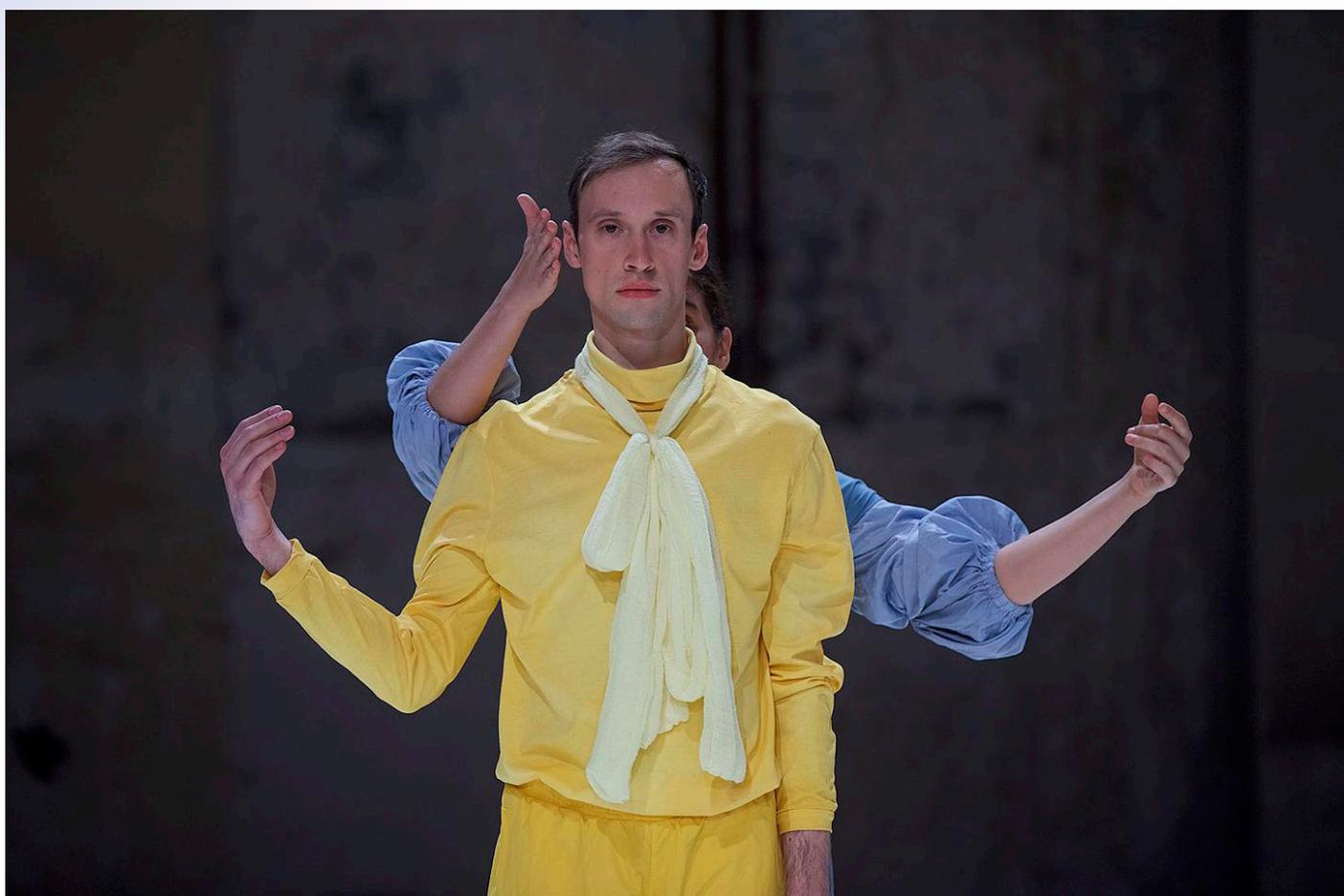


# Learning to take care of Sasha Amaya's *Sarabande*

by Sebastián Eduardo Dávila



*Sarabande*, choreography by Sasha Amaya. Performers Sasha Amaya and Falk Grever. Photo by Dieter Hartwig. Image reproduced with the permission of the artist.

