by embodying the memory, like hula hooping, rope games, or military steps.

There are famous Turkish women writers cited and performed throughout the play like the late Ottoman and early Republican thinker Halide Edip Adivar, and Tezer Özlü, who had written about growing up in Turkey as a woman in the 1950s in her confessionalist narratives. While Halide Edip is shown tiptoeing in a light square as she is being harassed by two demonic show girls, Tezer Özlü's lines are read by a performer who is trying to stand in a push-up position. In the quoted section from Halide Edip's autobiography, she tells how she was threatened with death in an unsigned letter while she was writing for a progressive newspaper. Until that point in the scene, the demonic showgirls only dance to the rhythm of the speech of the red-dressed performer who is quoting Halide Edip's lines, but after the death threat they start getting closer to the red-dressed performer and start harassing her in their amplified playfulness. Tezer Özlü's section opens with childhood memories of her father forcing all of his children to wake up in the morning by pretending to be an army general. The push-up position is a very minimalist choice to demonstrate exactly this image: a female body trapped in

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20. Which is also the place where the Gezi Park Resistance happened throughout June 2013.

a challenging military position, who tries to speak her mind while dealing with that burden. In both these scenes, movement dramaturgies reveal the difficulties that these women intellectuals faced in Turkey both in their private and public interactions. These texts also give very personal histories of the late Ottoman Empire and emerging Republic of Turkey, which inevitably contradicts with the official national narratives of that history.

Among the cited movements, there are childhood games like various hand games or rope games that girls used to play for many decades. There is even a scene where a pseudo-Turkish folk dance is danced accompanying the Turkish folk song *Ceviz Oynamaya Geldim* [En: *I came to play the walnut game*]. The music and certain folk dance groupings on stage, which have been used for children and teenagers' school-based folk dance performances for many decades, places the atmosphere of the scene in a Turkish folk dance setting but this setting is subverted constantly with movement citations from contemporary culture of last few decades. These citations vary from runway models posing at the end of their walk, to John Travolta's dance from *Saturday Night Fever* in slow motion, to Moulin Rouge type show girls. There is even an occasion in the dance where the defamiliarization effect is taken one step further and all the performers pull the transparent petticoats that they had been wearing through various scenes over their heads. This allows the performers to look like a bouquet of flowers, or fragile semi-vertebrated sea creatures like tunicates. In this occasion, through creating this amorphous semi-transparent sea creature that responds to the music, they no longer cite anything other than themselves, their collective, and the stage.

*CirCUMstances* use two very particular performance tools on stage to distance the audiences from (what Lauren Berlant calls) the «cruel optimism» of Turkey's official/neutralized public memory<sup>21</sup>. «Cruel Optimism» is what happens when the object of longing in optimism is misplaced and the optimist longing results in creating a deceptive shelter to hide from reality<sup>22</sup>. These moments of defamiliarization from cruel optimism particularly takes place when female performers' bodies rapidly oscillate between affectionate and abject. The tools of this defamiliarization are, as I named them, *voicelessness* and *mouth-full*.

There are three occasions where this *voicelessness* is used in different sociopolitical contexts to bring different clichés to the surface. In the first scene, three performers simultaneously acting out different body languages of stereotypical female singers from different decades cannot find their voices just when they are about to sing. The second scene is a very short moment that ties two larger scenes together: in this moment a young smiling performer enters with a microphone and a large sheet of paper in her hand. This moment builds up the expectation that she would announce something, but she ends up walking pass the audience by making a large o-shape on the stage without stopping. Later in the

21. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2011.

22. *Ivi*, p. 1.

performance, the same scene is repeated, where this time the same performer is called from backstage by another performer who sounds a lot like a mother calling her child to come to the living room. The young performer then responds with a disappointed «I'm coming» before leaving the stage. In the most memorable scene where this technique is used, there is a performer who very slowly and very accurately cites a long text from Tanıl Bora's social science book *Lynch Regime of Turkey*, while two other performers gift-wrap the talking performer entirely with pink ribbons. These two packaging performers are wearing lip shaped pincushions (with pins on them) on their mouths like little masks to painfully mute them. In all these scenes, the expectation to hear something from these silent characters is played upon, however ultimately each of these scenes end with the disappointment of silence.

