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The ballets of 'Arabesque' in the triple translation between literature, choreography, and multimedia

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Abstract. Travels through the centuries, millennia-old cultural and historical codes, and their projections on stage are offered by the ballets of the Arabesque Dance Company: 'Siddhartha' by Hermann Hesse choreographed by Mila Iskrenova (2017); 'The Divine Comedy' by Dante Alighieri, choreographed by Asen Nakov (2024, entitled 'The Dante Secret'); and two productions by Boryana Sechanova – 'Adoration and Violence – Variations on the Theme of Mozart's "Don Giovanni"' (2007), based on Molière and Pushkin, and 'The Galatea Effect' (2022), based on Efemia Fard's play of the same title and 'Pygmalion' by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The choreographic interpretations are by no means copies of the literary originals, but rather new readings that transform the setting, characters, and relationships, embellished with multimedia elements that often offer their own interpretations of the events.

Keywords: choreography, directing, ballet, dance theatre, multimedia

Journeys through the centuries, yet commented on from the perspective of the present day – such readings can be found in literary works, which have embedded cultural and historical codes dating back thousands of years. When, however, these are transferred from literature to the stage, what is required is not simply a translation from one art into another, but also a new choreographic reading that reinterprets the original source in a different way, projecting it into contemporary conditions and relationships. It is not uncommon for multimedia, which is conquering ever more territory, to become an equal participant in the expressive means of choreography.

Adoration and Violence – Variations on the Theme of Mozart's 'Don Giovanni' (2007)

The legend of the eternal lover, Don Juan, has been multiplied into numerous different interpretions in literature, among the best known of which are Molière's comedy *Dom Juan* (Brunel 2007) and *The Stone Guest* – the play from the cycle *The Little Tragedies* by Pushkin (Pushkin 1986). Among the

choreographic interpretations, the most popular is Maurice Béjart's ballet *In Search of Don Juan* (1962), which combines two legends in its production – the legend of the eternal lover Don Juan and that of the Spanish poet and mystic from the Carmelite Order, John of the Cross (Juan de la Cruz), canonized by the Catholic Church as a saint.[1]

In Bulgaria, Don Juan would appear in some earlier dance versions, significantly closer to the opera libretto[2], but the staging by Arabesque, ***Adoration and Violence – Variations on the Theme of Mozart's 'Don Giovanni'***[3], modifies the relationships between the protagonists in a new way. According to choreographer Boryana Sechanova[4], women are seekers, pursuers and killers. They are both the stalker Don Juan and the Commendatore – the killer of love. What they want is being wooed, yet in reality they are killing love with their posturing. They drag men into the hell of pragmatism and then bring them to destruction, destroying even the slightest hint of romance in them. Then they cry – mourning the perished "eternal lover", but mostly mourning themselves.

The choreographic solution of *Adoration and Violence* emphasizes three variants of the modern male-female relationship: on the one hand, she poses while he is helpless before her; on the other – he is brutal and she is the victim; there is also a third option – he is forced to be with her, sacrificing himself, but in the end, he cannot stand it any longer and transfers her to another man, or he himself goes to another man. The variant in which the gallant Don Juan elegantly woos Donna Anna is presented only in multimedia as a shot from a bygone era.

The multimedia[5] in *Adoration and Violence – Variations on the Theme of Mozart's 'Don Giovanni'* is a parallel narrative that does not duplicate the stage action, but develops independently.[6] In some of the shots, the woman is the seducer[7], but

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[1] *À la recherche de Don Juan* (1962). In the play, Don Juan betrays his own nature by falling in love only with Her, while renouncing all other women, who finally tear him apart. Here, in addition to the two different stories about Don Juan, a reference is added to the legend of Orpheus torn apart by the enraged women to whom he pays no attention. The last part of the work is dedicated to Nothingness and Emptiness, which is one of the mystical concepts of John of the Cross, seeking God in the "dark night of the soul" and in "Nothingness".

[2] The first ballet production was *Don Juan* by Fedya Bakalov in Plovdiv (1974, music by Gluck), followed by *Don Juan* by Margarita Arnaudova in Ruse (1977, music by Gubarenko). Both productions strive for a faithful retelling of the plot, without offering their own interpretations of the story.

[3] *Adoration and Violence – Variations on the Theme of Mozart's 'Don Giovanni'* – music by Hristo Petkov, choreography by Boryana Sechanova, multimedia by Marta Varlaamova; premiere: Ballet Arabesque – 27 January 2007.