“How to take care of a dance piece?” Choreographer and dancer Sasha Amaya posed this question during her two-day workshop as part of the festival *Submerge: Getting Into the Work at Lake Studios in Berlin* (August 25–26, 2020), and she repeated it in a conversation we had days later. One of the festival’s aims is to strengthen the notion of critical empathy embedded in performance, allowing the spectators to “submerge” into choreographic processes guided by the choreographers themselves. In what follows, I want to respond to Sasha’s question in

writing, based on an experience that is situated in and inscribed onto my body, but my words should remain open. My hope is, therefore, not to give a final answer to issues as ambiguous as “care,” but to allow such ambiguity to affect my introspection and the development of further questions. The starting points for this text are my cognitive and bodily memories as participant of the before-mentioned workshop, and as member of the audience in *Sarabande*, a dance performance choreographed by Sasha and performed at Sophiensaele in Berlin (January 8, 2020) and at Lake Studios (August 29, 2020). I am suggesting here an understanding of care meaning caring/carrying further — for instance through writing — as well as allowing ourselves to be transformed by what we care for.

### I. The workshop

One of the things I keep thinking about is the similarity of the dancer's position, directly facing the sovereign in baroque performances of the sixteenth and seventeenth century in France<sup>1</sup>, and frontally facing today's audiences in theater halls. In other words: The public now sits in the place once taken by royalty, whose fixed position forced the dance to be directed at them. The frontal orientation of the dancers facing each other is an element of baroque's legacy, embodied and reproduced by many, but consciously acknowledged only by a few. During the workshop, Sasha shared with us both her knowledge about baroque culture(s) and the fascination for its embodiment; a fascination that is at the core of *Sarabande's* creative process. I must admit that neither did I share her enjoyment for the easy-going and self-contained music at first nor for the movements and gestures it inspired in my body — controlled, delicate, and indifferent. However, the process of entering the choreographic process allowed me to take baroque and its contemporary interpretations more seriously. One of Sasha's wishes was precisely to create a dance piece that neither uncritically actualizes baroque nor one that makes fun of it. This by far does not mean that we did not find enjoyment or laughed. But the easiness was countered by the accuracy of rigid movements.

In Europe, dance scores were developed for the first time in the context of baroque performances. Based on these documents, specific dance pieces could and still can be performed by different, new bodies. Nevertheless, not every movement is documented in the score, since it mainly depicts floor patterns: more or less geometric, sometimes symmetric figures that mark the path of the dancers with a precise indication of their footsteps. During the workshop, we began to understand this sign-system and learned to write in it, developing our own figures. Following the set steps, our feet were simultaneously guiding and censuring the rest of our bodies. We translated quotes from our daily lives and a filmed baroque dance performance we saw together into this system. The patterns became rigid orientations for the

<sup>1</sup> For a general introduction to the history of baroque dance see: “Baroque Dance,” *An American Ballroom Companion. Dance Instruction Manuals, ca. 1490 to 1920*. Library of Congress, accessed November 14, 2020, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/dance-instruction-manuals-from-1490-to-1920/articles-and-essays/western-social-dance-an-overview-of-the-collection/baroque-dance/>.

movements we were trying to reproduce and combine. This dynamic between rigidity, memory, and imagination accompanied us through the different exercises. We transitioned from free movements and a loose feeling to extremely precise expressions not only with our feet, but also our faces and arms. Like our sensations, our imagination was also in flux. I sometimes visualized myself being one of the male bodies in the video we saw; a dramatically dressed gentleman with high heels and a wig, who delicately jumps around in circles with the expression of controlled surprise. Sometimes his – my – hands were posing still. At other times, they were merely following the movement of our arms, as if they had no strength of their own. I have heard from friends that in Colombia, gay men are disdainfully called “mani quebrado”: broken hand. Suddenly, the dancer's body and mine are one. But instead of facing the king, I now face the studio's mirrors that reflect my sporty clothes and sneakers, and thus my difference from him. Once again, I feel disconnected from the violins and flutes in Georg Friedrich Händel's compositions playing in the background.

