

Embedded —and in bed— with *Faktor T*



BY ANNA DROZDOWSKI

I have had the luxury of following the development of the Polish dance company Dada von Bzdülów's *Faktor T* for an entire year—luxury because it has been a project that has evolved greatly over time. Had I witnessed any one slice, or been limited to either studio or stage, my understanding would be different. This account may still be inaccurate—it is, after all, a collection of observations and intuitions. This work has been essential for those involved, though by no means would I label it easy. My embedded position gave me access to the underbelly of creativity and practical pressures that are part of international collaborations—productions so often coated with a glamorous patina, more about chic marketing than authenticity. Learning the play, and its players, extended my understanding beyond the performers and into the support networks both here and in Poland.



Katarzyna Chmielewska (Kasia) cleans the stage for performance.

I was first introduced to the company Dada von Bzdülów at their performance of *Several Witty Observations (à la Gombrowicz)* at La MaMa Experimental Theatre in New York City in 2007. Struck by their complex collage of vignettes and diverse performance techniques, I took on the assignment of “embedded journalist” to document the creation of *Faktor T*, their new project, with enthusiasm. It would afford me, I thought, an opportunity to return to my previous work in dance ethnography as well as to set eyes on the region in the world where my name comes from. The dance, based on a novella by Stefan Themerson, addresses a central theme of the relationship between attraction and aversion. This text focused the bi-national project and became a thread that ran through both the performance and production.

“We are trying for a systemic integration of creative exchange,” says Bill Bissell, Director of Dance Advance, regarding the international efforts between artists and organizations. “Let’s stir the pot with these particular ingredients *and* support them across a period of time and see what happens.” And so this is how the Polish trio Dada, their lighting designer, and musician made a match with a dancer, costume designer, photographer, and writer based in Philadelphia. Bolstered by support provided by the Polish Cultural Institute in New York; the Trust for Mutual Understanding, New York; Kulczyk Foundation, Poznań; Klub Żak, Gdańsk; Philadelphia Live Arts Festival and Philly Fringe; The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage through Dance Advance; as well as the Old Town Cultural Center (SDK), Warsaw; and the City of Gdańsk, this project has truly been one devised and wrought across the Atlantic.

My reflections outline the substantive periods of time I spent with the company, chewing on culture and communication. I am in a position in which my typewritten voice serves as an authority. I will mention, above all things, that this conflict is my *Faktor T*: my attraction and aversion is to the page.



Fear of Commitment: Selection Process, Philadelphia

Leszek Bzdyl, Dada's leader, has come to Philadelphia for the workshop/audition. He prefers to work long—showing up in the morning and then spending the entire day in the studio, though he recognizes this feels awkward in the U.S. "This is not how we do in Gdańsk, where we do a bit...have some coffee, cigarettes, do more...more cigarettes, and it goes slowly." Without the option for indoor smoking or easy opportunity for coffee and informal conversation, the rehearsal environment feels antiseptic and odd to him. "This is a funny situation for a man from Poland to be in, to come and teach American dancers contemporary dance. Dance in Poland is a dozen years old; it was born here [in America]. It is like I bring wood to the forest." While most of Dada has undergone classical training (in dance or theater) they are working in an experimental, in-between genre still new in Poland—for performers and audience alike.



Leszek Bzdyl explains his ideas during rehearsal.

Approximately twenty dancers attend over the week at the Philadanco studios. The process of workshopping competition reveals a pattern familiar to local dancers who are grateful for the experience but are often stymied by what they experience as opposing forces—especially here, in a process that aims to winnow the pool to a single dancer. "It feels more like an attempt to impress, rather than a chance to gain skills or make yourself vulnerable to a new way of working," said one participant. With relatively few local companies hosting auditions, the opportunity for high-level and cost-free classes (that might lead to paid work) is difficult to pass up. From my position in the corner of the room, some are clearly trying to be seen, others furrow their brows while parsing out what might be wanted, a few are easy and unconcerned with the way their peers perceive the weight of the week. In a generally convivial community, this is one of the few moments when people step in front of one another and put on their "game face." But you can't wear this face for an entire week, and so the extended experience can also be more genuine than a two-hour cattle call.

On the second day, the bus is late and Leszek arrives, flustered and without his chaperone. Following the warm-up class, he sheepishly announces, "Five minute break for cigarettes?" yet he is the only smoker. Sitting on the bench outside in his socks, his chiseled figure looks out of place in West Philly. He is still acclimating to the time change and the change in his pocket; this audition process is also new to Dada. I joke about taking up smoking in solidarity; we are learning about one another too and it is important for me to demonstrate that I'm not wearing a lab coat for my research. He explains Dada's history and also laments the "new" Poland that steadily loses people to Europe for better paying jobs and a broader dance environment. He does this while drinking Poland Spring water (bottled in Vermont), but the irony is unacknowledged. Leszek likes to talk, but not in straight lines. He tries again, exasperated with his uneasy command of English, to explain the ineffable quality of the movement he is looking for: "How to do? Try to find something like joy. Don't be dancer. Because if it is just muscle factory, that is sad. Do what you want," he tells the dancers, "but use the floor."

