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» If not dance... then? – an interview with Joanna Pilatowicz



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Anna Karahan

Joanna Pilatowicz – dancer, coach, choreographer living in Germany is talking, with Anna Karahan, about her passions, emigration and starting everything again and again from the beginning.

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Since when have you danced? How has your adventure begun and developed?

There is much to say here...few... or more than a few years ago and maybe even more than that, who knows? It started from the dancing and acting studio of Hania Kamińska, earlier conducted by Urszula Jaworska in Warsaw. There began my absolute fascination with dance in every form. I had really great teachers with creative imagination, Poles and Russians. The person, who contributed the most to my development is Hania Kamińska. I think that she believed in me like no one else did, giving me, after a few years, a jazz group to teach. In my opinion I was not cut out for it completely at that time. Thanks to her I began to perform with a group of my girlfriends who, like me, had done a lot for dance.

After years of performances and learning there was a time, when I felt that I must leave, something was slowly burning out of me, there was something I missed more and more. I did not know that in the moment of my arrival to the Netherlands I had something what was called in my studies the typical 'occupational burnout'. I did not figure it out, because how I could feel something like that after barely a few years? I was forcing myself then to do it but I did not feel the pleasure from dance, without which it is really hard to do so. I understood that I was even more terrified than satisfied.

Again I was lucky meeting Joan van der Mast on my way, a specialist when it came to modern dance and Laban movement analysis. Her classes helped me a

lot, not just as far as dance is concerned but also to get through this really difficult time when I did not feel satisfaction in dancing. I taught also jazz dance in her school and of course other schools in the Netherlands.

All those classes I had conducted in English for the first time, and when it comes to details which I had to explain to students my English was really bad – irrespective of the fact that I have finished the courses in Poland with good results. So, additionally I had to improve my English skills, but I really did not have time and strength to learn Dutch.

After a year my English was definitely better and I was informed about that by my group. *(laugh)*

That burnout and a lack of good mood in dance made it impossible for me to choose a carrier of a typical dancer. I went to auditions and there were many of them, a veritable paradise for dancers! I did not refuse the projects. I made then my own choreography for a fashion show, wherein I was performing as well, I took part in the Joan project. Furthermore I did artistic modeling from which pictures got to the main library in Hague. And so on, little by little...

When I felt almost settled in the Netherlands, I had to move to Germany... and there everything started from the beginning... It was very overwhelming! As a result, I even stopped dancing... I didn't know how to start everything over once again.

And again... African dance of Mich Mokelo happened upon me. Frankly speaking it has cured me of the burnout in dance. The feet! I rediscovered my feet and a rhythm – everything from the beginning, but what is the most important – the pleasure. Incidentally I discovered Salsa and I had another great teacher, who could not restrain himself from teaching me Salsa. He claimed that when I start to dance Salsa, it made me look like I was shining and that is how I started to perform with African dance in Mich's group with other Salsa dancers in their projects.

All that helped me to strengthen a co-operation with Nostos theatre, and a Greek choreographer Christina Liakopoloy invited me to co-operate with her theatrical play. My dance partner was Mich Mokelo and over the next number of months we were dancing and playing with Christina's group. And yes, I played an act in German! German people are not as open to English language as Dutch people are. I also began, really slowly though, to teach dance more and more.

Because of all those dance influences I did not really know what I actually taught, is it a jazz or not anymore? It was explained to me by Joan very well: "you teach contemporary". Obviously it is dependent on school what name suits them better, but I always explain what I have got to offer.

What do you teach your students? What pieces of advice do you give them – what is the most important in that occupation? When is it worth to start an education in this direction?

It is difficult to put that into a nutshell. It is dependent on a given group, what age bracket it is. Some come just for an entertainment, others are, so to say, forced to do an artistic program and as teenagers they do not have a motivation and desire to learn every dance style, but there is also an eminent group of dancers, who want to develop, who want to dance more, perform, etc.

