

**Etudes:** an online theatre & performance  
studies journal for emerging scholars

## Dance to Ward Off the Plague

By Juliana Moraes

### Abstract

Dance to ward off the plague is a series of video projections that Juliana Moraes has been doing on the neighboring building's side facade, which is in front of her living room window. The project started spontaneously at the beginning of social isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and has been developing ever since. The projected videos are filmed and shared on the Instagram account @danca.para.afastar.a.pesto. The images are edited from the artist's archive of choreographic works and new creations made especially for the series. Collaborations with old and new partners complete the project. In this paper, Moraes describes this process from a personal perspective.

## Dance to Ward off the Plague

By Juliana M.R. de Moraes

As a newly hired professor in the Corporeal Arts Department at the State University of Campinas, UNICAMP, I received a FAPESP (São Paulo State Research Support Foundation) project grant to create the Experimental Practices in Choreography LAB. The first product related to this project was supposed to be the premiere of the dance piece *Afetos*, created in partnership with dancers Talita Florêncio and Gabriel Tolgyesi. However, due to the pandemic, UNICAMP implemented quarantine in mid-March, and only research linked to the new coronavirus was permitted to continue on campus. The university gymnasium, next to the Arts Institute, was turned into a field hospital, and the access route to our building was reserved for ambulances. I have therefore been working from home, teaching online, since March 23rd. A projector and a camcorder, bought with FAPESP funds, were delivered to my residence, as there was no way to receive and store them properly at the university.

For years, I have been interested in exploring choreographic principles in different fields, thus performing a lateral move within languages. Claire Bishop defines this action as "re-skilling—the move from one area of disciplinary competence to another." According to her, "re-skilling isn't just disciplinary reorientation, it is the bringing to bear of one set of competencies on those of the newly elected discipline" ("Unhappy Days"). Over the years, I have used my choreographic expertise to work with theater companies, actors, professors, and musicians. I have also worked as a lecturer in a visual arts department, teaching performance to students without movement training, and devising exercises based on my choreographic knowledge to engage them in collective and collaborative performance practices. It has been clear to me that even though they had

no movement training, visual art students have an acute poetic sense, and re-skilling my knowledge has enabled me to supervise works on photography, video, site-specific, and installation art.

How could I continue these sideways leaps in isolation, without the people I am used to meeting in rehearsal rooms? In my twenty years as a professional choreographer and dancer, I have been very concerned with documenting creative processes; thus my store of digital images, both photography and video, is enormous. This archive, along with the equipment bought with FAPESP funds, the extra time I had at the beginning of the isolation period when the university was adjusting to online classes, and just sheer luck combined to trigger another leap.

One April night, my husband, actor Gustavo Sol, and I were in the living room watching the last rehearsal of *Afetos*. At one point, Gustavo thought about testing whether the projector would reach the wall of the building next to ours. He took the equipment in his hands and turned it toward the window. The projected image was so beautiful that I took my cell phone and filmed the scene. At that moment, Talita was dancing. I found the giant image of her moving between the balconies stunning. At the end of the projection, we heard applause from the residents of our building, people we had not known before, but who now send me messages asking when I will make new projections.

It was the first time that I published a dance video on Instagram. When I woke up the next day, many people, especially dancers and artist friends of mine, had left comments, and the video had many more views than I expected. Some of those people I had worked with before, others had been my students, and some were artists I admire. I felt a mixture of being in the rehearsal room exchanging ideas, and being on stage receiving the applause after a show. Even though I used to criticize the virtual world for

its coldness and misrepresentation of reality, in times of extreme thirst, any liquid feels like water.

After that first video, I called my niece Clara, who is five years old, and asked if she would like to be filmed by her mother, dancing freely in the yard. I used to see her once a week, or every two weeks at the most, and because of social distancing we had not seen each other in a long time, so this project would be a way for us to reconnect and do something together. She loved the idea. She chose an outfit and a song that her mother sings to lull her to sleep, and improvised as she wanted. My sister filmed the dance on her cell phone and sent it to me by email. I edited the images, projected the video and posted it on Instagram. It was the beginning of a series I have named *Dance to Ward Off the Plague*, now in its thirtieth video.