[4] Boryana Sechanova is the author of an earlier version – *The Diary of a Seducer* staged in Varna and awarded the Varna Award for Best Performance (2004).

[5] Marta Varlaamova is the author of the multimedia.

[6] For example, a female photographer photographs a seductive man and, supposedly in order to find the most suitable pose, flirts with him – straightening his shirt, adjusting his position on the couch, etc. A few episodes later, the multimedia returns to the model and the photographer, sitting at a table in a restaurant – she is trying to seduce him, while he remains mysteriously silent.

[7] In the multimedia – sexual relations between a man and a woman, as if they are in a barn.

she also becomes the victim when the wedding ends in infidelity[8] and the sex ends in violence[9]. There is a third variant where the married woman resignedly pours water on her husband's feet, who has long ceased to be seductive, however is still demanding care[10]. The fourth multimedia version, the one in which the gallant Don Juan elegantly woos Donna Anna, appears only as a distant memory of a bygone era.[11] An interesting detail is the taking off and putting on of the pearl necklace – initially as a sign of self-surrender, and later as a symbol of well-paid love.[12]

The performance is framed with footage from a modern highway[13]: initially the pickup in the two cars stopped one next to the other was initiated by the man. At the finish, back in the highway traffic, the woman tries to get the attention of the man in the car next to hers, but he is passive. Finally, the visual collage transforms the lady into two crooked branches (legs) and reminds, in a somewhat synthesized way, that love is an illusion and a deception.[14] The highway and the multitude of cars remind that what is shown is not an isolated case.

The video projections also include footage shot with the performers of the choreography. In the multimedia, however, they do not dance. Thus, the two spaces are clearly distinguished: on the one hand, the stage, where the dancing performers are; on the other, the video screen, which shows the same performers, but deprived of the wholeness of the dance, with the emphasis placed on the gaze, the posture, and fragments of their bodies.

Both the multimedia and the choreography are presented in fragments, with the idea that the viewer should put the puzzle together, while a deliberate discrepancy is created between the interpretations of the choreographer and those of the multimedia director. This places the viewer before the dilemma of which to follow: the choreographic solution or the video projection, which is often an ironic commentary on the stage action and does not allow the viewer to experience it spontaneously.[15]

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[8] The camera enters a contemporary pub, where girls and boys are smoking, drinking and having fun. The groom has "quick" sex with another woman; the bride sees this.

[9] The video takes us to a bathroom – undressing under the shower and sexual relations that gradually turn into violence. The woman leaves devastated.

[10] In the multimedia, a woman holds a water jug decorated with a drawing of a beautiful couple from a bygone era: depicting the man as a gallant cavalier, bowing and kissing the woman's hand. The woman in the multimedia pours the water into a basin decorated with the same drawing. In the next instant, the camera moves to two hairy male legs in the basin – the man, fat and flabby, stands up and shakes himself contentedly, assuming, in his pleasure, what is supposedly a Spanish pose.

[11] A silhouette of a Spanish woman dancing flamenco against the setting sun, and a little later – a carousel where different faces flicker past, without the camera focusing specifically on any one of them.

[12] Or perhaps as different forms of payment – in our century, the woman pays, whereas in the time of the mythical Don Juan, the man pays.

[13] Multimedia of a stream of cars with their headlights on the highway creates an impression of the big city, where the person is a speck of dust from the general flow.

[14] The same is also shown by the choreographer, but in his own way, turning the lover Don Juan into a victim.

[15] Even in two of the numbers (No. 16 and No. 21) there appears to be no action on stage during the multimedia projection.

The presence of two different stories[16] unfolding in parallel synthesizes different genre characteristics: on the one hand, a *post-modern reading* of a literary work; on the other, *total dance theatre*, intertwining dance and video in a stage realization, with both having an equal impact. At the level of the plot, however, the performance also brings to the fore the *choice* from the *fairy tales* – "if you go to the left..., if you go to the right..." (Yaneva 2009: 464– 469).

***Siddhartha* (2017)**

Hermann Hesse's literary work ***Siddhartha*** (1922) was adapted for the stage by choreographer Mila Iskrenova (2017) as an encounter between the East and the West. The narrative synthesizes several time periods – the time of Siddhartha; the blissful period between the two world wars; and the wartime sense of anxiety, which, however, is reinforced by the same sense of anxiety in our century.

