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## **Review of *Zaum: Beyond Significance***

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Directed and choreographed by Josephine Zmolek and Paul Zmolek.

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*In a historical moment when the 'body' is considered to be a direct purveyor of identity and is thus the object of so much intellectual and physical scrutiny, a moment when academics and scientists, as well as artists and politicians, are struggling to understand the cultural differences between bodies, dance can provide a critical example of the dialectical relationship between cultures and the bodies that inhabit them.*

Albright, *Choreographing Difference* (3)

*I accepted the dawn of Futurist arts' revolt. I opened myself and, smashing my skull, threw my reason of the past into its swift-moving fire.*

Malevich, "Reply"

I was invited to experience, and to write about my experience of, Joséphine and Paul Zmolek's contemporary ballet, *Zaum: Beyond Significance*. Because Communication Studies constitutes my academic training – my interests resting at the intersections of philosophy and politico-cultural critique as they relate to communicative interaction between beings-in-the-world – I brought with me to the experience of *Zaum* a particularly receptive viewpoint. Communication, in my view, is not limited to the spoken – to words, to language – and, it is a mistake to reduce communication to verbal artifacts derived from a complex process of body-language-body-language. Rather, we communicate with one another somatically – that is to say, our being-in-the-world is always already an embodied cultural identity that dynamically articulates a primordial (inter)subjective incantation. Put simply, we language our self to other selves through/with/in/from our bodies. Understood in this way, then, the dance and choreography of *Zaum*, as one modality of that ontological cultural languaging, spoke volumes to me.

What struck me in the first few minutes of watching *Zaum* was how the choreography is performatively constructed to embody and speak to the effects on art and culture of the Russian revolution. The movement begun in 1917 aimed at taking politico-cultural control away from the art

establishment and put it into the hands of the artists thus revealing the power of revolution to penetrate all levels of society. Reason was understood to be the purview of the elite and, as control shifted from the few to millions of working-class people, the elite reason that dictated all relationships in society was fundamentally altered - turned upside down, or discarded altogether. Zaum's choreography reflects this inversion and/or abandonment of elite reason in a number of striking ways.

The juxtaposition of traditional and avant-garde ballet in this contemporary, critical rendering of both highlighted, through its choreography, the revolutionary move from the elite to the mundanity of the everyday. Traditionally, the ballet exemplifies refinement; its movements are soundless except for accompanying music, it exhibits (an illusion of) ease and fluid motion, and it represents an elite and ideal conception of the beautiful. The choreography for Zaum, however, challenges those traditions. We hear the labored breath of dancers, and the sometimes irregular and violent impact of dancers' bodies with the stage, with themselves, and with one another. This somatic presence is not veiled by choreography that would distract us from the work of the dancers. Instead, the choreography throws into stark relief the actuality of that work – the exertion of force when limbs labor to express the tensions between politico-cultural integration and resistance; the drawing of air into laboring lungs signaling that the material mechanisms of the bodies in motion are functioning in anything but an abstract fashion; the tactile reverberations of slapping hand to hand, the report of pounding foot on stage, the solid thump of modern material being handled, being constructed, being appropriated for efficient function. We are reminded in this hearing – indeed, in this summons – that the revolutionary work of the people's cultural body cannot be ignored. And, imperialist elite reason must always answer to the industrious pragmatism of the embodied everyday that always already reaches beyond the rational.

Zaum's choreography also exemplifies the preoccupation with and celebration of the fast pace and automation of contemporary life so much a part of the Cubo-Futurist movement. Whereas traditional ballet emphasizes the fluidity of the body – the graceful line created by a straight leg and pointed toe, an arched back, a perfectly turned out foot – the choreography for Zaum takes on the character, in some sequences, of a blueprint for dancer as machine. Replicating the Futurist orientation toward technology and modern industry, the stagehands move as automatons – sharp, regular, and mechanized marching in concert; repetitive angularity of arms keeping time and keeping the machine in motion; seemingly interchangeable, assembly-line dancers simulating cogs in the wheels of industry. We are reminded, in these sequences, of both the promise and danger of mechanization: the promise of progress,

of creative cultural advancement, of ingenuity and innovation and, at the same time, the dangers of assimilation and absorption of distinctive individuality when the human-being is sacrificed for a collective, programmatic efficiency – when the body becomes material for the machine.