## II. The performance



*Sarabande*, choreography by Sasha Amaya. Performers Sasha Amaya and Falk Grever. Photo by Gerhard Ludwig. Image reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Seeing *Sarabande* performed at Lake Studios, I imagine being in Sasha Amaya's and co-dancer Falk Grever's shoes, in their sneakers. They do not face a monarch, but an audience that sits strangely distanced as part of the measurements implemented against COVID-19. In contrast to the audience's raised position at Sophiensaele, we now face the dancers in the much more intimate space of a dance studio, our facemasks acting as the only barrier between us. Suddenly, I feel the need to take off my mask to respond to Falk's gaze directed at me for a second. As choreographic features, gaze and bodily alignments are in constant transformation. The dancers direct their eyes at each other and at the ceiling and they transition from the expression of neutrality to an exaggerated opening of their mouths in order to articulate a firm and loud, but nevertheless emotionally unmarked "AAAHH." My smile is covered by the mask, but again, I am not laughing at them. It is out of excitement I feel hearing their voices fill up the space. I start to wonder whether it was really their voices I heard or just part of the music? Through the performance, vocalization, as well as how the dancers face each other, take various forms and functions, sometimes complementing, sometimes contrasting the music and movement. This is part of a choreographic exploration of the potentiality and limits of the body in/and baroque today.

Now, Sasha is standing at the studio's center. She indicates a circular path with one hand; a path followed by Falk, who is running around her. I cannot but think about the control of the choreographer over her co-dancer's male body. While her pose suggests mental concentration and physical tension, his body is clearly exhausted after several rounds. He wears yellow and she light blue, and I would not associate any of his movements with power, strength, or violence. Besides, touch was never at the center of the dance, neither in the workshop nor during the performance. This has not only to do with COVID-19 but is a part of baroque dance itself. Unlike other genres, the distance between dancers is already implied in the original scores, making it difficult for me to ascribe normative gender roles to either of the dancers. Like voguing, dance here has to do more with posing, facing each other, and walking step by step than with male and female interactions through touch.

Now I am focusing on Falk's hands. Starting gently, they repeat a delicate circular movement again and again, each time a bit faster. After a couple of minutes, I am already unable to follow his hands and arms because of their speed. I instead look at his face, where heavy breathing meets an otherwise unmarked expression. At this point, sound is produced merely with the body. However, besides Händel's pieces, *Sarabande* is also accompanied by Caroline Shaw's *Partita for 8 Voices*<sup>2</sup>, who herself deals with the contemporaneity of baroque music, a

<sup>2</sup> The version of *Partita for 8 Voices* Sasha used was performed by Roomful of Teeth.

historical reference sometimes directly quoted therein, yet other times barely noticeable. Lying on their backs and facing the ceiling, by the end of the performance both dancers crawl on the floor. Meanwhile, they begin to count, each of them differently, something like “one, two, three, one, two, three.” I suddenly realize that they are following a floor pattern, something I did not recognize the first time I saw *Sarabande*.

I think about these moments when I say that Sasha's choreography deals with the potentials and limits of the body in/and baroque, its movement and historicity. With this I do not mean that the body is brought to a physical endpoint, but that limits themselves are displayed as a field of research. How far, or how near should the contemporary performance of baroque go? When does irony start and when the affirmation of values associated with baroque culture? What does it mean to evoke an old European dance tradition, however differently, with non-European bodies?<sup>3</sup> And with European ones? Ultimately, what happens with the bodies and subjects participating in the workshop and in the audience, in the place of the monarch? How could I learn so quickly how to enjoy baroque and its actualization, being able now to proudly smile when I discover the floor patterns during a performance? Is there even a problem with such joy? Critical issues emerge here through the introspection into an embodied process, where bodily memory opens itself up to moments of imagination and speculation. As I suggested at the beginning, neither as workshop nor as performance does *Sarabande* urge us to answer questions directly. Moreover, it is the immersion into its creative process that invites us to pose our own questions; an immersion that the dancers also seem to be performing on stage. It is in this process that the potentiality of care resides, not only as a (re)productive, but as a transformative praxis. But let us stay with *Sarabande*: While crawling on the ground, the dancers' counting “one, two, three, one two three, one two three” has intensified the studio-situation where bodies are subject to a disciplinary movement otherwise directed by music. Here, however, only their feet remain disciplined. The rest of the body has melted on the ground in a passive rebellion, now following the steps set by some external agent or force. Through the vocalization of the tempo, they embody this force, albeit only partially.

<sup>3</sup> I think Sasha herself posed this question during one of the workshop's lunch-breaks.

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