In the *mouth-full* section I will discuss three scenes. The first one is a solo scene where a performer comes to the stage backwards, wearing a delicate long dress, and starts singing a nostalgic Turkish song. She then slowly turns to the audience to reveal the absurdity: her mouth is full of small marshmallows which makes her voice somewhat hoarse and forces her to spill the stuff in her mouth as she pushes the lyrics out along with the marshmallows. The visual performance contrasts everything in the scene: the romantic love song, her dreamy looks, her white dress, and longing body language. In another scene, three performers in chemises come to the stage, pick up their microphones, and each one of them starts talking about a variety of topics from the 2001 national economic crisis, to the IMF, to images; all without listening or understanding each other. What they are saying are political clichés. As the cacophony continues, they constantly stuff their mouths with gum, and, after a certain point, they start making bubbles with the gum as they try to talk. The most memorable scene in which the *mouth-full* technique is used is when one of the performers is trying to cite a long text from Feroz Ahmad's political history book *Turkey the Quest for Identity*, more specifically a section about the 1980 bloody military coup and its aftermath. As she is trying to explain this, the other performer sitting in front of her shows signs of boredom and gets a pot full of yogurt and starts eating it. She then tries to silence her by trying to feed her from the pot of yogurt. The lecturing performer inevitably spills the yogurt as she continues on talking. The other performer in the meantime collects the spilt yogurt from her shoulder and arms in an attempt to try and feed her the spilled yogurt again. She even holds the spoon right in front of her mouth and sticks out her own tongue to make her lick the spoon. The scene is absurd and abject at the same time: while the spoon and yogurt almost inevitably calls phallic connotations (of the phallus and ejaculation), the act itself (feeding someone) seems motherly and affectionate (at least in the first glance). The multiple contradictions in this scene reveal a forceful tool of silencing through both its phallic connotation and its overt motherly affection that denies the agency of the other person.

Both these tools, *voicelessness* and *mouth-full*, are used to reveal the cruel optimisms within feminine domestic and masculine public spheres. In the domestic realm, these are the feminine stereotypes



and standard notions of romantic love and family. In the masculine realm, it is political clichés like leadership cults, or faith in military intervention, or the justification of lynching which drove Turkey into many social catastrophes. These cruel optimisms are revealed through demonstrating their crippling and abject nature, respectively via *voicelessness* and *mouth-full*.

In some other scenes the violence of the feminine domestic, and dreams of stereotypical romance are visualized as the route to a dangerous escapism of denial. For example, there is a scene where there are two performers on stage, one under a spotlight and the other on the dim side of the stage, but still visible. The performer under the spotlight gives a short and poetic monologue, which implies that she wants to escape from the mundanity of a domestic life with a romantic partner that she passionately loves and can even die for. While she is giving this monologue, the other performer seems to be busy with mundane housework. She is sewing a little piece of cloth and answers the performer under the spotlight with a visibly unengaged voice and body language, repeating the same phrase, saying «you are right» over and over. Her unengaged repetition works as a silencing tool, almost a sort of demand to shut up the other performer, and to make sure that she leaves her alone in her very important daily tasks. These you-are-rights are well known to Turkish audiences; it is the unengaged, exhausted, and defeatist middle-class mother who thinks her daughter would inevitably only repeat her mother's life. Once the first performer finishes her monologue, the sewing performer leaves, then a male performer comes onto the stage for the first and only time in the performance. His presence on stage almost feels out of place. We see him caressing the woman performer's face with what seems to be puppet hands and kissing her cheek lovingly. But as he slowly moves away from her, he leaves one of his hands on her cheek as the puppet arm extends while he slowly moves backstage. We then witness the female performer slowly being pulled backstage with this puppet arm as she doesn't want to let it go, as if an imaginary or long finished love affair is drowning her. This visualizes the cruel optimism of this romantic dream that cannot be supported in her reality.