The dancers return, weary after several long days of near-constant movement. The technique begins on the floor though it does not make friends with it. Leszek instead has a somewhat antagonistic relationship with his support

system (the floor and the funding for this project). This isn't movement for movement's sake, it isn't meant to be "pretty"—though on day three the combination suddenly looks more lovely on the group. The phrase has an ease to it: sliding and rebounding, always recovering elegantly and effortlessly from the previous exertion. The waltzy lilt of the music breathes into the room and the movement responds in kind. Leszek demonstrates with nearly every group. "Easy, easy," he coaxes, "for memory not for most powerful people. See how much time I have for flying." Later they improvise and go through exercises in acting with their face. The week has been thorough.

Leszek appears torn about having to make a decision in the absence of his collaborators. It is difficult to select from a group that has shown such dedication and has worked with a high level of skill. Outside on our bench he tells me that he has to talk to someone, and I am glad of his easy confidence in the midst of such a self-described "crisis." Whom to choose? he wonders. Someone like him—a mover who has some schedule conflicts? Another who came for the workshops but is trying to leave the field? One who, despite his hopes, got embarrassed and subsequently never returned? The hard worker who is young and good and eager, but not the right fit because he needs someone who will question? He explains how touring for the company is different now—Rafał Dziemidok has a child and Kasia Chmielewska is married; they have priorities in and out of the studio. They are less light on their feet. And he must "take the decision" soon, and alone. The company arrives tomorrow and rehearsals begin the following week, so the selection and notification of the Philadelphia dancer needs to be wrapped up quickly.

When NASA assembles a team of astronauts, they are selected from a talented pool—each with the personal and professional skills required to execute a high-functioning, precise, and dangerous job. They train together for months, rehearsing in the simulator and living in close proximity, gaining the ability to predict behaviors and compensate for weaknesses. Despite having a work environment that involves the same amount of time together—time on the road, in airplanes, in a windowless room going over patterns of movement, and time where illness or injury to one person can mean the demise of the team—chemistry is often overlooked for performance capacity in dance. In selecting the fourth wheel for *Faktor T*, Leszek knew that he must find someone who wasn't just a "yes man" and so had been intently watching the groups' response to his experiments, inquiries, and demands.

We return from our smoke break and the group begins a final exercise, "Ten Minutes of Extreme Boredom." They start out, stealing glimpses of their provocateur and the clock; he watches them fidget and stare at the ceiling as the minutes thankfully ease to a close. The time elapses and he apologizes for the request: "I am sorry for this experiment, but thank you all. Thank you for this week. Sorry, but this is terrible and I will contact to you for the future work." And with that the week is completed, Dada's first audition is over.

I ask about attending the selection meeting but Bill [Bissell] responds with reluctance and suggests instead that I interrogate Leszek later. For me this feels funny—having already been a sounding board for most of the week. If privacy is a concern, where does my position fit in? Do I push hard in these first few weeks, to set a tone of full access, or wait to see what is made available to me? I don't press my request, recognizing the tension and protection born of a project with a lot of international expectations. I have my own predictions and have begun my own struggle with biting the hand that feeds me. I'm wondering what to keep and what to elide in my observations and how to do justice to the small but significant details of process, the subtle shifts in mood and the factors that are unavoidable when the work/life divide is fuzzy and my documentary is a written, not visual, one.

Getting to Know You: Rehearsals, Philadelphia

Three days later, rehearsals begin with Bethany Formica, the chosen Philadelphian, and Kasia Chmielewska and Rafał Dziemidok, the other members of Dada, who meet for the first time in the studio. The mood feels cordial and polite. They are getting to know one another in the first moments of an arranged marriage that will last a year, though the mail order bride will soon be an export to Eastern Europe. They launch into moving, getting to know one another physically with the audition phrase.

“*Sama nie?* [alone?]" Kasia asks. “Come on, they did it after just one time," Leszek implores. It is Kasia’s first day back after several weeks of vacation and he is impatient with her need for more time. The moment is clear in subtext; he is the leader of this project. “Yes, but they’re American," she retorts—somehow implying such an industrious society always has something to prove. Leszek shoots her a “Come on..." look indicative of a long history. “*Tak,*" brightens Kasia, suddenly playing good cop and demonstrating a newly earned English phrase that gives her the upper hand and lightens the mood: “Let’s start. Don’t dick around!" On the first day, the possibilities are endless and they want to make their time productive.

The following week Leszek waxes on my question about work/life/rehearsal. “We are more gentle with Bethany than among the three of us. Our first few days together were to fight, to die and come back—it is always this way, our words are sharp." Bethany arches her eyebrow, signaling that perhaps the fight hasn’t quite died and that with visitors in the studio the group is on good behavior. I wonder how close you can get to the inside of a work without viscerally living inside it. They are practicing flying again. I am sitting in the corner running through Leszek’s guidelines for their improvisation: softness and momentum, time for going up, time for looking/finding, and then time for coming down, keeping power/losing power, where is your weight? It isn’t exactly working; they spill over each other, grasping at a structure that makes success improbable but continuing to try.