Other partnerships followed. I asked Daniela Moraes, an incredible dancer from São Paulo, for a video. Dani has a habit of filming herself improvising and, in the video she gave me, her body is backlit. We see only her silhouette. I projected it, and it was dazzling. Next, I projected a recording of a rehearsal with my longtime partner, Swiss dancer Andrea Herdeg. In this piece, she dances inside a grand piano. The video was made without costumes or theatrical lighting, only training clothes and the service light in the auditorium where we worked in Zurich. When projecting, I noticed that it would be possible to fit the image of her body on the back of the sofa in one of the balconies of the front building. In reality, Andrea leans on the instrument, but in the projection, it disappears and is replaced by the real sofa. At the moment when she curls up between the lid of the piano and the strings, I managed to project her body onto one of the balconies. I also started new partnerships with friends, like the Brazilian choreographer (based in London) Fernanda Lippi and her husband, the Swiss filmmaker André Semenza. They have had a long career in dance

movies, and allowed me to use some of their works. I also asked for a video from my long-time friend Jun Mori, a Japanese dancer I met at the Laban Centre (now the Trinity Laban Conservatoire for Music and Dance) in London twenty years ago. Recently, I projected an experimental film by Flávia Pinheiro, a choreographer from Recife, a city in the northeast of Brazil.

In a family gathering on Zoom, my cousin Marina, a dedicated amateur ballroom dancer and full-time pediatrician, told me she wanted to send me some videos that she hoped could be projected. Among the many possibilities she sent me, I chose a close-up of her feet dancing tango, edited it backwards in black and white, changed the music and projected it vertically in the middle of the windows. Some of my former students, whose final work I supervised in the Visual Arts Program at Belas Artes, have also sent me some images. I managed to project Jorge Feitosa as if he were swimming up and down the building floors, and chose a really windy night for Isadora Ferraz's animation of a girl who loses an umbrella because of a strong wind, so that the sound directly invaded the images.

My building faces sideways to the street. There are two apartments per floor, and they all have living rooms on the same side. From there, we see the right wall of the neighboring building, which faces the street. It consists of apartments with large and small balconies, all closed in, with glass windows and curtains. Almost all the residents keep their side curtains, the ones facing my building, closed. I project in three apartments that almost always have the curtains closed. In the beginning, I did not understand well enough how these things worked, and I made some projections that leaked into the rooms. There was one complaint. We can see the resident who complained in video number six, in which I am jumping and wearing a dark red dress. She appears at the very end. When I realized I was bothering her, I stopped immediately. I now play the sound

in my living room equipment, low so that it does not leak out, and I try not to disturb anyone. Little by little, I have learned the best times to make the projections. It is not possible to make live performances on Instagram or YouTube, as too many factors must align at the same time. When there is a full moon, for example, the sky might be too bright, and on the evenings that it happens to rain, I am unable to place the projector in my window.

Some material I have used in this series already existed, such as footage from rehearsals of the new play *Afetos*. Working with old images allows me to revive experiences, analyze them, acknowledge structures that keep reappearing, and apply, in editing, choreographic devices I have been using for years. I have a preference for repetition as the core structure of my dance pieces, around which all other compositional tools revolve. This is something that I re-skilled in to create the video series.

People have been very touched by the images. Some friends have encouraged me to continue because there is something about it that is exciting. I think it is noticeable, in the videos, that the projection is made from inside an apartment by someone who, at the moment, cannot leave. These videos remind us of the pulsating life outside, and they are small slices of freedom that people receive on their mobile devices, amid countless photographs and advertisements. The series has also captured the attention of the media, appearing in *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, and some other venues.

After publishing some videos, I realized this could be an art series that lasts the length of this COVID-19 pandemic. I began to think about a title while reading the book *The Black Death and the Dancing Mania*, by Justus Friedrich Karl Hecker, a German physician and medical writer. It was first published in 1832. The book describes cathartic dances of people who, as early as 1374 in Aix-la-Chapelle, united in streets or in churches. "They formed circles hand in hand, and appearing to have lost all senses,

continued dancing, regardless of bystanders, for hours together, in wild delirium, until at length they fell to the ground in a state of exhaustion" (Loc.1000). This strange spectacle spread through many parts of Europe during the Black Death. "It was called the dance of St. John or St. Vitus, on account of Bacchantic leaps by which it was characterized, and which gave to those affected [...] all appearance of persons possessed" (Loc.993).

Art is a space for the dissemination of ideas and different ways of experiencing the world. In art, we shape feelings, thoughts, sensations, and perceptions that cannot be made visible in any other way. That is why, when I see people in my country attacking artists, I think that, in part, they are showing cowardice in the face of the challenge of experiencing it. We need inner strength to face reality, which is not the beaten reality in front of us, but the submerged reality that speaks through the cracks. The artist is an uncomfortable presence because she hears noises and shapes voices that many struggle to suppress. That is why freedom and creation are twin sisters. Authoritarian regimes spend enormous energy silencing artists, as they know that artists exude freedom and are a fundamental source of the oxygen that democratic societies breathe. With a federal government that keeps pushing constitutional boundaries, that openly attacks artistic freedom and artists personally, and with one-third of the Brazilian population supporting authoritarian attitudes, keeping an artistic routine, and spreading its results via a popular site like Instagram, is one of the ways in which I take my position against the current political situation.

