NEW BULGARIAN UNIVERSITY

Department of Theatre

STATEMENT

on a doctoral dissertation

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

by

YANITSA ATANASOVA SHOPOVA

entitled

"CONTEMPORARY DANCE IN ISRAEL – IMAGINATION, CHOREOGRAPHIC METHODS AND ARTISTIC PRACTICES"

Professional Field 8.4. Theatre and Film Arts

Scientific Specialty: Theatre Studies and Theatre Arts

Doctoral Programme: Theatre

Academic Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Anna Pampulova

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Professional Field 8.4. Theatre and Film Arts

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1. Subject of the Procedure and General Characteristics of the Dissertation

This statement has been prepared in connection with the procedure for the public defence of the dissertation by Yanitsa Atanasova Shopova entitled "Contemporary Dance in Israel – Imagination, Choreographic Methods and Artistic Practices", submitted for the award of the educational and scientific degree of Doctor (PhD) in Professional Field 8.4. Theatre and Film Arts, Scientific Specialty "Theatre Studies and Theatre Arts". The dissertation was developed at the Department of Theatre, New Bulgarian University, under the academic supervision of Prof. Dr. Anna Pampulova.

The dissertation comprises 147 pages and is structured into an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography. The dissertation abstract lists 62 sources in the main bibliographic corpus: 53 published sources and nine unpublished interviews and personal materials, as well as separate entries for image sources. Its structure is clear and coherent: a historical and contextual framework for the Israeli dance scene; a focused study of Gaga as a movement language; and a practice-oriented section in which the doctoral candidate analyses her own choreographic and pedagogical developments.

I would emphasise here an essential quality of the dissertation. It is written from the perspective of a practising dance artist, choreographer and teacher who seeks to translate accumulated bodily and stage experience into the language of research. It is precisely this boundary – between lived bodily experience and its analytical interpretation – that constitutes one of the dissertation's most significant strengths.

2. Relevance, Research Concept, Object and Subject, Aims and Tasks

The topic is relevant both to contemporary dance and to the wider field of the performing arts. The changing paradigm of corporeality in contemporary stage and performance arts has given rise to practices that treat the body not merely as an instrument for reproducing a predetermined form, but as an active source of sensation, imagination, impulse, choice and stage presence. In this context, Gaga, as a language of bodily expression associated with Ohad Naharin, is an appropriate subject of investigation not only as a training practice, but also as a possible catalyst for independent choreographic and pedagogical thinking.

The object of the research is the contemporary dance scene in Israel from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present, with an emphasis on the work of Ohad Naharin, Gaga practice and its impact on individual choreographic and pedagogical approaches. Its subject is defined more narrowly: Gaga and its significance for bodily awareness, imagination, stage presence and the development of an individual movement language. The central thesis is that personal practical experience with Gaga can be understood as a starting point for an original choreographic and pedagogical methodology, without appropriating, teaching or presenting the official Gaga practice itself as one's own method.

This distinction is important in principle and, in my view, represents one of the PhD candidate's sound scholarly positions. She examines how certain principles experienced in practice – listening to the body, inner impulse, bodily imagination and the release from habitual, automated movement patterns – can be transformed into independent artistic and educational explorations.

In this context, Shopova introduces the term "dance grammar" as her own conception of a system of individual principles through which the body creates, arranges and transforms movement. The term itself, however, is actively used in academic literature in various dance-related fields, albeit with different connotations and within different theoretical contexts[1]. Its introduction can therefore

[1] Вж. Zorn, Schlapbach, Kaeppler, Stevens, McKechnie, Vincs, Schubert.

hardly be regarded, in itself, as a terminological or conceptual innovation. Nevertheless, the candidate's attempt to interpret it through individual bodily expressiveness and her own choreographic and pedagogical experience outlines a distinctive personal perspective, although the extent of its conceptual novelty remains open to debate.

The dissertation's aim and ten research tasks encompass the historical context; the principles and practical conduct of Gaga; comparisons with somatic and release practices; the presence of Gaga in Bulgaria; the author's personal experience; and its application in work with professional artists and students. The scope is broad, but its internal logic is discernible: from the environment and origins, through the specific practice, to its personal creative and pedagogical reinterpretation.