Hermann Hesse's[17] *Siddhartha* is parabolic in character (Hesse 2010) – it follows the protagonist's journey through various schools and teachings in order to awaken "the innermost part of the human being, the greatest secret that is no longer the Self" (Hesse 2010: 18). The encounter with Gautama, the Exalted One[18] – Buddha, who has "stopped the wheel of rebirth" – seems to mark the beginning of the story. According to Siddhartha, by following various teachings, he has lost himself, and in order to attain enlightenment, he must first discover his Self (Hesse 2010: 37–40). Therefore, Siddhartha leaves Buddha and begins his journey. He comes to know earthly pleasures – love games with the beautiful Kamala, work for the merchant Kamaswami, access to wealth, sumptuous food, alcohol, and gambling. This, however, leads Siddhartha to a sense of excess that disgusts him. That is why he decides to return to the river (a symbol of the ever-changing life) and to love. For him, enlightenment lies precisely in love.[19]

The performance, however, begins with hatred – video projections[20] depict wartime scenes – planes, bombers, tanks, crowds with raised fists, dead bodies, a field littered with corpses, marching soldiers, and burning buildings. These images are projected onto a video screen above the stage, while the writer Hermann Hesse (also a character in the performance) meditates on the proscenium and subsequently jots down thoughts and observations in his notebook.

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[16] In and above the stage space.

[17] German-Swiss writer (1877–1962), winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1946, as well as the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in 1955.

[18] This pattern, in which a figure is characterized by means of an adjective used as a noun, is characteristic not only of the Indian epic. It is also found in ancient German legends (e.g. Wagner's tetralogy) and elsewhere.

[19] "...to learn to love the world, to no longer compare it with some world I desired or imagined – some kind of perfection I had imagined myself – but rather to leave it as it is, to love it, and to gladly belong to it" (Hesse 2010: 142).

[20] Video projections by Nikola Nalbantov.



Fig. 1. Mila Iskrenova's *Siddhartha*, based on Hermann Hesse's novel. Vasil Dipchikov as Siddhartha and Chan The Chung as Buddha, with Stefan Vuchov as Hermann Hesse in the background (Photo: Ballet Arabesque Archive)

Buddha (performed by Chan The Chung) is featured in the centre of the narrative, together with Siddhartha (performed by Vasil Dipchikov), but the author of the literary work himself, i.e., Hermann Hesse (performed by Stefan Vuchov), is also present, and it appears as if the journey of the writer duplicates the journey of Siddhartha to some extent, although it took place at a different time.

Quite often, the writer enters the action as the Disciple, as does Siddhartha. In No. 9, Buddha dances with Hermann Hesse, just as in No. 3 he danced with Siddhartha (Fig. 1). This leads to No. 10, when Buddha leaves, while in two parallel monologues Siddhartha and Hesse express their loneliness and the feeling that they are not understood (the movements combine Eastern style and free movement). They then meet and dance in synchrony, allowing their relationship to develop into a true duet (Fig. 2), and together they sit in the



Fig. 2. Mila Iskrenova's *Siddhartha*, based on Hermann Hesse's novel. Vasil Dipchikov as Siddhartha and Stefan Vuchov as Hermann Hesse (Photo: Ballet Arabesque Archive)

lower left corner in the Lotus position. Buddha also joins them there (No. 10). Their unity is confirmed in their trio (No. 12).

In No. 15, temptation appears – women try to seduce Siddhartha and Hesse, while the reactions of the two are to some extent similar, as they now act as one. The episode, however, is perceived as a trial sent by Buddha (insofar as it is he who brings the women onto the stage).

Interestingly, a few episodes later, in No. 18, Siddhartha, Hesse and other men "pump up" their muscles by doing various strength exercises. The impression is that the men are competing and even racing, while their dance is even reminiscent of a disco dance. At the same time, at the other end of the stage, Buddha performs Tai Chi movements. Thus, the difference between the West and the East, between the physical and the spiritual, becomes even more evident.

No. 23 is perceived as the Culmination, when men and women repeat Buddha's movement combinations as his followers. In No. 24, all three characters place their white cloth on the floor, step on it with their heels and spin on it, creating the impression that they are able to control the "cycle" (as only Buddha did in No. 20).

Between the duets expressing the teacher-disciple relationship, there are ensemble scenes in which the women manipulate large white cloths: they use them as laundry, washing and hanging it out to dry; as a rag for wiping the floor; as a roof over their heads or as a veil for the Virgin Mary; and as a means of attracting attention and seducing the men. The women also symbolize the river – ever-changing life. Buddha, on the other hand, uses the white cloth as a scarf or as a white "territory" that he (and later Siddhartha and Hesse) steps on and spins with his heel (like the "cycle of life"). It creates the impression that the white cloth is actually a blank page of life and each person decides what to use it for.

