REVIEW

by

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Margarita Krasteva-Stoychevska

New Bulgarian University

of a dissertation submitted for the award of the educational and scientific degree of Doctor (PhD)

in Professional Field 8.4. Theatre and Film Arts

by

Yanitsa Atanasova Shopova

entitled

"Contemporary Dance in Israel – Imagination, Choreographic Methods and Artistic Practices"

Academic Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Anna Pampulova

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE PROCEDURE

Yanitsa Atanasova Shopova, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Theatre at New Bulgarian University, has submitted a dissertation, an abstract of the dissertation, and a curriculum vitae as part of the procedure for awarding the educational and scientific degree of Doctor (PhD). The submitted documents and materials meet the requirements of the Bulgarian Academic Staff Development Act. The doctoral candidate's academic supervisor is Prof. Dr. Anna Pampulova.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE

Yanitsa Shopova's professional career is distinguished by a wide range of activities in contemporary dance, dance theatre, and the performing arts, combining choreographic, directing, performing, and teaching practice. She is the creator of numerous dance productions and performances, including "Womanhood", "Paradise Birds", "JUST DANCE: Trash", "Awl", and "Pastet", the latter having received a nomination and the Icarus Audience Award in 2022. She has extensive international experience through creative projects, teaching activities, and collaborations with artists and organisations from Ukraine, Brazil, the Czech Republic, China,

Italy. Since 2019, she has taught contemporary dance techniques and dance theatre at New Bulgarian University, actively contributing to the development of contemporary dance practices and the training of young performers. Her professional biography also includes participation in playback theatre companies, mentoring, and organising and leading international festivals and creative initiatives.

She has received numerous awards and distinctions, including:

- 2023 – Nomination and the 2022 Icarus Audience Award for the dance performance "Pastet", awarded by the Union of Bulgarian Actors.
- 2021 – Nomination for the "Flight in Art" Award of the Stoyan Kambarev Foundation.
- 2018 – "Golden Muse" Award for Best Contemporary Dance Performance for "WръZки", awarded by the Bulgarian Dance Association.
- 2015 – "Everyone Wants to Rule the World" (duet): winner of the Russian Cup at the 2015 Open Russian Championship and first place at the World Dance Olympiad in Moscow in the same year.
- 2015 – "I Will Not Be Impersonal" (solo): winner of the European qualifiers organised by the European Sport and Dance Union (ESDU).
- 2014 – "Give Us a Little Love" (duet): first place and inclusion among the "Top 20 Choreographies of 2014" at the World Dance Masters championship, organised by the European Sport and Dance Union (ESDU) in Croatia; also first prize at the World Dance Olympiad in Moscow, Russia, organised by the World Artistic and Dance Association (WADA).
- 2014 – "Silence" (solo): first place in the modern dance techniques category at the Dance Star World Dance Championship in Croatia.

RELEVANCE OF THE TOPIC

The subject of the dissertation is highly relevant in the context of current trends in dance and theatre arts and the development of new methods for training performers. The research addresses issues relating to bodily awareness, imagination, inner impulse, and the development of an individual stage language—issues that are of substantial importance to contemporary choreographic, performing, and pedagogical practice.

The relevance of the study stems from the need to investigate approaches that go beyond the traditional understanding of the body as an instrument for reproducing predetermined movements, and instead regard it as an active source of creative thought, emotional experience,

and stage action. In this context, the study of Gaga movement language, developed by the Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin, is especially significant, as it emphasises bodily sensation, imagined imagery, the pleasure of movement, and the overcoming of habitual movement patterns.

Another important aspect of the topic's relevance is its chosen cultural and historical context. Tracing the development of contemporary dance in Israel from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present provides a basis for a deeper understanding of the artistic influences, institutional processes, and individual creative explorations that have led to the formation of a recognisable choreographic identity. Thus, the subject combines a historical perspective with an analysis of contemporary artistic practices.

Particularly relevant is the practice-oriented dimension of the research, concerning the possibilities for applying principles inspired by Gaga in work with professional artists and students. The examination of specific choreographic and pedagogical processes—including the performance "Pastet", the student production "Dracula – The Bloody Truth", and the dance miniature "Collapse"—establishes a direct connection between the study and actual artistic and educational practice.