3. Methodology and Research Approach

The methodology is qualitative and interdisciplinary. It combines historical-contextual and theoretical analysis, comparisons of choreographic methods, analysis of selected dance works, reflective examination of personal practical experience, observation of rehearsal and teaching processes, analysis of specific artistic and pedagogical cases, and semi-structured interviews. The practical body of material includes work on "Pastet", "Dracula – The Bloody Truth" and "Collapse", as well as interviews with dancers and performers.

The choice of methods is appropriate to the nature of the subject. When investigating performance processes, not everything of importance can be reduced to quantitative measurement; observation, reflective analysis and participants' feedback have genuine evidential value when properly contextualised. I also positively assess the stated limitations: the conclusions are not presented as universal, but as valid primarily in relation to the specific artistic and pedagogical cases.

At the same time, the methodological section could be more precise regarding the criteria used to select the performances analysed, the number and profiles of interview participants, and the way observations are translated into generalised indicators. This does not invalidate the research, but it identifies a direction in which any future development of the work could increase its verifiability and applicability.

4. Analysis and Evaluation of the Content

Chapter One, "Overview of the Development of the Contemporary Dance Scene in Israel from the Beginning of the Twentieth Century to the Present", establishes the historical foundation of the research. It traces German Expressionist dance, American modern dance, migration and cultural processes, the establishment of institutions, schools and companies, and the figures and works that shaped the contemporary Israeli scene. Particularly useful is the attempt to demonstrate that external influences were not simply imported, but reworked in the search for a distinctive choreographic identity.

The chapter is rich in factual material and provides the necessary context for the emergence of Ohad Naharin and Gaga. At certain points, however, the historical narrative dominates the analytical connection to the central research problem. The relationship between the earlier processes and the later emergence of Gaga is sometimes constructed retrospectively, as though the entire historical trajectory inevitably led to it. For a future publication, I would recommend formulating this causal relationship more cautiously: as a cultural and bodily environment that made certain explorations possible, rather than as a unidirectional genesis.

Chapter Two, "Gaga – Movement Language as a Choreographic and Performance Practice", is the conceptual centre of the dissertation. It examines the emergence of Gaga, its fundamental principles, the structure of a session, the role of verbal instructions and bodily imagery, parallels with somatic practices, release techniques and the Five Rhythms, as well as its influence on

imagination, movement and artistic presence. The doctoral candidate's personal practical experience, including her personal encounter with Ohad Naharin, occupies an important place.

Particularly valuable is the section in which Gaga, in distinction from a fixed technique, is analysed as a language that directs attention towards sensation, change, the pleasure of movement and individual bodily poetics. The tracing of Gaga's presence in the Bulgarian context during 2021–2026, through the project "Shutdown", training, international exchange and interviews with Bulgarian dancers, also deserves positive recognition. The study thus extends beyond the Israeli context and demonstrates actual mechanisms of transfer and influence.

Chapter Three, "Personal Practical Developments and Methodology Inspired by Gaga Movement Language", is the most substantial original part of the dissertation. Here Shopova moves from description and analysis to her own research practice. Exercises involving imagined imagery, bodily sensation, inner impulse, dramatic text, stage objects and partner interaction are presented. Their application is traced in "Pastet", "Dracula – The Bloody Truth" and "Collapse", in work with both professional artists and students.

The strength of this chapter lies in its attempt to observe not only the final artistic product, but the very process of its emergence: how movement material is generated, how performers make choices, how they respond to partners and space, and how freely arising movement is edited and organised compositionally. An important conclusion emerges here: freedom and precision are not opposites. Freedom opens up a field for discovering individual material, while precision reconsiders it and transforms it into stage form. This is both an artistic and a pedagogical result.

5. Scholarly and Applied Research Contributions

I would summarise the scholarly and practical contributions formulated in the dissertation under five main headings:

1. The relationship between the historical development of contemporary dance in Israel, the work of Ohad Naharin and the emergence of Gaga has been systematised.

2. The presence of Gaga in the Bulgarian dance context during 2021–2026 has been documented.

3. An original system of practical exercises, clearly distinguished from the official Gaga practice, has been described and analysed.

4. Specific indicators of performers' development have been derived through observations, interviews and analysis of rehearsal and teaching processes.

5. A practical model has been proposed for moving from bodily sensation and imagined imagery to movement material, stage action and a compositionally organised physical score.