The other symbol is the crate – the ensemble performers use it to collect the fruits of their labour, but it also represents people's heavy thoughts when they place the crates on their heads (No. 26). The people resemble robots – their actions are completely mechanized: they pass the crates to one another, then place them on the ground, after which they pass them to one another again, and so on. They then place the crates on their heads or put their heads inside them when the crates are on the ground. Interestingly, Siddhartha also takes part in this action (Buddha even hands him the crate), and the crates themselves can also be interpreted as the fruits that each person gathers.

No. 27 marks the beginning of the Reprise – Hesse (again in a white suit and hat, again writing something in his notebook) approaches Siddhartha. Buddha stands between them, and the three are together again. The final No. 29 and No. 30 are directed towards the audience and are reminiscent of stage bows and curtain calls (although they can also be interpreted as the knowledge attained, inasmuch as they are built from combinations of the Graham technique, but are overly demonstrative). At the very end, Siddhartha and Hesse enter the stage arm in arm.

Multimedia appears at several moments throughout the performance. After the initial wartime footage, the narrative incorporates video projections of cell division, extraterrestrials with bulging eyes, a tree with intertwined roots (when Buddha hands Siddhartha the crate), and a statue of the laughing Buddha. These images are complemented by balls suspended above the stage, which are illuminated in different ways at different moments.

The performance is in suite form, consisting of individual études, whose purpose is not so much to retell the relationship between Siddhartha and Buddha, that is, between disciple and teacher, as to draw parallels between East and West and between then and now.

The juxtapositions operate at the level of video projections (the bombings) and the carefree dance of the women; the presence of Hermann Hesse alongside Buddha[21] and Siddhartha; and the muscle competitions and the disco dance, which recall the subsequent "Americanization" of society.

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[21] I think it is precisely the presence of Chan The Chung (in the role of Buddha) that makes the production so spiritual and comprehensible, as he enriches it not only as a dancer but also with his vision of the spiritual structure of the world.

The musical collage of Wagner overtures, European popular songs from the 1930s, and the only ragga piece by Led Zeppelin[22], together with the dance language, sets different cultural and historical codes against one another. It seems to me, however, that the interpretation would have been clearer if the Buddha–Siddhartha–Hesse connection had been brought out more explicitly and maintained until the end of the performance. In the production, the tension begins to subside and the relationships to become blurred from the appearance of the crates onwards (especially with the idea of the Reprise in No. 27). Thus, the "epiphany", which is brought out quite clearly in the literary text, is not reached.

Nevertheless, the idea of visualizing on stage such a complex spiritual work as Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* is quite risky, because spiritual quests and philosophical insights are difficult to translate into an adequate stage form. Mila Iskrenova has succeeded in doing so without seeking to follow the source text literally, while introducing the interesting idea of bringing the writer into the narrative and exploring his affinity with Siddhartha.

The Galatea Effect (2022)

For centuries, humanity has been fascinated by the myth of the sculptor Pygmalion, who created the most beautiful sculpture of a woman (Galatea), and when he fell in love with his creation, Aphrodite, the goddess of love, brought her to life. The idea of inanimate matter being given life through divine favour brings to the fore the question of to what extent the creator is the actual originator of their creation? Or is it the opposite – does the creation create the creator? The interactions between creator and creation are multilayer and have been reinterpreted in new ways each time, both in literature and on stage.[23]

The Galatea Effect by Boryana Sechanova (2022) is influenced by the plays *The Galatea Effect* by Efemia Fard and *Pygmalion* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The choreographer transposes the action from Antiquity to the cosmic realm. In Boryana Sechanova's version, The Creator is an alien from another planet who attempts to create his Sculpture in a world of robotic puppets. The Creator succeeds in modelling a being with a more harmonious presence, although this "humanized" automaton still falls short of the ideal of tenderness, beauty and empathy characteristic of The Woman[24], who is the prototype of his future sculpture (Fig. 3). In fact, the question remains unanswered as to whether The Woman actually exists or is merely a dream imagined by The Creator.

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[22] Musical consultant is Vesela Tsvetkova.

[23] This is the direction followed by the productions by the Russian choreographer Boris Eifman, namely, *The Pygmalion Effect* and *Rodin, the Eternal Idol*, and multiple other choreographic solutions.