Each time I attend rehearsal I see snippets of new material, things seemingly unrelated to what came previously and without a visible through line. Leszek tells me that people like to see problems onstage—that the theater traditionally uses fictitious problems (stories) to make the audience vulnerable to the performance. He wants to use real problems instead, and avoid the fraud that theater so easily participates in. This, he says, will ask a lot of the Polish audience, along with setting the performance in the round. Hiroshi Iwasaki, costume designer, noted, “Self-conscious performance isn’t groundbreaking anymore, though everyone is self-conscious about what they’re wearing onstage." Fashion, or in this case, trend, truly depends on time and place, and there is little synchronicity



Bethany Formica and Rafał Dziemidok in rehearsal in Gdańsk.
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Rafał and Bethany in performance—audiences were constantly amazed she could lift him.

with the performers' training. They do share, however, a preoccupation with how they've gotten to this room, to whom they are beholden, and if anyone "owns" the project outright.

Much of the movement is grounded in contact improvisation—work that is old hat for Bethany who can't very much longer "feel her spine" or "let gravity take her" simply because it is a novel way of working for others. She has started to offer some opinions, to be more of a voice as the showing draws closer and the questions of what and why become larger for the group. She is struggling with who is leading the charge, what the piece might look like, and what her role is within the group: "I don't know what it's about, Anna, and I don't trust it or myself—either I look like an asshole on stage or I act like one in rehearsal demanding that they re-explain." In this example dance doesn't serve as an international language; the group has not yet found their comfortable collaboration.



Kasia, Leszek and Bethany practice 'flying' in rehearsal.

Improvising and looking for levity, Bethany kisses Rafał on his elbow. He explodes, "I'm a time bomb, you can't do that," and at *that* he means she can't make anything even slightly sexual in the studio. They roll around with one another for nearly forty hours a week in a professional way, returning home to make long distance calls to their spouses. Bethany counters that she, while recently married, has seen her husband less in the past month due to their conflicting performance schedules, and so she can empathize. I ask Rafał what the Polish word for troublemaker is. He responds, a deadpan counter to his typical pomp, "Oh, we don't have that word."

It feels like a science experiment—the Dada trio living together, riding the bus, rehearsing, and returning each day to jump into whatever Leszek proposes, with their fourth table leg and spectator in the room. Dada espouses an intensely familial dynamic, from which as an ensemble they gain and lose; it can provoke an environment that borders on dysfunction or provide short cuts to mutual understanding. When spending every breathing moment together on tour—in the studio, on the train, in the shared apartment, and in transit between all of these locations—it is not difficult

to feel that your micro-community is a bit too...micro! Their collaboration is sold short by these circumstances of community; they must rely on one another more than they care to, and ask each other for help. The simple task of the grocery store is also navigated in tandem for support and translation. A month without a home country is too much to bear, their partners too far away and the ease of understanding the transit system erased. This opens up a new perspective for "old" dancers whose average age is 38.

I tell the group at lunch that I want to apply for my Polish passport. I have birthrights to hold one and there are the opportunities it affords: no lengthy and difficult work visas, a trip to Cuba without breaking any laws, speedy travel in the EU line at the airport, and the chance to learn a past I don't know as a countryman rather than tourist. Kasia and Rafał think it hilarious that I want in to their country, now hip because of the EU association, just as everyone

else is trying to find a way to get out. I ask why they choose to stay and Kasia replies simply, “We are Polish.” She goes on: “Besides, you are not normal American.” What constitutes a “normal” American? Somehow I’m glad not to be one, though it seems a sideways compliment.

The travel writer Chuck Thompson has criticized tourists from *the States*: “Americans’ dress for travel looking like they’re going out to mow the lawn.” Our informality abroad is an Achilles heel. Kasia is surprised when she sees Bethany leave to drive home in her rehearsal clothes. This is not such a large transgression in the United States, to wear your work “uniform”, whatever it might be, in transit. In Poland this is simply not done. Street clothes are worn on the street, lockers provide a place to transform into your profession—whether a policeman or dancer—and once the work is finished you put on your good leather shoes (rather than your white sneakers) and head out for a coffee.



Bethany during the work-in-progress showing in Philadelphia.

Later in the week, the ladies absent, I arrive to a maudlin pair of men who have been at each other’s throats and are steering clear of each other during their separate warm-ups. Capitalizing on the opportunity to give them a little taste of their old rehearsal methods, I suggest that we go for tea and talk about problems. This is the crux of *Faktor T*: attraction and aversion and the crisis that comes with them. They are supposed to be Rehearsing (with a capital R) and in Philly this only means time in the studio. It takes only a small amount of cajoling by me to reinforce that rehearsal takes many forms and that I could use an hour of their time for my questions. Just because they’re in America doesn’t mean that they have to “work like dogs” as they’re fond of saying. Sold.

Rafał and Leszek see themselves caught in a trap of funding and success, and the need for good criticism to secure more support, presentations, and opportunities. Over coffee and cigarettes the “system” feels bad to them, where I see it as complex and symbiotic. In *Faktor T* their concept of calling out the unwritten codes of performance in both physical and audible ways is interesting. The first section aims to bore the audience—assuming that they have come to be entertained and instead are met with warm-up exercises and inelegant improvisations. To bookend this first half-hour section, a paper plane descends on the group encouraging them to find the VIPs (which Leszek charmingly pronounces “whips”) in the room. They plan to call out the critics and other “important” people and rearrange their seats in the space such that they are all on the same side. They will then hand them knives to continue watching with. “You don’t like it? Let us reseat you, it’s better from this side and this guy doesn’t mean much to our future.”

