

Remaining at the margin or deciding to create and belong: dance as a medium to create interpersonal space

Summary:

In this paper I review the artistic work of Sashar Zarif and development of his dance by relating his work to his personal experiences. I highlight the major interactions and events in his life and the ways these affected his artistic development. His evolution from a state of fusion with idealized object to individuation will be discussed and its manifestation in his work reviewed.

Introduction

Sashar was born and raised in Iran till he was 16///EARLY TEENAGE YEARS. During and after revolution he was active in the political changes of the country. **His life was at risk after his cousin was arrested and eventually killed in Jail.** He had to escape Iran in the most dangerous fashion. He was in turkey for 3.5 years and eventually came to Canada after he was recognized by UNHCR as a genuine refugee. He has lived in Toronto ever since.

In Canada Sashar pursued different activities. He studies systems design at Waterloo University. However his attraction to dance eventually won over engineering study. He focused on his dance exclusively. He traveled to **Azerbaijan, Daghistan, Iran, Tajikstan, India, Mongolia, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan conducting research, thought and performed in dance ethnology -specifically sufi and Shamanic related dance and music rituals-** and studied dance with some great artists and instructors in these countries, and especially Azerbaijan. He then returned to Canada and he continued his academic studies at York university in cultural studies and finished

with his Masters in Dance and currently finishing his PHD in Arts and Education: Displacement, and new Identity and Dance..However he has continued to study dance and movements of the world. He learned Flamingo in Spain, and Indian Dance for three years. He returned to his **country after 20 years** and researched dance and music of different areas of Iran. In his creations and artist work he has drawn extensively from these studies and experiences.

Remaining attached to a secure environment and an idealized mother

For healthy growth and for creativity every person needs a sense of whole person, a unified ego. In childhood this comes from adults who are in charge of taking care of the child. Sashar owes the inspiration of the dance he creates to the richness of his childhood and in particular to the sense of freedom he experienced with his grandmother. The contacts he had in early childhood has had a deep effect on his work and these **influences ooze throughout** his presentations and movements. He says that he was raised in a family that was different from other families in that they all enjoyed dance and music and singing. His great aunt has a beautiful voice and finished training in the conservatory of Baku. His cousin is a musician and created a few music CDs, and plays a couple of instruments. His father sings and is a musician. Another aunt was a dancer and a good story teller. His grandmother who played a major role in the development of his artistic taste was also a dancer and storyteller. When they family members got together there was dance and music and singing and these observations had a lasting mark on young Sashar. While the artist's exile has had a deep effect on his creation, it is clear that his early childhood has been the most important influence in providing material for his current work.

Sashar's childhood also related to his own experience of Exile. It appears that artist's experience of exile started even before he became remotely aware of the meaning of the word, or of any words. **His grandmother moved from Russia during, or soon after, their revolution.** As a result the settings of his early childhood have had a decisive effect on his character and, eventually, on his preoccupations and artistic presentations in different ways. His moves, the content of his work, the music used and even the choice of dance as his medium of artistic endeavor are enhanced by these early childhood experiences. When he talks about his grandmother he talks about that secure and idealized mother that was the source of the good things.

Remaining isolated and marginalized or being involved and creative

For Sashar then comes the personal experience of exile. The way the artist, then only a teenager, escaped his country and found his way to Canada becomes important in his artistic work. He was young and his fate was in the hands of others whom he had to trust without knowing anything about them. Getting to Canada was not easy and included hiding in a truck, traveling on a mule, and walking for many hours non-stop. He remembers that when he was hiding in the truck soldiers came to search the vehicle. They walked right to the spot he was hiding under. He could hear their footsteps clearly and loudly. However his heartbeat was even louder. He was fearful that the sound created by pounding of his heart so loudly may give up his hiding place. **(People being shot, hiding in a room for 5 days and leaving only at night, three people living in the same room as they had no fuel to warm their rooms and so on).** (The

hardship of living in the camp,, 3 rooms but all living in the same room because of cold. And other fears, fear of addiction, fear of coming to Canada and being lost)

Sashar has been able to transform an authentic "tragic situation" into a sign of fate. By bringing the idea and the experience on the stage he gains power over them. This reduces his anxiety and reduces the grip of the past traumatic experiences over him. By bringing the experience on stage he refuses to be under the sign of tragedy. The artist's reactions to these events are different at different times. Sometimes his reaction is melodramatic; crying when reading a letter from home, asking mother to keep her hair long, or wanting to go back to his country despite all the hardship he experiences to escape the place. But also the long time he was trapped in a small town in Turkey gave him a lot of opportunity for fantasizing actively and abundantly. Both of these features are clearly visible in his work and performance.