In summary, the relevance of the topic derives from the combination of historical and theoretical research into contemporary dance in Israel with an examination of a specific movement language and the possibilities for reflecting on its principles in independent choreographic and pedagogical work. The topic is significant both for the development of theoretical research in dance and for the improvement of practical approaches to teaching dance theatre and physical theatre.

APPROPRIATENESS OF THE RESEARCH METHODS FOR ACHIEVING THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The research methodology corresponds to the complex nature of the issues addressed and to the need to combine historical, theoretical, analytical, and practical investigation. The author applies a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach comprising historical and contextual analysis, comparative examination of choreographic methods, analysis of dance works, reflective consideration of personal practical experience, observation of rehearsal and teaching processes, semi-structured interviews, and feedback from participants.

The use of the historical and contextual method is appropriate to the first research task—tracing the development of the contemporary dance scene in Israel. By examining the influences of German Expressionist dance and American modern dance, as well as the roles of leading

institutions, schools, companies, and choreographers, the necessary foundation is established for understanding the cultural and artistic environment in which Gaga emerged and developed.

Comparative analysis of choreographic approaches and selected dance works makes it possible to outline the characteristics of different movement languages and compositional principles. This approach is appropriate for clarifying Gaga's position within the broader field of contemporary dance and somatic practices, without reducing its distinctive characteristics to a mechanical similarity with other methods.

The practice-based research component is particularly important. Observations of rehearsal and teaching processes, analysis of original choreographic projects, and reflection on the author's professional experience make it possible to trace how abstract concepts such as bodily listening, inner impulse, and bodily imagination are translated into specific movement tasks and stage actions.

The interviews with dancers and performers, together with feedback from participants in the artistic processes examined, complement the author's reflection with the perspectives of other practising artists. This is a significant advantage, as it allows the research to examine not only the choreographer's intentions but also the ways in which the proposed tasks are perceived and carried out in creative work.

The distinction between the official Gaga practice and the author's own choreographic and pedagogical methodology also deserves positive recognition. The author does not claim to teach or adapt the method itself, but regards her personal experience of it as a source of inspiration for her own artistic and educational explorations. This position demonstrates an awareness of the limits of the study and an effort to define its subject matter and scope accurately.

Alongside these advantages, the methodological approach also entails certain limitations that must be considered when evaluating the results. The practical observations relate to specific original projects, teaching situations, and a relatively limited group of interviewees. Consequently, the findings are primarily qualitative and context-specific and cannot automatically be generalised to all dance and pedagogical practices. It would be useful to systematise more clearly the criteria for evaluating the results achieved, as well as the means of monitoring participants' development over time.

These characteristics do not undermine the chosen methodology; rather, they delineate the limits of its applicability and the possibilities for expanding the research in the future.

In conclusion, the research methods employed are appropriate and correspond to the stated aims and tasks. Their combination provides the necessary link between historical and theoretical

analysis and the practical investigation of choreographic and pedagogical processes. The methodological framework is particularly suitable for a dissertation in the performing arts, where artistic practice is both an object of research and a means of generating new knowledge.

EVALUATION OF THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation constitutes an independent study with a clearly defined research problem, a coherent structure, and a distinct practice-oriented dimension. It is organised into an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, and a bibliography, with the individual parts establishing a logical connection between the historical context of Israeli contemporary dance, the theoretical examination of Gaga, and the practical application of ideas inspired by that practice.

The first chapter serves an introductory and contextualising function. It traces the main stages in the development of the Israeli dance scene, the influence of European and American dance movements, the establishment of professional institutions, and the role of prominent choreographers. The analysis of selected works contributes to an understanding of the distinctive movement, spatial, and compositional characteristics of contemporary dance in Israel.