“We will need two more days,” says Leszek, “Always we need two more days.” He acknowledges that the process has not been warm or easy, and that they struggle to find a way to do it. “But,” I counter, “You all show up each day and do it. Why?” This question of why whets his appetite and he turns away wagging his finger in the air. Rafał wonders why dance artists respond to what critics or presenters want, cranking out the same tired pieces that have gained success, yet he also struggles with wanting the success without the formula. He boldly claims that in the United States we have the luxury to be ambitious, but ambition is a requirement for him. An important element for both men is risk, to be on the edge, and to be honest on stage. Safety bores both the performers and the audience. They have chosen to point out that some opinions count more than others, knowing that their critical community at home is no larger than Philly’s.

At the showing Leszek pretends a casual concern with failure, but he is clearly trying to convince himself and I see that this is one of the many problems on his list getting worked out on stage. A group of curious dancers, Poles, and presenters have come to see what the past month has boiled down to. I am to run the CD player and play technician, which seems the best way to remove this responsibility from a group that is not “finished” and nervous about what will happen with the VIPs. The audience appears successfully bored though the amount of positive feedback falls short of the company’s hopes. The family Dada returns to Poland, the piece put on pause for several months as the performers think over their place in this Tragical Faktor.

The Honeymoon Ends: Performances, Poznań, and Gdańsk

On my first day with the company in Poznań, three weeks before the premiere, exasperation has set in. They’ve locked themselves into the theater hoping to push through, or past, or around this frustrating block but essentially committing themselves to misery. What is the common goal? I ask, as I watch them focus on their differences as people and as performers. They’ve made up their minds that the challenge to cooperate stands as an insurmountable and ridiculous task, yet they are bound together to do this work. The air is toxic with insecurity and performance pressure; they’ve built their own *Faktor T* by wanting and needing the work while deciding that it is impossible. *Mutiny on the Bounty* seems an appropriate title, as they continue the conversation in transit, at home, and at the studio. That evening over dinner, the group agrees that their work has never been this hard. “But,” Leszek adds, “We said that the last time and the time before that too.” I explain the term “glutton for punishment” and they joke about guilt and religion.

They have been busy these past three weeks finishing the piece. The second half of the dance is sparkly and theatrical, non-linear and loud and a welcome respite from the drone of the first section. It evokes Shakespeare’s *Henry V*—the drama you endure to get

to the one golden and hilarious courtship scene that rewards the wait. In *Faktor T*, the audience doesn’t know that they are waiting for something, and at invited rehearsals the public looks antsy and shoe-gazing until the knives come out and reseating begins.

The following day proves the boiling point for the group—tears and shouting, door slamming, and handwringing. This is the process I came across the Atlantic Ocean to document? They talk it out, and Rafał prioritizes the elements that are important to all: feeling safe, clear direction and communication, and the ticking clock. Their struggle with each other is heightened by their disdain for the characters developed for the second half of the work. Roles in which their everyday lives are reversed and they must embody uncomfortable characteristics necessary for



Rafał and Kasia rehearsing their duet in Poznań.

their completion of the dance (yet another *Faktor T*): Kasia is dominant, Bethany weak, Leszek an environmentalist and Rafał a zealot. Michal Kolodziej, technical collaborator and longtime colleague, serves as a positive force, quietly arranging the music and lighting in the corner and perfecting his paper-plane building technique. He has enough experience to know this difficult moment and the wisdom to steer clear of it.

I adopt this tact and leave to walk off my jetlag in the Stary Browar (Old Brewery), now converted into the largest shopping mall I have ever seen, and in which the theater is ensconced. It is the epitome of mega-selection and one-stop shopping in a country where shopping is still a new concept. Beautiful, alarmingly clean, and part of a contemporary art complex that consumers can wander through between browsing for socks and picking up spinach at one of three supermarkets contained within. Grażyna Kulczyk is the patron of the space, heiress to an auto fortune thanks to the modern capitalist convenience of divorce, despite the country's historically rigid Catholic confines. She lives above the theater, her bodyguards ever present at the entrance. Thinking back to a lecture I attended on the stages of culture shock—Honeymoon, Negotiation, Hostility & Aggression, Adjustment, and eventually Reverse Culture Shock—I wonder how helpful this knowledge would be to this group.



Rafał, Bethany and Leszek during rehearsal in Gdańsk.



Kasia's blue stockings; costume designer Hiroshi Iwasaki's subtle signifier of lesbianism.

What role do I play in this process? I ask again, passing shoe stores and cafes spewing clouds of smoke into the mall. To document, help them make nice and mediate, offer suggestions or direction, sit and listen, remind them of the English words they've missed, keep pace and play the tape? Any of these might serve as the answer; my presence in the room no longer tempers heightened emotions. I feel satisfied that I am no longer a guest but still conflicted about access to so much dirty laundry. The observer paradox is old-school anthropology; I've just done too little fieldwork. Embedded could be interchanged with embroiled in describing my work. The home space is less charged, I credit them this—they have managed to mostly avoid letting the work difficulties interfere with their personal relationships. My navel gazing tells me that I give my position too much weight and that I shouldn't whine about my struggles on the page when the work onstage is to be my subject. But all is threaded together, influenced, and accounted for. The process has no false fourth wall for this experiment.

