

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Megan Mazarick

Postcards from My Selves in Budapest

by Megan Mazarick

Normally I can find harmony in my shifting roles as an artist/mother/partner, but I feel split during my three-week residency in Budapest as Philadelphia Dance Project's bilateral exchange artist.* My partner and our two-year-old daughter accompany me to Hungary, and during our stay, my professional self doesn't want to follow the same narrative as the other parts of me:

"Make something! Try to meet presenters!" yells Professional Megan.

"Meander through the streets, and eat local cuisine," whispers Foodie Megan.

"Be productive, find dancers to work with!" demands Professional Megan.

"Enjoy time to become inspired. We should stroll through a gallery," sighs Part-of-a-Family-Unit Megan.

I Am A Professional at Lying on The Floor

I am always at home in the studio. I feel at peace letting my bones fall into the earth and waiting for something to move me. Workshop Foundation (the organization hosting me in Budapest) provides me with limitless rehearsal space. Rolling on the floor, I start by trying to piece together some kind of architecture to create a movement sequence. *Sequential roll, soften into side-body, melt, rebuild, stack torso over one elbow and hover for a moment.* I downloaded Himnusz, the Hungarian national anthem, before leaving Philadelphia and play it while working on a series of nebulous [baby freezes](#). The freezes match the melodic swelling of the music in an absurd way. This is not my country and there is a comedy in the seriousness of the anthem against this jagged rolling floor dance.

Wiggle Dance

Like most two year-olds, my daughter smashes through formalities with exuberance and charm. In Budapest, she enjoys the landscape of a new city. Everywhere is a playground. At a performance installation, she attempts to jump on the photographs placed neatly on the floor as part of the exhibit. During a dance performance in a cultural center she plays hide and seek in the curtains. When I chat with presenters, organizers, and fellow artists, she tugs my shirt down to breastfeed.

We attend a show at OFF Biennale Festival, one of many art events in Budapest during my residency. It incorporates strobe light, smoke, and loud techno. The start time keeps getting later. *“What am I doing? Is this even appropriate for a child?”* wonders Megan the Mom.

We watch two dancers blindly navigate a room full of black balloons. They thrash in ecstasy and occasionally freeze in a tableau. It's dark and the music thumps loudly. The dancers embody the moment at a party or rave (*do raves still exist? Megan the Mom wonders*) when most of the guests have left and there are only a couple of people still dancing. My daughter watches sleepily and says, *“Balloons. Dance Show. Wiggle Dance.”* She is unfazed.

My Lover, the Other

At an Artist Talk/Choreographer Sharing event organized by Workshop Foundation to network with other artists, I am told that “liberal” is a bad word in Hungary. I learn that Hungary's pro-nationalist movement and its resistance mirror the political divide in the US. There are protests in Budapest during my visit, and though they are calmer and quieter than some back home, there is frustration and an overall feeling of resignation and distrust of the government among most of the Hungarian artists I meet.

I am acutely aware of feelings towards otherness through my partner, who is a Black Puerto Rican man. Budapest is easy for me to navigate. I operate under a shelter of artist-friendly spaces and whiteness. Meanwhile, he sightsees with our daughter and immediately notices that he stands out. We three wander into a café and I inquire about an open table outside. The host starts to lead us to the table but takes a look at my partner and changes her mind, “I am sorry, we are all full.” Other moments, I am overcome with Budapest's splendor, and forget my partner's feelings. Gothic churches reach into the skyline alongside modern buildings, and huge grey cobblestones whisper of Soviet rule and ancient history.

“I could live here, it's so beautiful,” says Megan the Idealist.

My partner is silent. As we approach our flat we pass a glaring piece of Black Americana in a store window—a bowing wooden butler figurine displayed prominently as he holds out business cards. It is unsettling to think I might not have noticed this without him here. What else am I missing?

Sheep in a Box

Back in the studio, I put a small square of tape on the floor and practice being either inside or outside of the box. How is this frame changing my body or my internal reference? I am of this land. I am not of this land. I am an insider. I am an outsider. I hold open rehearsals where anyone can join in. Dancers come and go and sometimes it is only one other dancer and me.

“I thought this research was going to be about internal motivation but now it is about boundaries and borders,” Choreographer Megan tells the bodies in the room.

I co-create some scores with three talented dancers who keep coming back to my open rehearsals. We try excluding one body from a

group score. We move in unison and then far away from one another, lost in our own dance world. I think of a choreographer I met early in my trip, who complained that Hungarian people are “sheep.” We create a score where someone yells “sheep” and everyone turns into a pedestrian and jumps inside of the taped box. It is silly but fruitful. Toward the end of the third week one of my dancers notes the differences in our physicalities. With no intention on my part, the dancers I am rehearsing with are all from different countries.

The Philadelphia of Europe

The artist problems in Budapest are similar to those back in Philly. Space is plentiful but there is little funding. Budapest is a reasonably affordable city so many dancers come and make their own work, companies, and collectives. Like Philly, there is a desire for permanent artist organizations and central hubs specifically for contemporary dance. Also like Philly, artists working in the field seem to all know each other but exist in micro-communities or separate factions.

Outside of my normal working artist hustle, I am afforded the luxury to make more happen here. I rehearse, go to classes and performances, and network. “*Why am I not doing this back home? I should always be this productive,*” says Megan the Maker.

I want to always be my maker self. I love the idea that my daily life is focused on choreography and feeding into my creative process. I can fully embrace this self in Budapest and it feels wonderful but exhausting.

I try to squeeze memories into the last couple days of the trip. My final evening in Budapest I do a work-in-progress showing of my new piece (which I call *Boundary*) then rush red-faced and sweaty to see a [Companie Par Terre](#) show immediately afterwards. The Hungarian audience doesn’t respond much to this French deconstruction of breaking, popping, and waacking, and they sit silently frozen in their seats. I can’t help but think of how differently this would be received in Philadelphia. Out of appreciation for the dancers (and frustration with the Hungarian audience) I yell out loudly and alone when the dancers solo. People look over at me puzzled.

My partner eagerly strolls with our daughter on the last morning of the trip as I run around desperately taking pictures from inside the flat while packing. He is thrilled to be going back home. I am sad because it means falling back into routines and compartmentalizing my maker self back into her designated spot. In Philly, I will go back to rushing back and forth from adjunct teaching gigs, weekend bartending, playdates, and dance applications, all while looking for new ways to trick myself into creating work and feeling inside of my own body. Budapest gave me room to contemplate my different roles instead of wearing them all at once. I sit on my suitcase trying to zip up the sides. I can’t fit all of these selves home in my luggage. After unseasonably warm weather during the beginning of the trip, my fingers are freezing as I try to capture the view of the Danube River from my balcony. The cold has finally crept into Budapest.

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