Similarly the cruel optimism of the Turkish-style stereotypical romance, set by classic Turkish movies from the 1960's-70's, are cited multiple times through the performance. In these movies, platonic love is the best kind of love, and anything to do with bodily desires are dishonorable, morally corrupt, and has nothing to do with love because they are dirty and carnal in nature. In various scenes, well-known clichés from those movies like the «bad girl laugh», or still-recycled classic phrases like «you are as beautiful as you are insolent» are quoted. There is even an amazingly absurd scene in the performance when a full scene from a famous Turkish movie from 1965, *Sevmek Zamani* (En: *Time to Love*), played in its entirety as group choreography. In this scene there is a TV set on stage that shows the scene from the original movie. In the movie, there is a man and a woman on the edge of a cliff under a giant tree where the woman is trying to persuade the man to love her. The man insists that he is *only* in love with *her picture* (which he saw before her) but *not* her. He says he wants to stay in love

with her picture only, since the picture is never changing and constant. This classic scene, with all its melodrama and aggressively uncommunicative platonic love, is simultaneously played by seven performers on stage wearing identical raincoats to each other and characters on screen. The male character is acted by four performers and the female character is acted by three performers. The performers do not speak the lines, but the dialogue is heard (and seen) from the TV set. What performers do on stage is to mimic the exact same choreography of movements that the two characters in the movie scene act, but because there is a group of them doing this, it becomes a large group choreography. The purpose of this is to enlarge the scene, and to underline the absurdity of it through the choreographic repetition of multiple bodies doing the same thing. Once the audience grasps the simultaneous nature of the scene (with the TV set and performers on stage), they start laughing with a Brechtian defamiliarization effect, and the scene gets applause from the audience at the end.

There are also playful engagements with the audience that demolish the – already permeable – fourth wall completely. For example, at the beginning of one of the scenes, two performers take two chairs for the upcoming scene from among the audience seats, which in turn results in momentary negotiations of movement with the sitting audience members to create enough space to take the chair. In another scene, in which the performers beforehand distributed flashlights, the audience is made responsible for lighting the stage by turning the flashlights on each time they hear the music play. Each time the music plays performers' movements on stage abruptly stops as they try to freeze in a pose; and each time music is paused the hasty movements of performers are heard from within the completely darkened stage. The music choice in this scene is a potpourri of the opening scores from American TV series and films that impacted Turkey since the 1980s such as *Dallas*, *Mission Impossible*, *The Muppet Show*, *Jaws*, and *SpongeBob Squarepants*. Just like other music and movement citations from mostly American, more broadly Western media, these choices add to the illustration of the palimpsest-like nature of Turkish modernity, which has grafted many modernities and counter-modernities on top of each other throughout the last century and half.

As a part of its audience engagement, *cirCUMstances* also plays with the gaze of the audience by returning it, and queers the taken-for-granted assumptions of this gaze. For example, there is a moment where all the performers come to stage and stare at the audience intensely for almost half a minute, until they start addressing the audience with soft whispers as if they were talking to a lover in an intimate space. These whispers are phrases like «my lover, my dear», «my beloved», «welcome my life», «my dearest, my only one», «what a beauty you are», and so on. As these exclamations of love and affection overlap in repetition, they slowly engage the audience while simultaneously getting louder. Their body languages slowly build into gestures that demonstrate they want to squeeze the cheeks of the audience, pat them, and kiss them. This continues until it gets uncomfortable, and even aggressive in relation to the traditional passivity of the audience. They move to front stage until the stage light borders their

movement and suddenly stop as their own voices – now disembodied and coming as a pre-recorded cacophony from the sound system – takes over, while they return back to their expressionless faces. This alienates the audience from the aggressive affection they had just been showered with. In another scene, all the performers enter the stage from different parts, all of them are wearing only one slipper. They slowly approach the audience and finally, when they are very close, they take off their slippers and make a gesture of throwing the slipper at the audience – a very typical reactionary punishment method for mothers in Turkey. In another short scene, the gaze is turned back to the audience directly when a performer comes on stage and sets up a camera with a tripod, counts 3-2-1 with her hand, and takes a picture of the audience.

