

BUDAPEST DANCE SCHOOL

IN MOTION

Through performances which are as emblematic today as they were at the time of their production, the exhibition *The Budapest Dance School In Motion* recalls the history of an institution which continues to exert a defining influence on the world of contemporary dance in Hungary. It is a story of an institution which, since the late 1970s, has periodically had to reshape itself, but it is also a story which, despite a series of institutional renewals, shows a great deal of continuity, in large part due to the role played by Iván Angelus both as founder and director. This duality of perpetual renewal and continuity in an institution at the core of which is an art form that is community-based on the one hand and for which the medium of transmission is the human body contributes to an understanding of both the present and the cultural changes of the last forty years. The forty-year history of an institution balancing on the margins of cultural life sheds light on the funding environment of the cultural world of the last decade of socialism and post-1990 Hungary.

After 1948, the continuation of what had been a vibrant world of movement art in the classical avant-garde period of the early 20th century and the interwar years was brought to a sudden halt by the official state cultural policy in Hungary. In the decades that followed, the government provided support almost exclusively for classical ballet and folk dance (which had been elevated from a communal art to the status of performance art). The tradition of movement art could only survive in isolation in the private homes of individuals and under new names, such as aesthetic body training and rhythmic gymnastics. The workshop-like undertakings and pedagogical activity of Olga Szentpál, Valéria Dienes, and Alice

Madzsar, representatives of free dance who emphasised individual expression, i.e. who differed from classical ballet not only in form but also in approach, were almost completely forgotten in Hungary. As a result, the younger generation, who began around 1980 to show curiosity concerning modern forms of expression and dance techniques, sought inspiration and stimulation primarily from abroad, and although often indirectly, they were predominantly linked to American modern and postmodern dance.

The first manifestation of the new dance movement in Hungary was the New Dance Club started by Iván Angelus and Ferenc Kálmán in 1979, out of which the Creative Movement Studio evolved, which aimed to encourage creativity in movement and dance at all levels (amateur and professional) and for all ages (children, teenagers, adults). Although the Creative Movement Studio focused on dance education, it also extended its activities to the creation and presentation of productions which encouraged cooperation among different art forms and the organisation of cultural events (concerts, performances, exhibitions) for the public. As Angelus stated, “our work on movement theatre has a number of wider outcomes, particularly in the development of concentration and cooperation skills and the development of a liberated, autonomous, creative, movement-based attitude.”

Founded in 1979, the New Dance Club was a movement research workshop which was also intended to introduce modern dance forms to the public through film screenings, lectures, and presentations on workshops in which dancers had participated abroad – experiences that were not available through official channels. Iván Angelus turned to dance after a background in theatre (Stúdió K) and Ferenc Kálmán (Domino Pantomime) after a background in pantomime. They felt that, at that time, their opportunities in Hungary to convey their vision

of dance as a modern form of theatre were limited, so they opened their own dance studio, which they ran as an economic working community, a small-scale private business model that became possible in Hungary in the early 1980s. In 1983, Angelus and Kálmán renovated a basement gym room in an old high school in Újlipótváros with loans from private individuals and the national bank. Under the name Creative Movement Studio, the school outlived the regime change of 1990, and nine years later it moved into the building of the old Goldberger textile factory in Óbuda, where it continues to operate as the Budapest Dance Academy.

The full-time education of professional dancers began in 1991, based on Angelus’s vision and experience and the professional-pedagogical foundations which had been laid over the years at the Studio. In an ever-changing cultural and educational environment, the institution was also perpetually forced to renew itself: the club-like programmes of the 1980s and 1990s, which included a wide spectrum of artistic forms and subcultural and experimental initiatives, were replaced by the full range of dance education in the 2000s: offering basic, secondary, and eventually higher education. The Budapest Dance School – by which we now understand all these institutions – trains artists who have developed their own toolkit and who, as dancers, dance teachers, choreographers, and company managers, expand the pool of professionals who cultivate, shape, and teach contemporary dance in Hungary and abroad.

The creative approaches adopted by the School in its approach to its mission also found expression in the use of documentary genres throughout its operation, including the use of various media. This made it possible to organize a dense “study exhibition” which includes objects, texts, and various modes of presentation. Given the wealth of archival material avail-

able and the space constraints, each room (organized chronologically) is structured around the presentation of a major dance production through which three different periods in the history of the institution come to life.

Mirrors, from 1982, which was considered by many to be the first independent dance performance in Hungary, was based on the movement research workshop initiated at the New Dance Club. The aspiration of the Studio, which opened the following year with regular dance classes and the continuous involvement of international guest teachers, was to build a dance company. Although no company was formed, the ever-widening network of contacts is striking in the context of Angelus' solo *Walrus-Party* (1987), which was performed several times in Hungary and abroad and which enabled Angelus, who often thought in terms of creating productions that were a synthesis of the arts, to perform in almost all of the contemporary art venues in Budapest while also collaborating on television, film, music, and visual arts projects. Among the productions done by the school from its period as a full-time educational institution, *Number Nine*, first performed in 1992 and staged for nearly three decades, each time in the same space-time structure but with different movement sequences, illustrates the role of the human body as a medium for knowledge transfer: dancers moving within nine circles formed by light impart on one another a series of movements they invented. Here, we see on stage the unique relationship which defined the pedagogical system of the Creative Movement Studio as early as the 1980s and continues to be the basis of the work at the Budapest Contemporary Dance College: teacher and student learn from each other. The stories in these rooms are accompanied by a selection of films and videos, a timeline in the corridor, and an "alternative" history of the institution which emerges from plans which never actually came to fruition.

Budapest Dance School in Motion

2021. 10. 22. – 2022. 01. 09.

Budapest History Museum - Budapest Gallery

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Graphic design: BARBARA IPSICS

Special thanks: IVÁN ANGELUS, ARTPOOL,
TAMÁS BAKÓ, VIRÁG FEHÉR, ATTILA PÁCSER,
SZÓFIA TÖLLI
Publisher: NOÉMI NÉPESSY,
director of Budapest History Museum

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Photo: Péter Hapák
Dancers: Adrienn Hód and Tamás Bakó (2000)

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