That is why girls, who dance a short period of time, for a year or two, who are 20 years old and absolutely wanting to apply for a dance school, well... I speak to them in a different way. I need to make sure that they will "keep their feet on the ground" and at the same time try not to take their passion, desire and inspiration away. They need to know facts. I just ask questions, one after another, sometimes I stay with them after the classes and ask them what their plans for the future are, what idea they have, what they do to achieve it, what happens "if..."? What back-up plan do they have? Will they be satisfied "if..."? Do they know what the salaries for dancers are? Do they know how many girls come to auditions, for example to Pineapple studio in London? (hundreds!) Can they compete with them? Do they know what age they are at? (usually 15-17 years old) etc. Typical coaching questions. Allegedly I am diplomatic, but ...only for a statement that "they just love a dance" – I respond to them that love is not enough. The passion, addiction to dance and so – that is usually enough. The feeling that you cannot stand the life without a dance – that is a lot!

Clearly, it looks different with persons at the age of over 30 or 40 years old, who had a dream but the flow of life led them in another direction, another carrier, family etc. They come to somehow make their dreams come true. We have annual concerts, so I help them to be on the stage in front of people, to work out their own style and feeling in dance, to feel that they are unique and to give them as much technique as they are able to absorb. They are really able to amaze people.

The things look different with a group of young professional step dancers, who very often come back from competition with medals. They think that other form of dance is absolutely unnecessary. Hence they are not motivated enough. There are many of them and dance is compulsory. My role here then is to give them what will be useful in the future, even though they do not know about it at the moment.

It is different with children. They mainly want to have fun, so every dance must be given in the form of a play, connected with it or with breaks for fun with moderately dance character.

When it comes to pieces of advice I usually give them...: BREATHE! It is really a plague of not breathing people. We all forget to breathe and this is the most important. I turn the music off and I say to go through the whole combination listening to your breath. It is enough in order to notice when we breathe and when we stop doing it. Breath should cause a movement, not the other way and god forbid the movement without a breath and blocking it. It is totally unnatural, but fairly encountered.

If you breathe, your technique automatically gets better, lines longer, movement freer etc.

It is not just dance that you deal with – you write also novels and articles. Soon, your first book is going to be released – when and how has it come to existence. Where did you draw your inspiration from?

“Stories from the border worlds” is going to be released in the next 1-2 months. I hope that during Easter the book will appear in Polish bookstores and as an online e-book. The novels came to existence in Netherlands, and there were of course many of inspirations. There, perhaps, where I could not fulfill myself in a dance, something inside me was fulfilling with words in a fantasy and metaphorical form reflecting what was happening around me, inside me.

In Netherlands I had not many funny experiences in the beginning, so it is quite possible that during writing novels I was changing the perspective myself, and thereby the facts are more tolerable.

And what about painting – how important is it in your life? How often do you paint?

Painting resulted actually from the runic signs. Once I was given the book with signs, and in my opinion they needed colours. Originally runes were engraved on stones, quite simple symbols, however for me they were something more than that. I connected them with colours and accents of Feng Shui. That is how I started to paint, just for myself, using aquarelles on the paper. I created for myself a whole deck. Where those runes magic? I do not know, but they worked perfectly on my subconscious, and then, as it turned out, a few persons who received those paintings informed me that in the areas of life, which symbols supposed to affect, got definitely better. I am not the one to judge if it is true. In the Netherlands I started to paint with acrylics on canvas and I could carry out the experiments like those for hours. They are not perfect pictorial works of art, but some of them I do like very much and apparently customers like them as well.

I paint periodically. I may not have a mood for painting for a month, a week. Afterwards though, something suddenly mandates me to paint, a need, and I am able to do that a half of a night, what I usually can let myself do since I work afternoons as a dance teacher.

Which of these forms of artistic expression is the closest to you – dance, writing or painting? How do you know, which of those forms give you the best of what you are feeling at the given moment?

This is always a difficult question to answer, however I believe, that humans are never unilateral, that they need to express themselves by different means. These are not just tools perceived as an art, but also in life as a cook, helping others, having done something good for another person, etc. I really need that, and an artist expressing themselves as well as doing it somewhere on the philosophical level is very important for me.

Coming back to the question... you do not know which form is the best in a given moment. It is rather a desire for what you feel in that moment and what you want to do. It is a conversation with someone, who calls you to express themselves in words, in painting or in dance. It happens that you want to paint but in that day it just does not work.