In the last scene, all the performers come to stage and dance in cabaret style to a children's song recorded in the 1960s. The dance accompanying the song has small and playful vignettes acted by two of the performers in the middle of the stage, such as one kissing the hand of the other (the gesture of respect for elders in Turkey) in very exaggerated manners, while the other poses to be superior. The sections of this song include a clapping game that little girls play with each other in school gardens, which ends with an additional playful slapping of each other on cheeks as each slap leads the slapped performer to make a full turn around herself, following the full circular motion initiated by the slap. The song finishes with the routine sounds of the gramophone after the song is over. The performers continue the action they are stuck with at the end of the song – the slight wiggling of their bodies up and down – to the rhythm of the gramophone's empty sizzles while continuing to intensely stare at the audience.

## International Comparisons

Quoting the bodies from mundane circumstances is not a new thing in Western contemporary dance. Laermans, in his 2015 book *Moving Together: Theorizing and Making Contemporary Dance*, mentions that in the recent years Western contemporary dance relatively institutionalized «the citation of mundane movements»<sup>23</sup>, which each choreographer from William Forsythe, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker to Jérôme Bel<sup>24</sup>, had used differently. Laermans explains the context and practice of this citing process as follows:

Our existing potentiality to act corporeally is selectively structured through the various body techniques and disciplines that were used in our youth to impart on us how to sit still, walk properly or behave civilized. In a similar way, learning to become a dancer is to acquire a thoroughly cultured body, one whose generic potentiality to move has been changed into an always particular ability to dance. [...] An existing potential is therefore by definition marked by a culture's nor-

23. Rudi Laermans, *Moving Together: Theorizing and Making Contemporary Dance*, Valiz, Amsterdam 2015, p. 63.

24. *Ivi* p. 63.

mative codification of some possibilities as truly human, at the expense of others. The selection comes down to complexity reduction, and is at once contingent and unavoidable.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, it can be said that «[c]ultural forms, norms, and rules subject the body and bring it about as a dancing body in the process. By negotiating body and cultural practices the dancers are turned into subjects»<sup>26</sup>. Laemans also mentions that the artistic practice of such choreographers who quote mundanities of «the cultured» body on stage, creates an «egalitarian spirit that levels down the hierarchic difference between highly skilled and ordinary movement [...] thus linked to an artistic politics of perception»<sup>27</sup>. This egalitarian spirit truly supports a work like *cirCUMstances*, considering that the political aim of the work is to excavate the subconscious of the public memory – making it quite useful to quote bodies that have constructed precisely that. Elaborating predominantly on the three contemporary Western choreographers that Rudi Laermans mentions, some parallels with their works and Movement Atelier's works can be drawn to theoretically frame the movement and staging vocabulary of Movement Atelier.

For example, Jérôme Bel works with untrained bodies and with people of different ages, ethnicities, races, and with disabled people. His work was once described as: «No more dancing queens and princes with Jérôme Bel, but people that are transformed by their dancing»<sup>28</sup>. Considering that Movement Atelier was the first group in Turkey to use unconventional female bodies on dance stage like elderly women, the «transform[ation] by their dancing» is as relevant as it is to the case of Bel. As demonstrated in case of *cirCUMstances*, elderly female body is rediscovered as a medium of expression which can show a strong dance presence on stage as much as the young female body; and can even become a preferable option to demonstrate the erosion of embodied patriarchal private and public cultures of Turkey, which is one of the major themes of Movement Atelier.