The second chapter focuses on Gaga as a movement language, its fundamental principles, its practical structure, and its relationship to the work of Ohad Naharin. Particular attention is paid to the role of verbal instructions and imagined imagery, bodily awareness, and the possibilities for overcoming established movement habits. Also of interest is the examination of Gaga's presence in the Bulgarian dance context during the period 2021–2026, through the analysis of training activities, international projects, and interviews with Bulgarian performers.

The third chapter is among the most substantial parts of the study, as it presents the author's own practical explorations. Through an analysis of the performance "Pastet", the student production "Dracula – The Bloody Truth", and the dance miniature "Collapse", it investigates possibilities for generating, selecting, and compositionally organising movement material. The practical tasks include work with imagined imagery, dramatic text, action verbs, stage objects, and partner interaction.

A significant strength of the dissertation is its consistent progression from theoretical clarification of the research problem to specific creative and pedagogical applications. In this way, the author does not confine herself to a descriptive presentation of existing practices, but seeks to understand their potential and turn it into a foundation for her own professional work.

The connection between scholarly research and personal professional experience also merits a positive assessment. This connection is natural in the performing arts, where the creation of

artistic material, the rehearsal process, and pedagogical work can provide valuable research observations. In the present case, this experience is illustrated through specific examples and subjected to analytical reflection.

One aspect that could be developed further is a more rigorous systematisation of the empirical results. A clearer distinction between direct observations, feedback from participants, and the author's own interpretations would strengthen the evidential basis of the findings. It would also be useful to identify more explicitly which of the proposed practical tasks are applicable in different educational contexts and which are closely linked to the particular conditions of the projects examined.

Despite these opportunities for improvement, the dissertation demonstrates thorough knowledge of the subject, analytical ability, and a capacity to connect theoretical knowledge with professional practice.

The overall assessment of the dissertation is positive. The study has clear thematic coherence, a consistent line of reasoning, and considerable practical potential. It contributes to the understanding of contemporary choreographic and pedagogical approaches and provides a foundation for further research into the interaction between bodily sensation, imagination, and stage action.

MAIN STRENGTHS

The following can be identified as the principal strengths of the dissertation:

1. Relevance and originality of the research problem. The author directs attention to Gaga as a contemporary movement language and to the possibilities for examining its principles within independent choreographic and pedagogical practice.
2. A well-founded connection between the historical context and contemporary artistic explorations. Tracing the development of the dance scene in Israel provides the necessary basis for understanding the creative environment in which Ohad Naharin's practice took shape.
3. The interdisciplinary nature of the research. The combination of historical, theoretical, comparative, and practical approaches enables the subject to be examined from different perspectives and in its artistic and pedagogical complexity.
4. A significant practical component. The study includes the analysis of actual choreographic and educational processes, giving concrete substance to the research observations and demonstrating possibilities for applying the proposed practical tasks.

5. The independence of the author's position. Particularly valuable is the distinction between Gaga as a specific practice and the author's own choreographic and pedagogical explorations inspired by personal practical experience of it. This allows the contributions to be formulated as the results of independent creative and analytical work.
6. A contribution to performing arts pedagogy. The dissertation emphasises the development of bodily awareness, imagination, independent decision-making on stage, and the performer's ability to create and organise individual movement material.
7. Potential for practical application. The tasks and models described may serve as a starting point for choreographers, directors, teachers, dancers, and actors working in contemporary dance, dance theatre, and physical theatre.

Taken together, these strengths establish the dissertation as a study that combines a research-oriented approach, creative independence, and practice-oriented results.

SCIENTIFIC AND APPLIED RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

On the basis of the content presented and the results formulated in the dissertation, the following principal contributions can be identified.

First, the connections between the historical development of contemporary dance in Israel, the work of Ohad Naharin, and the emergence of Gaga as a movement language have been systematised and traced analytically. This outlines the cultural and historical context of one of the significant contemporary dance practices.

Second, the presence of Gaga in the Bulgarian dance context during the period 2021–2026 has been investigated through an examination of training activities, international initiatives, and interviews with Bulgarian dancers and performers. This part of the study has documentary and analytical value for tracing international exchange and the dissemination of contemporary dance practices in Bulgaria.