The title also refers to simultaneous plagues in Brazil, some of which are centuries old, and which are exploding because of social and economic injustices exposed and increased by the virus. Those are religious intolerance, homophobia, racism, sexism, and the outbreak of fascist movements. In the middle of a pandemic, our agency is limited by

isolation. Even though there have been street protests in the country, going outside with masks and keeping a distance is not an easy task.

In difficult days, when I was feeling extreme anxiety about being locked at home, I took to dancing as a cathartic response. I moved until I felt exhausted and could finally calm down. Videos six, nine, and twenty-seven of the series were filmed in those moments. After talking to some colleagues, I realized I was not the only one dancing to ward off anxiety. Even though we are not doing it together in the same place at the same time, as happened during the Black Death, we are moving collectively, linked by the same need to release surplus energy. "If we want to answer correctly, we have to fall back on the idea of collective catharsis. In every society, in every collectivity, exists – must exist – a channel, an outlet through which the forces accumulated in the forms of aggression can be released" (Fanon 145). By projecting dance on the wall of a tall building in the middle of a gigantic city, I am metaphorically releasing the energy from inside closed spaces, letting it run free and paint the concrete for a few minutes.

One of the most discussed impacts on the performing arts during this pandemic is the impossibility for people to gather together in the same room, breathe the same air, listen to the same sounds, watch the same images. Collective experience—being a body among others, whether on stage or in the audience—is at the core of the performing arts. All the small rituals of spectatorship are banned for now. Going to the theater, talking to friends and acquaintances at the entrance, listening to the three bells, finding one's seat, watching the performance, going out for dinner with people you know and others you have just met, are impossible. If you are a performing artist yourself, all that is mixed with conversations about your last play and your next projects. Producing, performing, and watching pieces is your life. Theater buildings in your city become intimate; you

know their smells, their strengths, and fragilities, while they hold your memories and emotions. Their dressing rooms witness your anxiety, happiness, gratitude, despair, and exhaustion.

The children living in the apartment right in front of my living room have already noticed the projections. They can't identify the images coloring their building, but they see the beam of light coming from the equipment on my window, and the camcorder in a tripod I set next to it to record the events in 4K (I have been filming in high quality and uploading some of the projections to my Vimeo channel, <https://vimeo.com/julianamoraes>). Whenever I notice the children, I quickly close the curtains, in what has become a cat-and-mouse game. I could try to talk to them, reason with their parents (who haven't noticed anything yet) but the game is much more fun. Their parents, a husband who I rarely see and a mother who has been working at home since April (and had to turn her bedroom's little balcony into an office), have both appeared in different videos. We can only identify them as gendered adults, as the curtains mask their faces in a kind of shadow play. I have been sharing some videos on both Instagram's one-minute feed and on IGTV so that one can see the impromptu performances of my neighbors. For instance, in video number sixteen, the husband walks in at the very end, just as the dancer finishes moving and her image slowly disappears. In the same video, at one minute and eight seconds, we hear a whistle, a Brazilian sound gesture typically used to praise a woman's beauty—someone passing in the street at that time probably saw Fernanda Lippi dancing and felt like expressing his/her attraction to her. In video twenty-four, I filmed myself dancing on the window of my own office and edited it so that it would be almost the size of my neighbor's window. When I projected it on my neighbors' window, the wife was sitting on her sofa, and it felt like my dance addressed her. Incorporating life's chance happenings into art acknowledges art as part of

life, not as a particular category above quotidian boredom. Changing perspective opens me to seeing life as a character, to seeing my neighbor trying to cope with her job at home while cleaning the apartment and looking after two children with an almost never-there husband.

We have been home for seven months now. After 146 thousand deaths in Brazil, the pandemic has eased in São Paulo, and we can now go out wearing masks and have some social interaction in open-air spaces. Panic was replaced by repeated handwashing, attentively disinfecting every package, showering whenever coming back home, video-calling older relatives to check in on them, working online, endless meetings and some interviews on Instagram, YouTube or Google Meet. Even if my workload has increased to pre-pandemic levels, my promise that I would keep the *Dance to Ward Off the Plague* project going until the end of this crisis has made me edit images even though I might sometimes feel too tired. As a professional artist, I am used to seeing things through, even though sometimes I might want to quit them halfway. *Dance to Ward off the Plague* allows me to keep dealing with my creative energy while theaters are closed, and hopefully to have fresh material for conversations at dinners after plays when we finally go back to sitting together, breathing the same air, watching the same scenes, and being moved by live bodies on stage.

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