Reminding that Movement Atelier's dance performances were a product of the alternative theatre movement in Istanbul, which was primarily signified by the usage of black box stages<sup>29</sup>, it can be said that the architectural shift in the performance space allowed a different performative experience as much as a new spectatorship experience in Turkey. The combination of these factors allowed for different and unprofessional/unconventionally-trained bodies to enter the field of modern dance. Similarly, both Jérôme Bel and William Forsythe graft different dances onto each other, and do not fear from creating a rehearsal-like atmosphere on stage. Where Bel sequences together ballet movements, waltzes, and moonwalks in the same piece<sup>30</sup>; Forsythe would «occasionally slip into jazz and street

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25. *Ivi*, pp. 54-55.

26. Gerald Siegmund, *Jérôme Bel: Dance, Theatre, and the Subject*, Palgrave, Basingstoke 2017, p. 6.

27. Rudi Laermans, *Moving Together: Theorizing and Making Contemporary Dance*, cit., p. 64.

28. Gerald Siegmund, *Jérôme Bel*, cit., p. 3.

29. Deniz Başar, *Performative Publicness*, cit.

30. Gerald Siegmund, *Jérôme Bel*, cit., p. 6.

dance forms such as breaking and body popping, which are frequently mixed with ballet vocabulary»<sup>31</sup>. When these grafted movements are presented in an unfamiliar theatrical space that does not architecturally guide the audience gaze in one direction – as Forsythe himself comments – «It forces you to re-examine those things [that you take for granted, which perhaps you’ve stopped seeing] and say “... what are these things?”»<sup>32</sup>.

Also, occasionally, in Jérôme Bel’s career there are pieces in which he built his choreographic practice solely on literary texts, where literature replaces music as the initial inspiration and shape-giver of the dance practice. For example, his collaborative work *Lenz* with Caterina Sagna in 1990 (in Venice), was based in a novella by the German writer Georg Büchner. Bel defines the process as «[f]or the first time I made a direct connection between movement and the text. The entire choreography was based on language and there was not a single movement that was accidental»<sup>33</sup>. The process described here is very much in parallel with what Movement Atelier does with literary and social sciences texts, especially in scenes that are based on texts of literature (like «demonic show girl» style section of the performance created in response to the meaning and soundscape of Halide Edip Adivar’s autobiographical text). Again, in parallel to the political consciousness of Movement Atelier, which excavates public memory and wide-spread political discourses, William Forsythe’s 1992 piece *Alien/a(c)tion* in Ballett Frankfurt was «inspired by the wave of xenophobia that swept across Germany at the time, hatred directed towards Turkish families and other immigrants»<sup>34</sup>. However, among these three Western contemporary choreographers noted by Laermans<sup>35</sup>, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker’s work is the one that is most directly comparable to Movement Atelier, especially with pieces like *Rosas Danst Rosas*, which engage and confront gendered nature of mundane body movements:

When the dancers in *Rosas Danst Rosas* touch themselves, running hands through hair, or adjusting a tee-shirt, these actions draw attention to the performers’ gender and sexuality. These are distinctly feminine gestures; slipping one or both shoulders of a tee-shirt off and back on, throwing a head of long hair forward or backward, cupping a breast with a hand. They are repeated rhythmically and absorbed into the repetitive unison choreographic patterns. Since the dancers are all doing the same, they vividly illustrate the American queer theorist Judith Butler’s (1990) claim that gender is a performative act that is learned, rather than constructed through seeing oneself as with or without the phallus. In this sense they challenge the dominance and role of the visual in the construction of gendered subjects. The occasional looks, smiles and nods exchanged between performers, and performers and camera, suggest that they are enjoying themselves and perhaps paradoxically illustrate Irigaray’s claim that «woman takes more pleasure from touching than from

31. Valerie A. Briginshaw, *Architectural spaces in the choreography of William Forsythe and De Keersmaeker’s Rosas Danst Rosas*, in Id., *Dance, Space and Subjectivity*, Palgrave, Basingstoke 2009, p. 187.

32. *Ivi*, p. 187.