What influences on your creativity from meeting with people of different nationalities and cultures? How, personally, does your point of view changes your emigration experience?

I would say that it has a huge influence, it enriches you incredibly. For sure it gives you more of an experience. It never takes it away. Since I am interested in psychology, what makes people talk and think diversely in various conditions, their motivation, points of view, beliefs... what shapes and changes them, I could write about it in another book.

Everyone has their own turning points in life, where personal philosophy changes, sometimes completely. For instance I have always relied just on myself, I did not ask anyone for a help. Being alone in the Netherlands forced me to be in other position, it suddenly required other behaviours that I did not feel inside me, I did not have them. Supporting others makes you happy, being supported is also an ability. For me being supported was harder. I had pangs of conscience. It really does teach you, sometimes in a very nice way.

I also realized, that I had such a conviction inside me, some personal pride, that I did not want to be in a position of being supported. I associated it with being a victim and a parasite on others. It took me a bit of time to accept and see that roles are interchangeable. We give and we take, we exchange and that makes “the energy” flow. The fact that I needed help in one thing did not stop me to help someone else, someone who was just helping me in something else.

What are you heading for? What do you look for in your life?

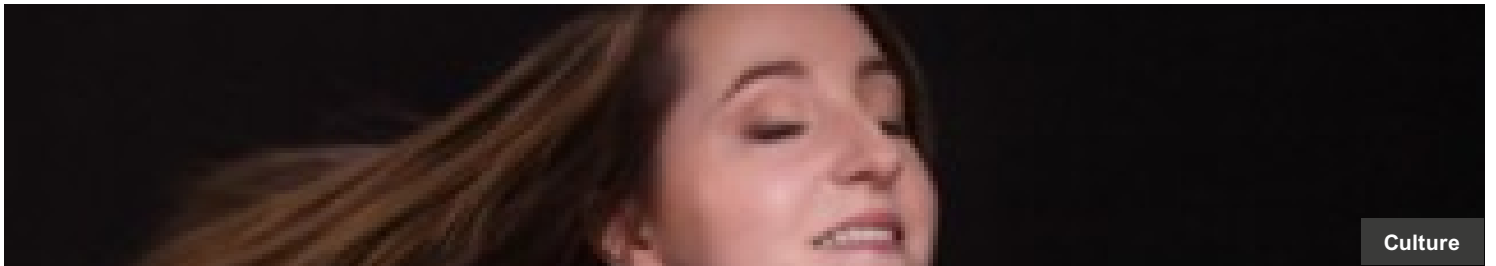
So far I have learnt about myself that I definitely want to express myself on the artistic and philosophical level. Since there are so many forms of expression trying to get my attention, I would like to connect them and I have an idea how to do it, but for now I remain silent....

I suppose that all those forms are not a goal but a mean. The most important for me are relations, human relationships. Who we are without the ones closest to our hearts? Anyway, it is another broad subject and I will tell you about this in my next book, which hopefully will be realised in English.