Exile has had its own rewards for the artist as well and has provided him the opportunity to discover new frontiers, to enjoy new experiences and to pursue new possibilities. In the new environment the music is different, the interpersonal space is enriching and opportunities could be pursued without fear of retribution. As a result he trained himself formally and informally. He studied dances and movements of different regions of the world and enriched his repertoire of various dance movements.

While we observe the artist's struggle to feel at home and make the most out of the new situation, we encounter a strong sense of not belonging. Sashar speaks 5 different

languages but speaks all of them with accent, and this is true even with his mother tongue. When, after a long time, he visits his home country people asked him repeatedly, “where are you from? Where is that accent from?”

In Sashar’s work on the stage, we see the self-consciousness and doubts of a young man in a new country where he was/is contemplating the nature of his activities and contribution. We see the artist’s special blend of personality that stem from a heightened consciousness of self and his place in the world. And the artist wants to convey his experiences to others but in his unique way. The artist’s technical skills and presentation depends on the establishment of a sense of self, and his presentation varies over time as his sense of self changes and as his integration in the society develops. However the accent is an ongoing reminder of not being from here and not belonging. At one level he chooses movement and its silent language as his medium of artistic work in order to avoid misunderstanding; no words, no explanation, talking in movements. His art is an effort to express the truth of his being and his experience in gestures and movements. However he wants to deal with the experience of not belonging and this becomes the central theme of his dance.

The artist, through a generalization, tries to convert his personal experiences (both childhood experiences, the experience of exile, and his later undertakings to understand cultures and movements of other people of the world) into something which is common to all human beings. As such his dance reflects his struggle for growth, gaining identity and making sense of the experience of immigration.

When we watch his dance we are transformed and transported to the past, to the time when we were young and free, free of worries, and when we were getting ready to face the world, and to start our own journey. We can identify with the artist's attempt to integrate his past experience with his current motives and aspirations and struggles and present them in a unified creation on the stage.

Sashar pays attention to details of the movement in his creations. It looks as if he has captures and internalized all the details of moves of people around him and has recreated them in his dance. In this the art work becomes therapy. Life is also paying attention. Where you are going in life? Where you are coming from? How others affect you and how you affect others? These are the questions of therapy and the questions of life, but also the question of art. And Sashar is presenting his view on the stage and he is very convincing at his presentation.

Creativity and relatedness, freedom and destiny

In Sashar's work the duality of character and how one's interaction is affected by it takes a central role. What is also evident is the struggle with traditions, and the effect of this struggle between tradition and new on the artist who is always on the look for integrating the new experiences and the past struggles, always worried about where he is heading and always trying to deal with the resulting internal tension. **Then, as is expect in any work of art**, the observers wonder what is real and what is imaginary; how much of the past the artist is holding onto in order to define himself, and how much of the new is being integrated into the self. We can watch this internal journey and struggle of this migratory bird on the stage. **As a result of this struggle we can say**

that dance for Sashar has as its aim the expression of the most profound feelings of the human soul and its deepest experiences. The artist's presentation is the product of the vicissitudes of circumstances he is born in and interpersonal relations he has grown up in and faced in life, and how he has integrated these spaces. As such address the issue of fate and personal choice. As a result of this attempt to deal with this history is that everything in the work becomes so personal and we can say every move of his dance is coming from somewhere in the artist's past experiences and personal and social space. Emphasizing the effect of culture he says, "A good dance... is an expression of realities. The cultural roots are the most importance source of information for an artist." However he also emphasized the personal side of creativity when he states, "Artist ...can both in personal space or public space, reflect his current or future growth in art."

When an immigrant, especially an artist, tries to deal with tradition and hold on to those early experiences **he faces a grave danger.** The artist may become deeply preoccupied with a tradition that does not exist any more. When people immigrate to a new place they change. However they may not consider that the place they left behind also changes. They will be shocked when they visit the old place after a long time. This happened to Sashar when he returned to his home of the tradition, the country he left behind, after many years. He felt a stranger in his home country and realized that what he was trying so hard to protect did not exist anymore; that traditions had changed dramatically. At that point the artist could have abandoned his effort or could choose to move to a new stage of artistic work. He decided to pursue his work by integration of "then and there" with "now and there" and eventually "now and here". This is an ultimate integration. **This is provides hope for a better world,** a world in which **tradition and**

modern, static and dynamic live together and tolerate each other. He frees himself from fate and destiny. He is saying, “I live my life, face my challenges, create my work and in this process I create myself and so I am free”.