33. From Gerald Siegmund, *Jérôme Bel*, cit., p. 6, translated by the Gerald Siegmund; and the original quote is from: Pierre Hivernat, *C’est Jérôme*, in «Les Inrockuptibles», 14: XII–XIII, 1999.

34. Gerald Siegmund, *Of monsters and puppets: William Forsythe’s work after the “Robert Scott Complex”*, in Steven Spier (edited by), *William Forsythe and the Practice of Choreography*, Routledge, New York 2011, pp. 20–37.

35. Rudi Laermans, *Moving Together: Theorizing and Making Contemporary Dance*, cit., p. 63.

looking»<sup>36</sup>). The dancers' looks to each other and to camera signifying enjoyment operate in different ways. When looking at each other, it is as if they are saying: "Are you ready? Then here we go"<sup>37</sup>, a sense of camaraderie is expressed. Occasionally looks between performers seem to be more overtly sexual. De Keersmaeker and another dancer perform the same phrase, one standing in the foreground, the other on a raised area behind, they have their backs to each other. They each pull their tee-shirt off a shoulder, pull it back on, turn and look at each other half smiling. They then slip both shoulders of their tee-shirts off and on and exchange glances again as if sharing a sign or code. When dancers look to camera while slipping their tee-shirts off the shoulder or running their hands through their hair, they seem coy or narcissistic, but because they repeat the actions, they are clearly 'performed'. Feminine codes are being played with, resulting in a parody of the kind of femininity constructed by the visual, that Irigaray claims consigns woman to passivity «to be the beautiful object of contemplation»<sup>38</sup>.

As the second half of the quote explains; this particular gendered solidarity, which is the solidarity of women living within a patriarchal world is always made visible as a conscious choice in these feminist modern dance performances. The gazes and nods in *Rosas Danst Rosas* reveal a shared resilience among the female performers, which becomes bigger than the sum of the bodies on stage as the audience slowly starts decoding the «codes» of their gendered and amplified gestures. This shared resilience and performers' visibly being very aware and supportive of each other was materialized in *cirCUMstances* also; which was technically a very different performance with much more space for improvisation, compared to tightly structured movements of professional dancers in *Rosas Danst Rosas*.

Another reoccurring aspect of audience engagement in *cirCUMstances* – in parallel with all the cited Western choreographers' work – is challenging the audiences with what can be described as «returning the gaze». The gaze of the audience, described as an «uncontrollable multitude and a panoptic, disciplining Master Eye» by Rudi Laermans, is «anything but neutral»<sup>39</sup> and «[t]he bond between dancers and audiences forged by inner mimicry or meta-kinesis is broken by the gaze of the spectator»<sup>40</sup>. It is not a coincidence that other Western female choreographers like Yvonne Rainer therefore often talked about «the "problem" of performance»<sup>41</sup> or «the "seeing" difficulty of movement that had to be addressed in the performance itself»<sup>42</sup>. One of the ways to address this particular «seeing difficulty» in the gendered preconditions of a female ensemble is simply to return the audience gaze, since «[t]he looking is profoundly marked by the dominant heterosexual gender script and vastly structures by the standardized expectations [...]»<sup>43</sup>. In the moments when this masculine and heteronormative

36. Source of the quote within the text: Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, Athlone Press, London 1985.

37. Source of the quote within the text: Marianne Van Kerkhoven, *The Dance of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker*, in «The Drama Review», n. 103, Fall 1984, pp. 98–104.

38. Valerie A. Briginshaw, *Dance, Space and Subjectivity*, cit., p. 197.

39. Rudi Laermans, *Moving Together: Theorizing and Making Contemporary Dance*, cit., p. 155.

40. Gerald Siegmund, *Jérôme Bel*, cit., p. 28.

41. Source of the quote within the text: Yvonne Rainer, *A Quasi Survey of Some "Minimalist" Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of Trio A*, in Gregory Battcock (edited by), *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1995, pp. 263–273.