Third, an original system of practical tasks has been developed and described, aimed at generating movement material through imagined imagery, bodily sensation, inner impulse, dramatic text, action verbs, stage objects, and partner interaction. What is essential here is not only the variety of means employed, but also the effort to combine them into a coherent creative process.

Fourth, observations, interviews, and the analysis of rehearsal and teaching processes have been used to identify indicators of performers' development, including the maintenance of a particular

quality of movement, independent decision-making on stage, adaptation to partners and space, and the compositional organisation of individual movement material.

Fifth, a practical model has been proposed for moving from bodily sensation and imagined imagery towards movement material, stage action, and a compositionally organised physical score. This model has the potential to serve as an initial framework in choreographic and pedagogical work aimed at developing performers' individual expressiveness and autonomy.

The contributory character of the dissertation lies above all in the practice-oriented examination and systematisation of the author's own approaches, rather than in any claim to create a new official Gaga methodology. This distinction is important because it allows the actual results of the research to be assessed in accordance with its aims and limitations.

The contributions are predominantly of an applied research nature. They involve documenting contemporary artistic processes, formulating practical tasks, and identifying principles that may support the work of performers and teachers. At the same time, the dissertation establishes a foundation for further research into methods for observing and evaluating the development of bodily awareness, imagination, and stage presence.

The abstract of the dissertation is 37 pages long, follows the structure of the dissertation, and presents the essential information from each of its sections in a condensed form.

OVERALL EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

The dissertation "Contemporary Dance in Israel – Imagination, Choreographic Methods and Artistic Practices" is a relevant, professionally oriented study addressing significant issues in contemporary dance and theatre. Its principal value lies in combining a historical and theoretical analysis of the Israeli dance scene with an examination of Gaga and the presentation of the author's own specific choreographic and pedagogical explorations.

The study is distinguished by a clear thematic focus, a logical structure, and consistency in addressing the issues raised. The methods used are appropriate to the nature of the research, while the practical section demonstrates an ability to analyse actual artistic processes and to formulate approaches applicable to work with professional performers and students.

Particularly deserving of a positive assessment is the author's endeavour to make her personal practical experience an object of systematic reflection. This approach is essential to research in the performing arts, insofar as it enables artistic practice to be viewed not only as a creative outcome but also as a source of knowledge about the mechanisms of movement, imagination, interaction, and stage behaviour.

The applied research value of the dissertation is evident in the practical tasks developed and in the proposed model for moving from bodily sensation and imagined imagery towards independent movement and stage decisions. At the same time, the qualitative nature of the research and its restriction to specific artistic and pedagogical situations mean that the results should be interpreted within the context studied. This provides grounds for further development but does not diminish the significance of the practical observations and analytical generalisations presented.

On the basis of the analysis conducted, it may be concluded that the dissertation possesses the necessary qualities of independent scholarly research in the field of theatre and film arts, with a clear focus on contemporary dance, choreographic methods, and performing arts pedagogy. The study demonstrates professional competence, creative independence, and the ability to reflect analytically on practical experience.

My overall assessment of the dissertation is positive. I consider that the research contributes to the understanding of contemporary dance and performance practices and offers results with potential applications in choreographic and pedagogical work.

I congratulate the doctoral candidate and her academic supervisor on the work presented.

In concluding this REVIEW, I offer the following assessment: The doctoral candidate's activities meet the scientometric requirements for the award of the educational and scientific degree of Doctor (PhD), as laid down in the Bulgarian Academic Staff Development Act. I consider the dissertation by Yanitsa Atanasova Shopova, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Theatre at New Bulgarian University, entitled "Contemporary Dance in Israel – Imagination, Choreographic Methods and Artistic Practices", together with its contributions of scientific and applied value and the publications on the subject, fully sufficient for me to give a positive evaluation and to recommend that the esteemed Scientific Jury award Yanitsa Atanasova Shopova the educational and scientific degree of Doctor (PhD) in Professional Field 8.4. Theatre and Film Arts, in accordance with the requirements of the Academic Staff Development Act in the Republic of Bulgaria.

17 October 2026 Assoc. Prof. Dr. Margarita Krasteva-Stoychevska