I return to the midst of another argument about the difference between collaboration and direction, one-upping onstage, and to whom the project belongs in the moment and in the future. These ever-present underpinnings are trumped by a much more immediate concern: there is a problem with customs. The box of costumes shipped from Philadelphia includes leather shoes that weren't appropriately documented. It is being quarantined in what Natalia Draganik, a dancer and administrator who has been taking care of the crew in Poznań, describes as a

typical demonstration of post-communist red tape. This has sparked a flurry of frustrated organizer emails that have trickled through to the company—read during smoking/discussion/coffee breaks. In the little time left prior to performance it has created a maelstrom on which to focus attention and aggression, Dada operates without a manager and so such small details turn into major traumas in the midst of finishing the dance.

Bethany admits to behaving badly and feeling badly for it, suggesting that it would do them all well to remember their frustration with being away from home for so long. She is squarely in the midst of a meltdown, happy to see me as a representative of a language she misses, as conflicts are quickly expressed in Polish and she is often left out or outnumbered. Three days out, Rafał is weary of being the human dictionary due to his fluency in English. “Our problem isn’t the language barrier,” he tells me in another mid-rehearsal meeting about future of the piece, already on the production conveyor belt back West. “We’ve been working internationally for a long time. It’s about ego.” This confession, in its candor, counters Rafał’s regular bluster. Softening my stance of being purely a spectator of this experience, I venture to suggest that they get through the premiere before worrying any more about the future of the work. They are glad of the permission, I think, though the future of the work also concerns their future employment and so it will never quite fully move to the back burner.



Hiroshi helps Bethany with her costume.

Thankfully, the distraction of Hiroshi, arriving along with the box of waylaid costumes, is enough to bring the group back to focus. Hiroshi explained his concern about a lack of a clear working process, though elected to simply make a bold decision as an equal partner in the process. After receiving some abstract comments from Leszek about the intended direction of the work in Philadelphia, he set to shopping and sending things across the ocean. “Usually costumes have a lot of back and forth,” says Hiroshi. “There was no option for this, just measurements, and a time period that I suggested to separate the two halves of the work.” His costuming has a silver-screen era quality, in the vein of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and this earned a lot of “very American” comments about the work. The garments were quite successful with the cast and piece, and beautiful relics that fit to a T.

Joanna Lesniewska, Curator of the Art Stations Foundation and the Old Brewery/New Dance program, watches the work in the final days of rehearsal. The Poles are anxious about her opinions, though this moment has always made me shake my head. It is, after all, far too late to make any major changes. Joanna makes many comments about the work to Leszek, whose craggy face contorts as their conversation becomes more animated. Later, over tea and chocolates in the “newer” section of the new shopping complex, she explains that she knows that the work isn’t finished and that this is okay. It is her job to support and help develop such work and also to train an audience to gain a taste for it. With sold-out performances during the run in Poznań, and a sexy bilingual website and program that rivals any of those of more established dance houses, it appears to be working. Because her organization is private, and Pani Kulczyk is open-minded, Joanna has wide latitude in programming that makes her the envy

of others. Dada will give her and the other VIPs something special: danger, nudity, lesbians, feminists, religion, politics, and performance. The reviews of the premiere are treacherous, however, sharp twists from critics who wield penknives.

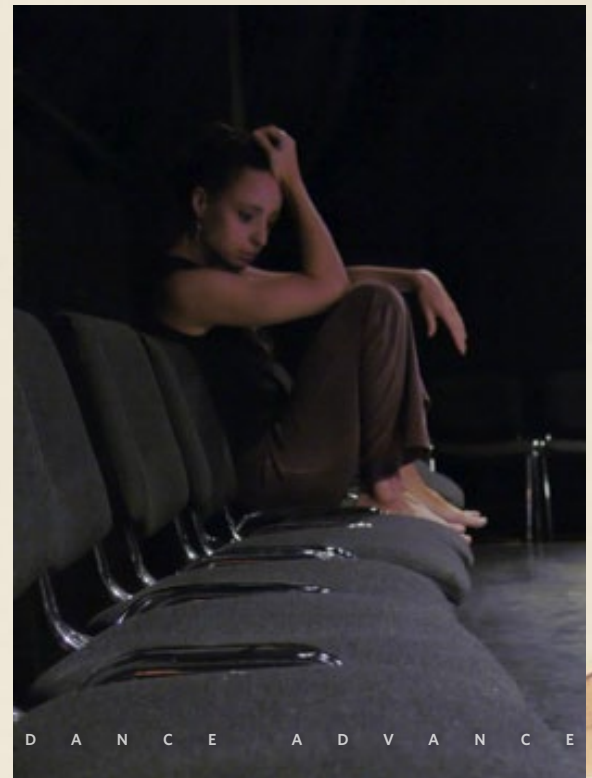
From Poznań, the crew travels to Gdańsk, their home city, for the second leg of the tour. The Dada artists are in better spirits on their own turf and everyone has a degree of breathing room outside of the studio, which loosens the pressure valve. The performances are well received, documented, and acclaimed, though their preshow ritual of getting close to the throat is very much still intact, and there remains rebound from the bad reviews in Poznań. Gabriel Biencycki arrives to make images and video of the piece, and his easygoing nature along with Michal's changes the alchemy of the group in a positive way. Gabe grew up in Poland, and is making good on an American Dream as a dance photographer in demand—but he is quick to explain that his first goal of running a dance company left him broke and jaded after a year of negotiating a cultural environment in the United States that he didn't know. He helps to bridge the gap for Bethany and me, explaining unwritten social codes, and he's curious about his in-between position in representing two nations.