[24] First and second casts: The Creator – Stefan Vuchov (Vasil Dipchikov); The Woman – Daniela Ivanova (Konstantina Handzhieva); The Sculpture – Viktoria Petrova (Andreya Dyakova).



Fig. 3. Boryana Sechanova's *The Galatea Effect*. Stefan Vuchov as The Creator and Daniela Ivanova as The Woman (Photo: Gergana Damyanova)

The finale of the play is emblematic – a trio between The Creator, The Woman and The Sculpture. The impression is created that he creates his final creation, while The Woman creates him – because the movements he directs towards The Sculpture are the same as those with which The Woman creates him. At a certain point, they change places. He is at the top of the pyramid and seems to be creating The Woman, while the creation is below, at the bottom, and mirrors their movements. Finally, all three climb onto the spinning circle, and he caresses first the creation and then The Woman, until the light engulfs them. In the trio, the movements repeat nunerous times, creating the impression of both a degree of robotlikeness and a time-travel journey with the same predetermined ending.

In fact, the finale remains open – perhaps The Creator will continue to travel across worlds and make successive attempts to create the perfect creation, but it will never be as perfect as the idea (or the dream) of it. This "cosmic" interpretation of the Galatea myth implies that, in his endless wandering through the Galaxy and tireless pursuit of the dream of perfection, The Creator may have visited Earth as well, and that we may all be the result of his creative



Fig. 4. Boryana Sechanova's *The Galatea Effect*. The museum visitors (Photo: Gergana Damyanova)

work. Such a finale elevates Boryana Sechanova's concept to a much higher level.

The sense of cosmic space is also achieved by combining electronic music with acoustic instruments.[25]

The choreography ufolds on three main levels. The movements of The Creator and The Woman are much more expansive and fluid (especially in their first duet) and differ significantly from the choppy, monotonously repetitive combinations of the robot girls. The third choreographic image is that of a society of connoisseurs who visit the museum and comment on The Sculpture on display. It is represented through grotesque swaying and deliberately static poses (Fig. 4). This image materializes one of the accompanying themes of the production – the way in which the work is evaluated by society, as well as the question to what extent society is capable of understanding the mission of art. This theme is rather implied, but it is also present in other productions by Boryana Sechanova – for example, in the earlier *The Birds*, based on Aristophanes.

The choreography lacks emotional peaks and passion: even in the first duet between The Woman and The Creator, which should express The Creator's emerging dream of sculpting such a sculpture. They are also absent from the subsequent duet between The Creator and The Sculpture he has created. The

[25] Composer: Petar Dundakov.

deliberate absence of feeling and "statistical" presentation of the stage action are among the tendencies in contemporary art, but they deprive it of one of its most powerful means of affecting the audience – empathy.[26]

The costumes[27] also mark the three main groups: casual trousers and a blouse (for The Creator) and an interestingly decorated dress (for The Woman); silver leotards and nylon tunics spectacularly illuminated by spotlights for the robotic cosmic creatures; and glittering accessories for society, suggesting the replacement of substance with external glamour.

The stage design[28] places a rotating circle at the centre of the stage, resembling both a potter's wheel and a podium for displaying finished artworks. In addition, five columns are constructed, which also serve as multimedia screens[29] (Fig. 5).

Multimedia intervenes in the stage action three times. In No. 2, it resembles a computer screen with characters scrolling downwards. In Nos. 8, 9 and 10, when, according to the stage action, the finished Sculpture is put on display in the



Fig. 5. Boryana Sechanova's *The Galatea Effect*.
Stefan Vuchov as The Creator and the statues (Photo: Gergana Damyanova)

[26] Unlike the choreography, the music in the final duet between The Creator and The Sculpture is highly emotional.

[27] Costumes by Adriyana Naydenova.

[28] Stage design by Venelin Shurelov.

[29] Art lighting by Georgi Buyukliev. No multimedia designer is credited.

museum, three layers are superimposed. On the one hand, the 'real' sculpture (the female performer) stands motionless on the rotating "potter's wheel" in the centre of the stage. On the other, the multimedia projected onto three screens at the back represents what The Sculpture feels (or is supposed to feel) – its "suffering" or at least some feelings. Moreover, the same performer who plays The Sculpture on the "potter's wheel" appears in the multimedia. The third layer consists of the gestural comments of the visitors standing between The Sculpture and the multimedia. It is only in No. 17 – the love duet between The Creator and The Sculpture – that multimedia appears again, but this time it resembles sticks being assembled. In the final trio, however, the screen at the back is not used.