42. Gerald Siegmund, *Jérôme Bel*, cit., p. 28

43. Rudi Laermans, *Moving Together: Theorizing and Making Contemporary Dance*, cit., p. 155.

gaze is returned «[...] the collective gaze [that] operates during a performance with an often unconscious effectiveness»<sup>44</sup> is made visible, therefore cannot be taken for granted as «neutral» any more. Confrontation of this claiming-to-be-neutral gaze in a performance space allows a performance like *cirCUMstances* to carve space for the feminine in the public life of Turkey.

Looking for non-Western international comparisons, I was only able to find few documented feminist dance works comparable to the body of works of Movement Atelier, where a group of women simultaneously quote, subvert, and superpose taken-for-granted assumptions, body languages, and various dance moves of their own societies. The two examples I found were both from diasporic Indian women's collectives.

One of these works is documented in an article by Torsa Ghosal and Kaustavi Sarkar, where a group of Indian women, dancers, and scholars deconstructed the traditional dance *Sakhya*. This was done in order to present a «herstory» of the epic it was based on, through a queer, empowering, and liberating re-imagining of this dance<sup>45</sup>. Even though Movement Atelier's works are not based on such narrative traditional dances like *Sakhya*, there is a practical similarity in what Ghosal and Sarkar define in their article (for the context of India) to the practice and political standing of Movement Atelier (for the context of Turkey). Ghosal and Sarkar explain the working process of making of this performance as follows: «[...] through *Herstories* and this article we stress the collective potential inherent in *Sakhya*. It unifies five non-uniform body types and disparate dance trainings. The moment becomes infinite in its shared possibilities»<sup>46</sup>.

The other – more established – example, again emerging from an Indian female diasporic experience, is the body of work done by Shobana Jeyasingh. Jeyasingh mostly works with Indian female dancers and generally performs in «a mixture of vocabulary from contemporary dance and the traditional, Indian classical dance form of Bharata Natyam», and breaks and grafts «West/East and male/female binaries [...] suggesting the possibility of a rethought, contemporary, urban, female subjectivity»<sup>47</sup> through her choreographies. Jeyasingh also once defined her intention as to create «an icon of Indian womanhood... appropriate to urban women in the 1990s»<sup>48</sup>. For example, in *Duets with Automobiles* (1993), she achieves her aim by blurring the lines of public and private, doing what «she has metaphorically described as “making a bedroom” out of the “awesome public building” of the classical language

44. *Ivi*, p. 156.

45. Torsa Ghosal – Sarkar Kaustavi, *Baar Baar Sakhi – In Search of the Queer Temporalities of Sakhya*, in Niharika Banerjee et al. (edited by), *Friendship as Social Justice Activism: Critical Solidarities in a Global Perspective*, Seagull Books, London 2018, pp. 92-114.

46. *Ivi*, p. 108.

47. Valerie A. Briginshaw, *Hybridity and nomadic subjectivity in Shobana Jeyasingh's Duets with Automobiles*, in Id., *Dance, Space and Subjectivity*, cit., p. 97.

48. *Ibidem*.

of Bharata Natyam»<sup>49</sup>. Similar to Movement Atelier, Jeyasingh utilizes literary texts in relation to her dance work, such as the references to Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) in the monograph accompanying Jeyasingh's *Romance with... footnotes* video<sup>50</sup>.

The rarity of these non-Western examples makes Movement Atelier's work unique at the international level, considering that mundanities of non-Western societies are not «cited» very often in the field of contemporary dance, despite the «relative institutionalization»<sup>51</sup> of the practice in the West. As a final word, it can be said that Movement Atelier not only excavates and subverts the public-masculine-official memory of Turkey, but also retells and reconstructs it from the civil-feminine-domestic perspective. Movement Atelier is therefore unique in terms of returning the pressuring narratives and body cultures of the establishment, which is the Turkish masculine public history, by revealing its absurdity through gazing at it with insistence, creative power and intergenerational female solidarity.

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49. Ivi, pp. 97-98.

50. Ivi, p. 98.

51. Rudi Laermans, *Moving Together: Theorizing and Making Contemporary Dance*, cit., p. 63.



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