For me, the most significant contribution is not the description of Gaga itself – there is already international literature and professional discourse on this practice – but its critical and ethical differentiation from the researcher's own methodology and the subsequent construction of an individual practice-oriented model. This is where the dissertation achieves independence.

N.B. The status of the term "dance grammar" is problematic and remains to be addressed in the critical remarks at the end.

6. Dissertation Abstract, Bibliography and Professional Validation

The 37-page dissertation abstract accurately presents the structure, aims, methodology, principal results, conclusions and contributions of the dissertation. The balance between the historical-theoretical and the practice-oriented sections is maintained, and the conclusion clearly sets out the

findings. The bibliography is adequate for the scope of the research and includes scholarly, critical, online, audiovisual and unpublished sources.

Yanitsa Shopova's professional biography is directly connected to the research topic. Her education encompasses dance theatre, contemporary dance techniques and ballet directing; she has many years of experience as a choreographer, performer and teacher; and since 2019 she has taught contemporary dance techniques and dance theatre at New Bulgarian University. Particularly indicative of the connection between research and artistic practice is the fact that "Pastet" – one of the practical cases analysed – received the 2022 IKAR Audience Award. These facts do not replace scholarly argumentation, but they demonstrate that some of the principles studied have genuinely been tested in professional and pedagogical settings.

The materials provided to me do not include a separate list of scholarly publications on the dissertation topic; consequently, I would not presume to offer a specific bibliometric assessment beyond the materials available. This, however, does not alter my evaluation of the content, the dissertation abstract and the practical validation presented.

7. Critical Remarks, Recommendations and Questions

My critical remarks concern primarily the possible further development of the work. First, it should be noted that the title "Contemporary Dance in Israel" suggests a broader scope, whereas the actual centre of the research is Gaga and its impact on the author's own choreographic and pedagogical practice. This is not a flaw in the research, but I would recommend a more focused title for any future publication in book form.

Second, the historical first chapter could be shortened and linked more closely to the research problem.

Third comes the term "dance grammar" and its positioning in the text as "original". This term calls for a more rigorous personal theoretical definition, developed through reflection on the author's distinctive perspective and comparison with existing work in the field (including concepts such as movement language, composition and bodily dramaturgy). Clearly, the term itself cannot be claimed as the author's own invention; what may be original is the specific way Shopova defines and applies it – a task that remains to be addressed in her future work.

Finally, I would put two questions to the doctoral candidate. First: Where, in her view, does the boundary lie between "inspiration from Gaga" and the actual adaptation of Gaga, particularly when individual principles begin to be systematised and taught? Second: Which elements of the proposed interpretation of "dance grammar" can be transferred to other teachers and performers, and which remain inevitably bound to the author's personal bodily experience? Answers to these questions would further develop the most interesting strand of the dissertation: the transformation of individual embodied knowledge into a pedagogical and research tool that can be shared.

8. Overall Scholarly Evaluation and Conclusion

In summary, I consider Yanitsa Atanasova Shopova's dissertation to be a complete, independent and relevant research study with a pronounced practical and applied orientation. Its principal strength lies in connecting the historical and theoretical context with actual choreographic, performance and pedagogical experience. The author does not merely describe what Gaga is; she examines how experience gained through this practice can be transformed into her own system of exercises and principles, without erasing the boundary between the original practice and her personal methodology.

I particularly value the fact that the dissertation focuses not on the "correct" reproduction of movement, but on performers' ability to sense, imagine, choose, respond and organise the material they create. This position is directly relevant not only to contemporary dance, but also to dance theatre, physical theatre and actor training. In this sense, the work has genuine potential for use in pedagogical practice.

The critical remarks I have made do not call into question the principal results and contributions. Rather, they identify opportunities for further theoretical refinement and expansion. I consider that the stated aim has been achieved, the principal tasks have been fulfilled, and the author's original practical work has been presented with sufficient clarity and subjected to analytical reflection.

In addition, I would like to note that Yanitsa Shopova's combination of demonstrated professional expertise in practice, pedagogical skills and capacity for theoretical self-reflection gives me strong grounds to believe in her future development as a teacher and researcher at New Bulgarian University.

On the basis of my overall evaluation of the dissertation, the dissertation abstract and the materials submitted, I confidently 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, Scientific Specialty "Theatre Studies and Theatre Arts".

I VOTE "YES"!

Sofia, 2026

Prof. Dr. Velimir Velev

National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts "Krastyo Sarafov"