Nevertheless, the multimedia reinforces the choreographer's suggestions, and thus the genre of the work takes on the characteristics of *total dance theatre*, insofar as its impact is total – encompassing music, concept, choreography, stage design, costumes and lighting.

***The Dante Secret* (2024)**

The Divine Comedy by Dante Alighieri finds an intriguing interpretation in choreographer Asen Nakov's ***The Dante Secret*** (2024).

In his *The Divine Comedy*, Dante combines images from ancient mythology and the medieval Christian tradition. The poem consists of 100 cantos, divided into three parts (cantiche) of 33 cantos each, with the exception of *Inferno* (*Hell*), which contains an additional introductory canto. Thus, *Inferno* has 34 cantos, while *Purgatorio* (*Purgatory*) and *Paradiso* (*Paradise*) each have 33. The poem's structure carries symbolism referring to the numbers 3 and 10.

The main themes in the poem are divine love, reason and faith. Dante celebrates the human soul srtiving towards God, but in many scenes he includes real historical figures and events from his own time, which he uses to illustrate moral teachings. The poem is rich in allegories – almost every encounter and every image carries a deeper spiritual and moral meaning.

The narrator – Dante himself – begins his journey lost in a dark forest[30], from where he is rescued by the Roman poet Virgil, who guides him through *Hell* and *Purgatory*. In the final part – *Paradise* – his guide is Beatrice, an idealized image of divine love and salvation (Alighieri 2011).

- *Hell* is constructed as a series of nine concentric circles descending towards the centre of the Earth, with punishments corresponding to the types of sin – from minor offences to the most serious sins, such as treason.
- *Purgatory* is a terraced mountain where souls are cleansed of their sins through penance. *Purgatory* offers hope of salvation and the possibility of redemption.
- *Paradise* depicts heavenly spheres in which souls, united with divine light, reach ever higher levels of bliss, culminating in the Empyrean (the Divine Presence).

[30] "Midway through the journey of our life, / I found myself in a dark wood, / for the straight path was lost" (Alighieri 2011: 35).

Without literally following the literary source, Asen Nakov's production ***The Dante Secret*** (2024) projects the action into the present day, altering both events and characters. The parallels between Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the present day come to life through the main characters – Dante, Virgil, Beatrice, Charon, and Cerberus. The Angel and the Devil, as well as the philosophers and the adulterers, are introduced as two sides of the same coin. Of particular importance to the work's overall impact are the stage design and multimedia.

The set design[31] consists of three inclined planes, which are initially positioned at the back of the stage and then separate in different directions, forming Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. The platforms are designed so that the dancers can dance on their highest section, but their main function is to represent the the dancers' aspiration to reach the top – an aspiration with a predetermined ending: sliding back down towards the bottom.

Multimedia[32] is crucial to the interpretation of the ballet and definitely contributes to the intended effect. In the music[33], I detect specific sounds and a cosmic quality that evokes many associations – at times the music is transparent; at others, it is saturated with heavy and intrusive repetitions that press upon the senses.

In Asen Nakov's stage interpretation, the 100 cantos of *The Divine Comedy* are transformed into 18 dance episodes[34], with more space devoted to *Hell*, while the transition to *Purgatory* and *Paradise*, the final destination of the journey, takes place considerably more rapidly.

It is quite understandable that Dante's encounter with the three predatory beasts – a panther, a lion and a she-wolf (Canto I) – has no stage equivalent: the ballet's Dante[35] moves among bodies scattered across the stage (No. 1)[36]. Nor are Virgil's explanations that he was sent by Beatrice (Canto II of the literary work) given a stage realization.

Quite appropriately, the shadow of Beatrice[37] (No. 2) appears on stage before Virgil[38]. Thus Dante's longing for Beatrice[39] becomes the ultimate goal of his journey. It is only in No. 3 that a duet between Dante and Virgil appears.

In the vestibule of Hell[40] there are the sinners who, in life, did neither good nor evil[41]; at the river Acheron, Charon[42], in his boat, ferries the souls of the

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[31] Set design: Katrin Krasimirova.

[32] Multimedia set design: Katrin Krasimirova – Elektrick Me; programming, sound design, mixing and mastering: Borislav Boyadzhiev Bor4e.

[33] Composer: Rumen Balyozov (son).

[34] Dramaturgy: Mayya Pramatarova.