At the theater, I eat fried cheese for dinner and try to drink a lot, in defense of my surname. These things make people more comfortable, and nothing makes cross-cultural confusion dissipate like several rounds of "Sto Lat" ("One Hundred Years," a traditional Polish song) and Bison Vodka. There is space to socialize and debate adjacent to the performance, something sorely lacking in Philadelphia. Dada's position in Polish dance is unique, I learn one late evening over dessert (Jell-O has ironically become a ritual of the group). They are technically homeless, though often critically revered. They exist in contrast to the Silesian Dance Theatre, one of the few other contemporary companies calling Poland home. SDT also hosts an international summer dance festival. In a free market, arts groups compete fiercely to wave the flag and bear the label of national export.

I have seen *Faktor T* in rehearsal and performance nearly a dozen times at this point, and yet I board the airplane back to Philly knowing that the artistic content simply marks the end of a journey made up of deeply personal means. The crucial work that has been accomplished with this group is individual and internal. The artists have met their limits as collaborators and sharpened their senses about what kind of work appeals to them. They have been smacked in the face by assumptions and learned where their



Bethany and Rafał at their wits end at the conclusion of *Faktor T*.



Bethany in her opening position as audience arrives in the performance space.

personal boundaries are in process and performance. International business has been challenging and eye-opening for all; the business of dance lies very close to the surface and is a large part of the project. This pushing toward the edge of a limit is wrapped up in the meat of the dance too. In the last moments of the piece, as each of the performers flagrantly shouts and postures to a grand crescendo, Bethany cries out in dark desperation, to no one in particular: “Jesus...I just can’t do this shit anymore.”



The characters in performance during the coda—the four perform the qualities they despise.

Couples Therapy: A Perspective on Difference

The project has been sponsored by a variety of venues and funders, each with their own aspirations and agendas for the cooperation of the two countries and the shape of the completed work. This is felt, disproportionately so, by the group of dancers who consider themselves fortunate to have gotten the work to begin with—work that is well supported internationally and for which they are well compensated—but work that also comes with the need to be attentive to all of its supporters. No one wishes to appear the petulant child; no one is foolish enough to think that support continues for projects that are “failing.” The group made this into another *Faktor T* as they crafted emails and stressed about drafting their experiential reports. But “failing” must be judged against the appropriate litmus. In an interview in Philadelphia, Bill prioritized the importance of supported experiments: “We must ask what is of value, even if or when they walk away from the process. Artists need time to understand who they are and what sort of work they want. The commitment for this group is to work together and we [the funding organizations] will take care of the bills.” Success is aspired toward, yes, but that definition is not necessarily marked by the external signals of critical acclaim.

Agata Grenda is Deputy Director of the Polish Cultural Institute in New York. She facilitates tours of Polish companies to the United States, and knows firsthand how much Poles love theater. Dada represents a risk for her; they aren't synchronized technicians and dance in Poland today often means the state-sponsored ballet. Dada wrings its hands over finding success and cooperation in many ways—they must do well in performance and in personal relations. Sometimes kid gloves are difficult to wear over a dinner that you haven't paid for, and they aren't a company known for minding their P's and Q's. Speaking about international cooperation, Agata said: "Bill and I were sad that there were to be no workshops the second time Dada came to Philly. But this was a company decision and we are here to support the development of the company and not our own desires or ego in programming." Another example that despite the company's fears (assumed, real, or otherwise) the community of dance supporters is actually and humbly supportive of artists, flexible with their capacity to respond as conditions evolve while simultaneously maintaining accountability. Each group wants to put their best people forward, and know that their team will rise to the challenge of an international market. This experiment has also taught them much about their peers abroad and the multiple definitions of "best practices."



Leszek's harried character and Bethany's infamous heels.



Bethany and Kasia arm wrestle and kiss: Dada's interpretation of attraction and aversion.

With the differences in the cultural economies between Poland and Philadelphia, it is easy to cry "we're different," as the foursome recognized. Their assumptions and expectations are born from two idiosyncratic environments. The differences between rehearsal processes alone reveal grave differences. Bethany is used to renting time by the hour, and as such has trained her body to enter the studio prepared to move within fifteen minutes of the call time. Three hours later, generally, she is putting on her boots and headed to a different rehearsal across town. In Gdańsk, the company is in residence and generally has a few weeks of unlimited rehearsal space in the theater in which they will perform (hence the room for coffee cigarettes and conversation). Say what you will about resources, these are two very different economies of time.

Bethany's impatience with the system emerges out of her sense of responsibility—the call is at 10am, and she will arrive knowing that they might not really start until 11:30 or noon but she cannot let herself be late. By her terms, she has been a good and appropriate professional—showing up on time, maintaining her technique, warmed-up and ready, remembering the choreography; she throws herself headlong into the project, so long as she feels safe. With Dada she often feels silly or silently angry, and as an outsider to their ten years of shared history, she finds it difficult to arrive feeling secure. She can't let it go, can't muster the drive to bring her feelings into the studio when she is conflicted about her role as dancer/collaborator/administrator. While grocery shopping in Poland she stopped speaking and started pointing at the counter, sure to get what she expected though this didn't help when reading menus. I pushed the metaphor further about her position: "If you keep ordering the chicken and you keep

getting pork, eventually you have to decide if you are going to change your strategy or acknowledge that you've got a plate full of pig, regardless of what it is called." The parallel was obvious and silly enough to raise her spirits.