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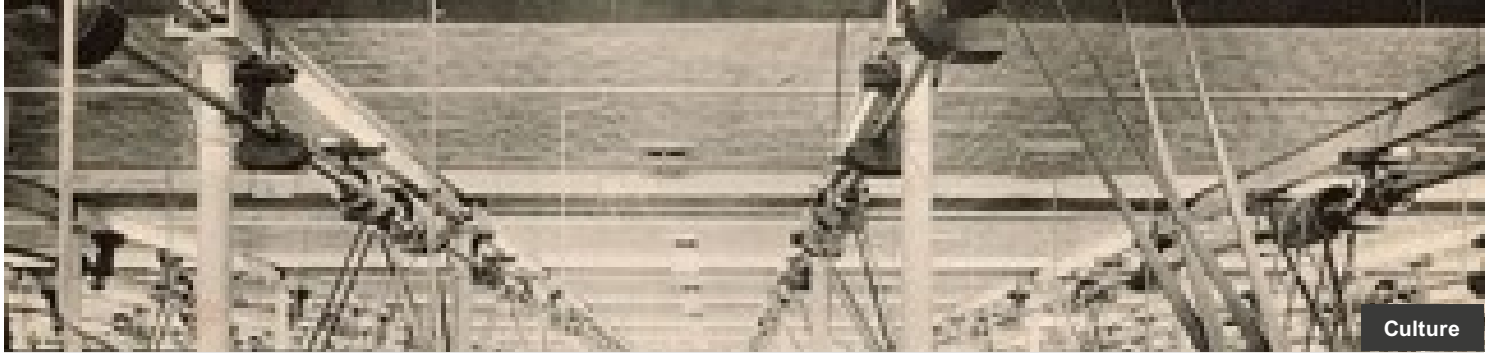
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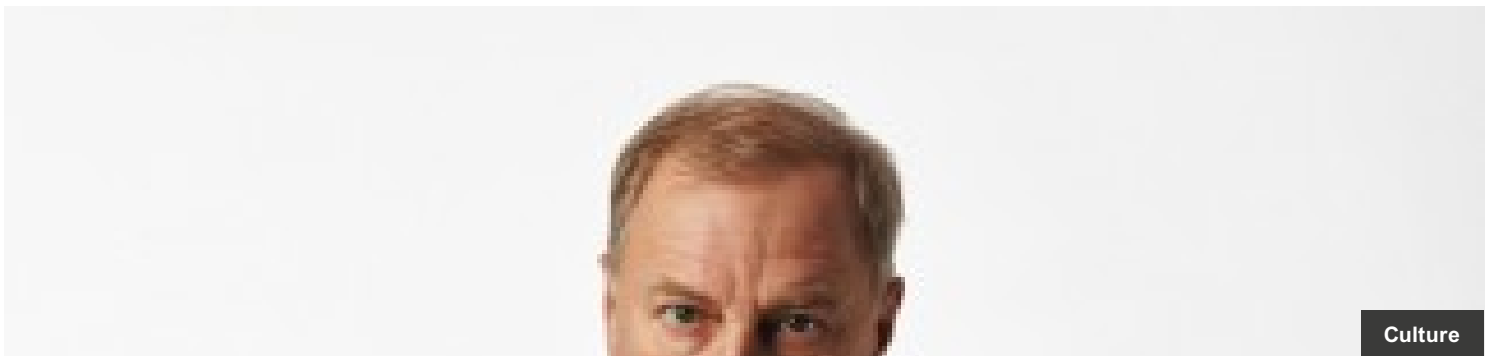
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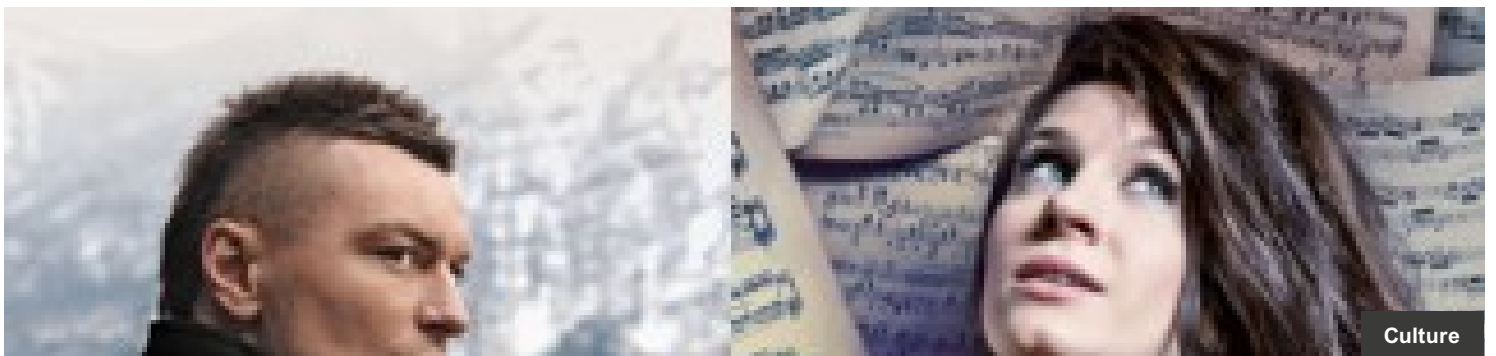
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