[35] Dante is performed by Vasil Dipchikov (Svetlozar Tinev – second cast).

[36] The numbers in parentheses (No.) indicate the sequence of episodes in the stage action.

[37] Beatrice is performed by Andreya Dyakova (Viktoria Petrova – second cast).

[38] Virgil is performed by Lorenzo Alba (Stafan Vuchov – second cast).

[39] Dante runs towards her, but the two souls seem to pass each other.

[40] At the entrance to Hell are inscribed the terrifying words "Abandon all hope, you who enter here" (Alighieri 2011: 51).

[41] "Heaven does not want to be stained by them, nor does deep Hell wish to receive them" (Alighieri 2011: 52).

[42] "Charon the demon, with eyes of glowing coals, / beckons to them and gathers them all together; / he strikes with his oar whoever lingers behind" (Alighieri 2021: 36).

sinners across. The ballet's interpretation (No. 4) is different – it depicts the vestibule as a prison from which the figures attempt to escape. A searchlight follows them, as in a prison, and even the sky is represented by bars (multimedia). The impression is created of a competition: driven by the desire to climb the top of the stage elevation, the figures fight for their place and do everything possible to prevent the others from succeeding. The ballet's Charon[43] is portrayed as an aggressive woman in black who controls the race of the moving bodies, forcing Dante to join in. In the end, one of them manages to reach the top, and Charon declares him the winner. The overall impression, however, is rather one of a struggle for survival, dominance and "freedom" – even when Charon chooses one of them to move on to the next level, the struggle continues (Fig. 6).

Canto IV describes the first circle of Hell, where the souls of those who lived before Christianity are excluded from Paradise because they did not accept baptism. There are the poets Homer, Horace and Ovid, the heroes Hector and Achilles, the generals Caesar and Brutus, the philosophers Socrates and Plato, and so on. This canto, however, has no stage equivalent.

In Canto V (the second circle of the Hell), Minos judges the souls of those who have been led into sin by lust. Among them are Cleopatra, Semiramis,



Fig. 6. Asen Nakov's *The Dante Secret*, based on Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*. Charon in Hell (performed by Daniela Ivanova) (Photo: Nikolay Raychev)

[43] Charon is performed by Daniela Ivanova.

Dido, Helen of Troy, Isolde and Tristan, and Francesca da Rimini, who tells Dante the story of her unhappy love.

In the fourth circle of Hell (Canto VII), the poets encounter Pluto, who condemns the wasteful and the greedy. The philosophers and the adulterers are represented on stage, but with a different emotional charge. The philosophers[44] (in fact, false philosophers) create a comic effect through their small steps (suggesting pettiness) and movements, which are further reinforced by their constant desire to consult one another (No. 6). The idea of adultery (No. 7), on the other hand, is recreated in a completely different way, one that seems to justify the souls, through three[45] (and later five) very tender and beautiful love duets (a man and a woman). Even though they are conceived as adulterers, the impression left is one of a celebration of love (the beautiful but forbidden love of Francesca da Rimini and Paolo is also projected here). The choreography relies on entanglements between the bodies of each couple, which Dante and Virgil try in vain to untangle. The multimedia evokes clumps of cotton or dandelion seeds, which subsequently separate from one another, creating an impression of germinating sprouts, of bundles of light emerging from behind the inclined plane.

The second duet between Dante and Virgil (No. 8) ends when Virgil lets Dante slide down the inclined plane and fall down.

The monstrous dog Cerberus[46], tearing with his teeth those who have sinned through gluttony, appears in Canto VI (the third circle of Hell). In the stage version, Cerberus[47] is depicted as a sexy woman in red, wearing leather trousers and chains (Fig. 7), with which she strikes the ground noisily (No. 9). The multimedia displays writhing figures that form a funnel, with its narrow end above the stage, and then transform into a ball of fire. Cerberus binds Dante with her chains and, at the end, hands him chains as well. With the chains in her hands, Cerberus tramples on the bodies, while they obediently carry her on their backs. The choreography creates various associations – with "the three chains of slaves", with sadomasochistic experiences dominated by the power of the flesh and passion, which binds like a chain (No. 10).

In No. 11, against a backdrop of burning fires (multimedia), Virgil leads Dante in another direction, towards those who practise self-flagellation[48] (No. 12). From the top of the platforms, they are watched by The Angel[49] and The Devil[50]. Their duet (No. 13) is a comic tango[51], suggesting two sides of the

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[44] Performers: Svetoslav Seropyan, Maria Kasabova, Teodora Drumeva, Yana Nikolova, Benedeta Grasi, Ervin Esen.