Their differences, as individuals and as products of the dance environs in which they work, become clearer as they discuss their future with this shared work. Each recognizes that assumptions were made, but not necessarily unfairly: it can be difficult to recognize an assumption that is born into the blood and not worth discussion unless met as an obstacle. Attitudes toward touring are different. Kasia explains that Dada makes money by touring and often a piece gets performed thirty or forty times over the course of many years. Because of relatively high performance fees, ongoing rehearsals are cancelled when the opportunity to hit the road comes around. Bethany is generally paid per project or per rehearsal hour, and cannot commit to holding all of her November time until Dada figures out the tour dates; Kasia can't understand how she can already have other projects lined up six months out that aren't flexible enough to let her leave for two weeks. Bethany can't commit to whatever touring schedule might appear down the line; Dada refuses to engage an understudy because it is only *her* role. Throughout this project Rafal has questioned his desire to remain in the field in a major way—his *Faktor T*. They have spent half the year on this work, and its life is precarious because their collaboration isn't a simple train ride away.



The Bicycle.



Some assembly required: The *Faktor T* four together in rehearsal.

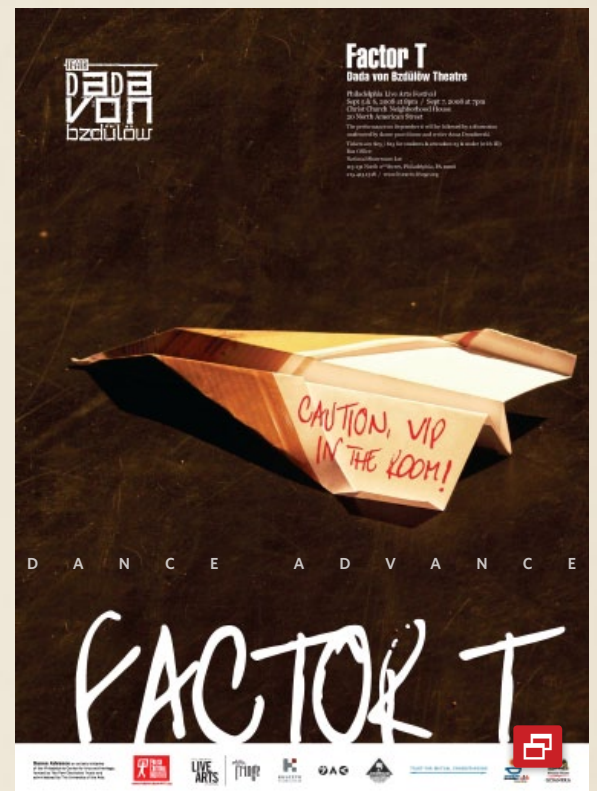
The methods by which work is created, sold, and distributed differ globally as well. The U.S. grant system awards financial support to worthy projects, with lead time of six months to a year. Presenters may book a season two years in advance, even occasionally buying something they haven't yet seen if the funding lines up. In Poland funds are distributed on a more local level and partnerships to support the development of new work exist through state funding on a much shorter turnaround. "Platforms" afford the opportunity to show work in its entirety and booking mostly comes from these international events, unlike the selling market at the annual Association of Performing Arts Presenters (APAP) conference in New York City. *Faktor T* reads differently in the two environs in which it's presented; Bethany's bad Polish term of affection ("*Czerwona malina to ja*" ["I am your red raspberry"]) and Leszek's invented English ("You want to be thinny, so you do jogging aerobics.") will endear only the most bilingual of presenters, but are missed by many. The foursome has different temperaments and temperatures for advancing this project—*Faktor T*'s performance life will be fleeting for the sake of logistics and lack of desire.

Old Married Couple: Touring to Philly, New York City, and Poland (again)

Six months later, in September 2008 at the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival, the group is in good spirits backstage, though they've had their share of blowouts about the air-conditioning, the limited number of seats in the house, the confusion over centimeters or inches for the ice-block prop. They are joking about the power outage from the previous performance which left them improvising far earlier than they had planned to and they are practicing not sweating the small stuff. Onstage, however, the mood is antagonistic and borders on violent—a major change since last spring. Where before they would work out their aggression in the studio pre-show, all discontent is now demonstrated onstage and the four-sided audience feels more like a boxing ring. Physical sparring aside, the influx of positive reviews finds them more confident than when I last left them, but sad.

Bill's absence pulses through the dressing room, as he has sent regrets about being unable to obtain a ticket to the sold-out show. Like Little Leaguers without a dad at the big game, the group does not easily digest this. *Factor T* is a project that Dance Advance has shepherded to the Philadelphia premiere and they feel he has turned his back on their cadre of difficult dancers. The group of conspirators is unwilling to let him off the hook, though his staff and other supporting organizations sit in the house tonight and all will attend a reception that Dance Advance has organized to celebrate the year's collaboration. It turns out, in this moment, that Dada's attraction and aversion are directed neither to the reviewers with bylines in the newspaper, nor to those audience members handed knives at the performance. Rather, their conflict is with another kind of VIP: the proponents of the project who seem incapable of cutting anything but the checks to support *Factor T*.