As a result of this view to his work, we need to be aware that when we approach Sashar’s dance and watch him move on the stage we are watching an autobiography of a very involved life, hence we need to be aware of the unexpected. His work is not for the faint of heart and it is not for having only a good time, rather watching Sashar’s dance is like being part of a journey to the deepest layers of someone’s life, to the layers that he may not even be aware of them himself. When we see Sashar performing on stage we see a courageous artist who is willing to share with us his private inner life and in this sharing, it appears that, he gives us the whole truth in a flash of a sudden movement. And in this attempt to connect and share with us, he avoids repressing his past. And with the energy that is released as a result of this sharing he **participates freely** in life at the present time, and invite us to do so as well. The experience of viewing Sashar’s dance, connecting to his movements and uncensored presentation, and observing his struggles with memories associated with painful feelings and intolerable emotions may help us release painful material from repression and free the energy that was used in the service of repression for the enjoyment of life and for constructive being (Winnicott, D.W. *Thinking about Children*. Page 9, Addison-Wesley, Massachusetts, 1997.). By providing us, and himself, the impetus to lift this repression, his artistic work gains therapeutic value as well.

Dance as an Artistic endeavor

While we discuss the effect of untoward circumstances, traumatic experiences and rich early childhood environment we know that misfortunes and circumstances are scarcely sufficient causes of artistic success. The artistic merit of Sashar's work comes from his hard work, extensive training, solid cultural background and his creativity. These issues are out of the scope of this paper. However the recognition he has received from his peers is an indication of the artistic merit of his work. Sashar received his formal academic training in performing arts at Azerbaijan conservatory of Music and Dance. He was awarded the honorary title of "Artist for People of Azerbaijan." Sashar was also a recipient of the Chalmers professional development grant from the Ontario Arts Council in 2003. He is also the winner of the 2006 Paula Citron Award (along with Holly Small) and the 2008 New Pioneers Arts Award from Skills for Change. These recognitions, in addition to the fact that his choreographic work has been **seen throughout North and South America, Europe and Western and Central**, are indications of merit of his work.

Conclusion

In summary I have highlighted some features of Sashar's dance in this brief paper. I showed that he remains attached to a secure mother and an idealized mother (in his grandmother) in his work, and that he has decided to be involved and active rather than to remain isolated and marginalized. I also showed that he fought with being passive and victim, and rather than being sorry for himself, he decided to challenge destiny and be in control of his life and creation. I also highlighted Sashar's struggle with the issue of identity that reached a heightened importance after he was forced into exile. I showed that these experiences have enriched Sashar's dance and that his work is not coming out of a vacuum, rather it relates to a rich life. The artist, in creations, challenges fate

and destiny and invites us to creativity and freedom. While we all need to find our own paths to this level of freedom, for Sashar this happens through movement, change, shaping self and relating to others. The artist is showing us how he is doing it in front of us and on the stage. In his work and in the development of his work Sashar undertake a personal journey in which he moved from a desire to fuse to early childhood figures to individuation. For him his artistic work highlight his individuality, but the work tell us the story of his transformation; early fusion with the idealized mother and gradual movement away toward development of an individualized sense of self. However, there is no doubt that **in making his dance so personal Sashar becomes involve in an act of showing, laying bare and opening his soul in front of others and that brings the risk of being too exposed.**

I emphasized the idealized mother as it appears that artist is referring to grandmother as the idealized person who determined the course of his life for him. This may create a conflict on stage as the artist tries to represent his own individuality and desire on the stage and at the same time he wants to be loved by his audience. The audience may represent his idealized grandmother who anxiously sitting, watching and will eventually judging his success. Again the tension between fusion, here with the audience, and individuality, doing what he desires, come into conflict. However it appears that the artist successfully solves this problem by avoiding to be constrained by the pressure of these representations and conflicts.

It appears to me that if we follow the development of Sashar's work we see a movement from fusion with the environment and indifferention to autonomy and his own style.

Not only this is clear in his work it is also clear in his personal growth. This process of individuation that is presented on stage may provide us the instrument to recognize the dance from the dancer from this well known lines by W. B. Yeats,

“O body swayed to music, o bright glance
How can we know the dance from the dancer”