[45] Performers: Valeri Milenkov, Tanya Katsarova, Stefan Vuchov, Daniela Ivanova, Svetlozar Tinev, Andreya Dyakova.

[46] "With bristling hair and eyes of red, / the accursed beast, who knows no mercy, / pounces upon the terrified souls, / gnashing its teeth into them with fury / and tearing them apart until they are exhausted" (Alighieri 2021: 69).

[47] Cerberus is performed by Benedeta Grasi.

[48] "...heresiarchs" (Alighieri 2021: 116).

[49] The Angel is mentioned as early as Canto IX.

[50] Lucifer appears in Canto XXXIV.

[51] Performers: Daniela Ivanova, Benedeta Grasi (second cast: Svetoslav Seropyan, Ervin Esen).



Fig. 7. Asen Nakov's *The Dante Secret*, based on Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*. Cerberus in Hell (performed by Benedeta Grasi) (Photo: Nikolay Raychev)

same coin. Multimedia depicting flowing water evokes associations of purification.[52]

Beatrice's solo (No. 14) is accopanied by multimedia images of falling stars and small multicoloured balloons. A sense of Paradise is created. Even in the distinctive duet between Dante and Beatrice (No. 15), she appears disembodied – Dante is unable to touch her, as his movements pass by her. At the end, she lures him after her, and he follows her, just as in No. 2.

No. 16 is the true Paradise – beautiful flowing figures whose movements create a sense of airiness and lightness. They develop into duets and ensemble lifts, in which Dante also participates. The multimedia depicts a sphere and a path within it. Only then does the true duet between Dante and Beatrice (No. 17) appear. It begins and ends with Beatrice behind Dante, as his shadow and guiding light. The duet is built around beautiful lifts and conveys a sense of airiness and unreality (Fig. 8). At the end, Beatrice is once again behind him,

[52] Through Lucifer's body, Dante and Virgil pass through the centre of the Earth and emerge once again into the world of light: "Thence we came forth to rebehold the stars" (Alighieri 2021: 384).



Fig. 8. Asen Nakov's *The Dante Secret*, based on Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*. Andreya Dyakova as Beatrice and Vasil Dipchikov as Dante (Photo: Nikolay Raychev)

covering his eyes with her palms; when he opens his arms, she melt into the darkness, but she has already shown him the world from a new perspective.

No. 18 is a kind of reprise – Dante remains alone on his knees, illuminated by a spotlight, as at the beginning of his first monologue (No. 1).

Multimedia is very important to the overall impression of the work. It accompanies the choreography and either establishes the setting or brings to the fore a subtext reminiscent of medieval morality plays – for example, the sinners writhing in the flames; purification through flowing water; falling stars and multicoloured balloons in Paradise; and the path within the sphere. The multimedia places *The Dante Secret* within the genre of *total dance theatre*. Nevertheless, the focus remains primarily on the different interpretation and distinctive messages.

The productions analysed here transpose the action from their literary sources into the present day, seeking parallels between the original works and the contemporary world. In each case, the choreographic interpretation changes both the relationships between the characters and the *genre variant* of the work. As a rule, the presence of multimedia places the productions within the realm of *total dance theatre* – a term introduced by Vadim Gaevsky in connection with the works of Maurice Béjart (Gaevsky 1981: 333). The term reffers to a work of art that affects as many senses as possible through the use of the maximum number of expressive means (Pavis 2002); in choreography, this involves a synthesis of music, dance, pantomime, spoken or sung word, but also multimedia (Yaneva 2025). There are, however, certain nuances. In *Adoration and Violence*, the multimedia creates its own parallel narrative, whereas in the other pro-

ductions analysed here, the video projections rather help to convey where the action takes place, that is, to some extent, they become a more spectacular form of "stage design". In *The Galatea Effect* and *The Dante Secret*, however, there are also elements of actual stage design – platforms, columns and a rotating circle. The combination of physical structures existing on stage and "unreal" multimedia raises questions about possible combinations of the real and the unreal. To some extent, this recalls the model of fairy tales (and of the *romantic ballets*). The action on stage, however, is projected exclusively within "real reality". One should not miss the orientation towards contemporary Bulgarian composers, including Rumen Balyozov (junior), Hristo Petkov and Petar Dundakov, whose works lend the productions a new, contemporary sound and interact well with the choreography and directorial concept.

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