I let them get reacquainted with me this evening without my pencil scribbling, which sometimes has felt like a hostile gesture. I'd see a glance in my direction when I took notes and so putting away the book serves as my white flag. Despite all of the "power" that I wield with my pen, they've never reassigned my seat in performance or looked at me like one of the VIPs that warranted special attention or nerves. Perhaps they cannot pretend performance with someone that they've shared living space with, or maybe they trust that I'll do them and this process justice. They are intensely curious about what I will write, concerned that they've revealed too much already. My response has been "So am I." I moderate the talk-back following the performance and am surprised by the candor of the group—my queries about *Factor T* open a floodgate of emotion that is untempered and honest for the VIP-heavy audience and rolling camera. Everyone is a bit surprised by this, but our frank discussion about the trials of making this work retroactively explains a lot of its content, and is cathartic for the group.



Program for Philadelphia performances of *Factor T*.

Epilogue; or, Hindsight is 20/20

Unable to resist, I follow the troupe to their last stateside appearance at Danspace Project in New York City in October 2008. It is the one time that I enter purely as an audience member. I purchase my ticket at the door and show myself to a seat, being careful not to cross the dance floor, as the usher instructs. I see the four first as performers, rather than in their pre-performance rituals and revel in the slight surprise as I meet their eyes onstage. They are changing things, though clearly without consensus and without warning. There is new blocking, but rather than being about ways to one-up their colleagues it is now a game; a challenge to make something new with what is now an old structure. There appears a comfort with one another that has been absent up until this moment—tension exists, but it is playful, not painful. It is the only time that I have witnessed *Faktor T* as a performance, rather than seeing it as process stymied more by self-discovery than a collective effort to produce an artistic narrative. That volatile discovery process was and is the content of the work, and I am taken by the opportunity I finally have to enjoy it. The audience is notably absent of anyone of importance.

“I recognize how difficult it is for me to work with mature performers when I know what message I want to send in performance” says Leszek from the road in November. “When I work with younger people, my voice is a God voice and they follow me unconditionally. The creation of *Faktor T* was like traveling through the dark rooms of individuality and resistance.” Bethany is happy to have found a familiar rhythm on the short return tour to Poland—an opportunity to teach and see more work. Rafał, far away from the United States but not from the process, reflects: “I have learned I cannot dance to save my life, that there are no limits to human egomania, selfishness, fear, and insecurity. Everything can be overcome if one stays humble enough. I have reached my limit in this production, *Faktor T* consumed all I know and much more—strategies that only emerged around performance ten strategies of survival and for the body that I didn’t know I had.”

Months later, with time for reflection Leszek understands the importance of his experiments, but softens too as he says, “Only experiments are important in theater. My role was quite funny, to propose an experiment and jump in as if one of the mice. But you have to be an equal mouse among mice. If you want to be Dr. Mengele...be a politician.” Rafał had suggested once that the appropriate ending to the piece would be to take the prop knives to themselves, samurai-style. Tempered, a bit, I might say that the collaborators have gained what they can from *Faktor T*. In this case the journey was ultimately the destination for both the dancers on stage and their supporters. It is the space to experiment and the experience of working together that has made clear for each what they hold dear.

Author Profile: Anna Drozdowski

Anna Drozdowski has written critically about movement for *Philadelphia Weekly*, *The Bournonville Daily* and the web publication *Braiding/Unbraiding/Rebraiding*, which documents Headlong Dance Theater’s work with choreographer Tere O’Connor (www.danceworkbook.org). Her research has been supported by the Chicago Seminar on Dance and Performance, the Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst, the NEA Arts Journalism Fellowship at the American Dance Festival, Philadelphia’s Community Education Center, and the Fulbright Program, through which she spent a year in residence at the Royal Danish Ballet. Currently she is a Pennsylvania Commonwealth Speaker, a guest curator for Philadelphia Dance Projects, and a Facilitator for Artists U, a professional development program for individual artists. As a manager, Drozdowski has worked with Headlong Dance Theater, Ballet Hispanico, The School of American Ballet, Nichole Canuso Dance Company, The Philadelphia Live Arts Festival, and Team Office! Through Ladybird, her consultancy, she undertakes projects in dramaturgy, production, and organizational planning for dance. She sits on the advisory committee of Dance/USA Philadelphia and holds a master’s degree in Performance Studies from NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts.

Credits:

Choreography and performance by: Katarzyna Chmielewska, Bethany Formica, Rafał Dziemidok, Leszek Bzdyl

Directed by: Leszek Bzdyl

Music: Mikołaj Trzaska

Costumes: Hiroshi Iwasaki

Lights: Michał Kołodziej

Polish Premiere: March 1, 2008 at Stary Browar, Poznań; March 6, 2008 at Klub Żak, Gdańsk.

American Premiere: Philadelphia Live Arts Festival, September 5 & 6, 2008 at 8pm, September 7, 2008 at 7pm, Christ Church Neighborhood House, 20 North American Street, Philadelphia, PA.

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Faktor T
Recorded on March 6, 2008 at Klub Zak, Gdańsk, Poland



Production Log
Recorded on March 6, 2008 at Klub Zak, Gdańsk, Poland



Faktor T
Recorded on September 7, 2008 at Christ Church Neighborhood House, Philadelphia, PA



Q&A Panel Discussion
Recorded on September 8, 2008 at Christ Church Neighborhood House, Philadelphia, PA



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