Finally, the beauty of Zaum's choreography is not of the elite ideal stripe. Whereas the rationality of the ballet embraces the aesthetic "rules" of dance, of standard movement, of formally embodied syntax, Zaum's debt to transrationality and transmentality re-conceives that beauty. In general, the direction and choreography of Zaum stages the revolutionary "return" to the primitive in language developed by poets Velimir Khlebnikov and Alexei Kruchenykh. The Futurist verbal experimentations – the moves away from meaning and symbol, away from the rationality of the idea(l), and (back) to the word, the thing, the core essence of language – is also apparent in the Zaum production.

As the Zmoleks point out in the director's notes, "Typically our choreography is created first which determines the structure, mood and character from which music and design elements follow. Submitting to the unknown, we gave up rational control by reversing this process." This letting go of the rational, of total control of the process, and finding direction in the experience of the moment is conspicuously present in the ultimate construction of the dance – the embodied poetic irregularity of an individual dancer impetuously breaking away from the collective in her frenetic bursting forth of freedom from linear articulation; the unexpected and disruptive asymmetrically personified grammar of the marionettes, controlled with wires of rational management only to ultimately be liberated, seemingly without any concluding punctuation; the non-sense of the high society hoop ladies whose tightly corseted syntactical accoutrements appear, at once, enduringly, timelessly rigid and erratically moving to the edge of endurance only to shatter against jagged, fragmented, indefinite meaninglessness. We are reminded, in these moments, of the beauty of the unexpected – how a novel perspective of the world brings with it new dimensions and content, and how such originality frees images and analogies (the stuff of reason) in a vibrant, generative move toward fresh insights into reality.

Although Zaum revisits politico-cultural themes – through the choreography and direction of the Zmoleks – that, for some, may seem outdated, the production is really quite timely. As Ann Cooper Albright suggests, it is by "tracing the layers of kinesthetic, aural, spatial, as well as visual and symbolic meanings in dance [that] can help us to understand the complex interconnectedness of personal experience and cultural representation so critical to contemporary cultural theory" (4). The

revolutionary movement of the Russian working class in the early part of the century brought to the fore, en masse, personal experiences of repression and oppression. Those historical personal experiences translated by the bodies in Zaum, and the social critique inherent in that translation, certainly resonates with the effects of the conservative tenor in contemporary politico-cultural environments. That is to say, the current economic impoverishment and educational deterioration in the United States – alongside the threat and inevitable viciously destructive consequences of an imperialistic war – mirrors, in some ways, the Russian context of 1917 with its own economic, educational, and war ravages. However, the phenomenal amount of creative energy that was released before the Stalinist counter-revolution still lives through productions like Zaum. The choreography and direction of the production underscored, for me, the hope of the Cubo-Futurists, even when faced with seemingly unendurable politico-cultural circumstances.

Before the lights are lowered, we are treated to that vision of hope in the form of two dancers, two souls, who have found one another, as human-beings, in the midst of the mechanized. The world slows, becomes softer, its edges rounder, more yielding, malleable. The dance becomes tenderer, warmer, gentler – two bodies intertwined. Finally, the stage is dark except for a single spotlight emphasizing this pair of bodies lying at rest, side-by-side, one in the embrace of the other. No breath, no words, no sound. One hand reaches out to another, also reaching.

Touch.

Care.

Good.

World.

Human.

Love.

If a cultural revolution was possible for the Russian working class, can we imagine what we'd be capable of today with the same focus and creative energy?

The Zmoleks' choreography and direction of Zaum: Beyond Significance speaks volumes in response to this question and, in so doing, opens new avenues for inventive, embodied expression that create the conditions for the possibility of moving beyond (oppressive and repressive) rationality.