

A Love Letter to Ballet

Adam Linder – a polylinguist within dance

Interview: Emma McCormick-Goodhart

Ever protean, choreographer Adam Linder operates a little like a cross-pollinator within dance, mixing movement lexicons and intelligences that cut across context and genre. "LOYALTY", which premiered at Kampnagel in 2021, represents something of a homecoming to his classical training, then, for it is his first ballet – a genre that he meets afresh by way of experimentations incubated elsewhere.

Emma McCormick-Goodhart: You've described "LOYALTY" as a 'love letter to ballet'. What about ballet – your mother tongue – moors you, and what pushes you away?

Adam Linder: I think what is primarily interesting to me about ballet, now, is the vocabulary. The way that the body has to organise itself to achieve the certain positions or steps; the proprioception, the virtuosity. The way that ballet, in its codifications, carves through space. And because the vocabulary is actually quite small, and so highly edified, there isn't much room for variation in its purest form.

When you have such pithy lexicon, and rigid ways of usage of this lexicon, it allows me to push up against and create a kind of dialect that cheekily and productively tries to do something different with a language that holds so much power. Just by reversing the way a particular step is done, or by putting the coordination of ballet movements onto a body that is lying on the ground: these are simple inversions of the expectation of how this vocabulary should be organized.

Nothing about it pushes me away. I think there are aspects of ballet culture, aspects of the genre of ballet – and those domains of culture and genre are very

different to me from vocabulary. I find the Eurocentric, vertical epitome of nobility and embodiment, a little flawed. The gender expectations, and the uptight way of holding the body: the complete rigidity of the spine, and the way it remains an undifferentiated column in ballet. We can do better. Things can be more juicy. These relations between bodies can be more fluid. Let's take what we know now, let's take what's swirling in other corners of culture, and let's imbue ballet with that.

EMG: Lush sound scores and vocal librettos run through your performances in intense dramaturgical permeation – in contrast to ballet's own historical muteness, tied to Greco-Roman pantomime. If sound generates an aesthetic, how does it unfold in "LOYALTY"?

AL: In a lot of my work I engage with how language, in its expectation of meaning-production, can move beyond that into a kind of extra-linguistic [space], creating different performative textures, either in contrast or in concert with textures of the moving body.

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One of the deep questions in why I make art and am busy with dance is in thinking about the huge post-Enlightenment separation of mind and body. In a lot of my earlier work I tried to stage impossible meetings, or productive mistranslations, between different forms of verbal and physical languaging. With "LOYALTY" there was a very conscious decision not to have any text in the piece, and there isn't. Sound is always so important. I think that it's very particular to work with the oeuvre of Coil for "LOYALTY", being so expansive, from experimental drug-induced drones to repurposings of Stravinsky riffs and melancholy '90s club sound – there's such a breadth of narrative. I don't know of anyone who has done a full choreography to Coil, and I felt that there would be a really productive ten-

sion in the proposition to make a ballet to their sounds.

EMG: You have feet in both the art and dance worlds. How does it nourish you to occupy both at once? Is it tricky to position yourself? Does the paradigm of the stage differ productively within an exhibition space?

AL: You know, it was never a conscious decision to work both in the exhibition space and in the theatre space, and I have continuously worked in both – always making stage works at the same time as making exhibition works. I guess that I just fell into making works in the exhibition space because in that moment it was a space that could allow me to exercise my thinking in a certain way, and then at different moments the theatre has allowed me to exercise other desires.

I think that the theatre experience is an A-to-Z experience, where dramaturgy is key; you are capturing the viewer's attention from beginning to end. It's often a frontal situation of viewing. The exhibition space, on the other hand, is a space for the viewer's free, liberal experience to move through space in proximity to what is happening; to carve out as much time, or as little time, as the viewer wants. And then you have this all-seeing transparent whiteness of the space, which is also a metaphor for how the back end of art is visible in the exhibition space – meaning the market, the value bestowed onto said objects.

Do I think that it's tricky to position myself? Sure, I think that any dance or art market wants predictable seriality. That's how a market works, and I think that if you double down and just keep producing variations on the same theme, that can be recognised by a wider public.

EMG: In what ways does coming from dance sensitise you to labour economies in art-world settings?

AL: I think that coming from dance you are accustomed to a certain economy, which is very direct: you are paid for your time that you are in the studio or for your



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performance. There is no speculative economy in dance, and it's incomparable with other markets within the arts. You're accustomed to feeling like you're in the nursery or the kindergarten, playing the game of 'bank', whereas other art forms are running around the stock exchange. But that's also a fun place to play from. For example, my work "Services" (2013–18), which were embodiments of activities that could be hired, per hour, per day, became a space for me and the dancers to get better and better at mastering these embodiments. It was almost like, if you're a client hiring this service, you're also investing in furthering our skills.

EMG: What might ballet in a future world look like?

AL: I think ballet in a future world will look like a very detailed, specific and saturated embodiment imbued with all the fluidness of sexuality, and the complex

articulation of time and attention that is concurrently happening in our digital 3.0 and beyond world.

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EMG: How should ballet curricula change, or equally, how can ballet write itself out of the academy and into broader scholarship?

AL: Well, I think ballet is changing – but very, very slowly. I think that there are different gender identities being welcomed into ballet. I think that the whiteness, the racism and the orientalism in ballet is majorly being questioned. I think that what will enhance ballet are curricula that seek to understand and teach and enrich the education of ballet through the knowledge of other dance forms. Can

we teach ballet through the rhythm that a dancer acquires as a tapper? Or can we teach the sense of attack within a certain movement through the musicality and attack in hip-hop? And can we teach a sensitivity to the feeling of the floor as in some other kind of released or contact improv form? I think that ballet needs to stop being taught through the logic of ballet, and actually be taught through the logics of other dance forms. 🗡️