

# Dancing Mania

Mette Ingvarsten

*Premiered last year in Brussels, "The Dancing Public" explores dancing plagues and movement spread by contagion. In an interview conducted at PACT Essen in September 2021, Bojana Cvejić asks Mette Ingvarsten about the research behind the piece and her desire to get the audience grooving.*

**Bojana Cvejić:** *When does the idea of "The Dancing Public" date from? What prompted you to investigate the phenomena of choreomania and dance marathons?*

**Mette Ingvarsten:** The idea came with the title – "The Dancing Public" – about five years ago, when I felt it was time for me to make a piece that would entail dancing together with the public. I came across 'choreomania', also referred to as the dancing epidemic that occurred in the Middle Ages, which attracted me as it combines several elements I wanted to explore: dancing in public space, dance as a social gathering and the excess of dancing movements that are relentless and uncontrollable, and which spread like a contagion. Movement travels through bodies at parties and in general when people dance for pleasure. But in the choreomanias dance was associated with an uncanny force, something unknowable that propels movement beyond control.

**BC:** *The performance brings two historical narratives that link up the dance outbreaks (also called the 'dancing plague'!) and dance marathons with periods of crisis, like the plague in the Middle Ages and the Great Depression in the 1930s. How is this mass dancing to excess or madness intricately linked with the circumstances of social crisis?*

**MI:** The correlation between dancing manias and socio-political crises is only one of the interpretations of these dance outbreaks. A crucial source in my research was Kéline Gotman's book

"Choreomania: Dance and Disorder" (Oxford 2018), in which Gotman traces the history of the discourses on dancing manias. Dancing was believed to be a way of keeping the black pest out, or it came about in the midsummer celebrations that got out of hand. The variety of explanations shows the phantasmatic core of dancing manias. In this piece I try to retrace this history of the discursive transformations of dancing manias by paralleling them with a journey through performative forms. At first I tell this history as a story, which then becomes a spoken-word poem with music. Later it transforms into songs. There is also a shift from a straightforward narration to a more theatrical manner of embodying the history, as I found that some of the forms of choreomania were theatrical or performative, like hysteria.

*What interests me in this is what happens to the body in moments of crises, and the bodily excess that so easily follows from it.*

**BC:** *This solo could be approached from two perspectives operating at the same time. One is the invitation that becomes a situation of dancing: from storytelling you incite us into dance in the course of the entire evening. The other perspective pertains to the construction of the body that shakes and convulses, embroiled in a state that would ordinarily be described as irrational, between joy and exhaustion, excess and madness: a dance 'craze'! What is your interest in the body?*

**MI:** I found accounts of choreomanias where nuns were barking or meowing, going into momentary states of contagious madness. What interests me in this is what happens to the body in moments of crises, and the bodily excess that so easily follows from it. The piece also asks why people party. This also represents a need for a kind of excess. I remember myself as a youngster; I had a great need to expend my energy, which also came with the desire to be in a situation where the rules would be temporarily suspended.

There is a long tradition of festivities – from the Greeks and the Romans to later carnivals – as events designated for experiencing a kind of freedom from moral constraints and regulations. By contrast, the dancing manias aren't organized moments of excess but come as eruptions when the body can no longer refrain from movement. And that is crucial to me, because it indicates a response to a societal or political condition. And what would trigger such a release? For example, during the Covid lockdown I felt something similar in my own body, something like: "I can no longer stand this confinement, staying put and in isolation I need to move and be with other people." Dance is both the symptom of an illness and its remedy. This says something about the regenerative capacity of the body to overcome different forms of oppression and unfreedom. Sometimes it happens in forms of sublimation – as in carnivals and parties – and other times it manifests in what resembles madness or has an uncontrollable element to it.

**BC:** *What you are saying about dance being both the symptom of an illness and its cure speaks of an operation you have mounted in many works. By subjecting yourself to a set of constraining movements in excess, you induce another state that will be able to release you from the initial constraint by bringing you to a higher level of focus and capacity. For example you used spinning and trance-like repetitions in your previous pieces, solos and group choreographies alike. Dramaturgically, in "The Dancing Public" the shift from narration to dancing, or from theatre to concert, brings a move from representation to intense embodiment.*

*I can no longer stand this confinement, staying put and in isolation. I need to move and be with other people.*

**MI:** I relate this to the Italian folk dance tarantella. I have read accounts of the tarantella that go as follows: one person goes through excessive convulsions to cure poisonous spider bites while other

Bojana Cvejić in conversation with Mette Ingvarsten

Text: Bojana Cvejić

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people are there to support and witness this process. What interests me here is the function this individual healing has within the community, and the effect it propels in the bodies watching. This mechanism is also something I explore within the performance, by being the one who subjugates herself to intense (and perhaps curative) states. My body is a kind of vessel, and that's similar to my other solos where I think of myself as a vessel for history. Even though it is a solo, there is nothing in it that is about me personally. My body conveys other historical bodies, or better still how the understanding of our bodies has changed.

**BC:** Now to think again about the bodies of the audience: you initially wished to create a situation in which the audience will dance. The convention of theatre dance is that it is observed in silence and from a distance; the audience will not 'dance back' at you. In this piece you incite them to dance while speaking about dance epidemics and contagion based on the imitation of movements.

**MI:** The choice of having music underscore the entire performance has to do with the question "How do I propose to people to get into a groove?". We construct a musical space as a container for the experience of social togetherness. When I speak of contagion and how dance spreads from one body to another, I am not saying "please, dance with me", but I am indirectly offering this possibility, that we could surrender to contagious movement. When I go into fully-fledged dancing, it is actually a mixture of convulsive motions and the gestures you mentioned earlier, like itching, laughing, and Tourette syndrome. Several movement histories run through these mixtures, yet there is a strong reference to party dancing, also because it is part of my own history. I danced hip-hop and performed in clubs from the age of 13, and then later throughout my youth I partied a lot. This ties together popular cultures of music and dancing. I perform the movement that anyone could do, except that I am doing this excessively to the point that it might be hard to believe it.

**BC:** Speaking of music and partying, you also travel through different musical genres that carry their own worlds. From spoken word, as a kind of rapping or slam poetry, to singing over dark industrial music.

**MI:** I didn't intent to mix different genres; this isn't how I usually work. I think it came from the music I chose to dance to, and then subsequently arranged for the whole soundtrack. For example, when I speak of dance marathons in the 1930s I use the heavy and dark sound of an industrial dance music track. Back then, during the Great Depression, dance competitions were organised with a money prize for the couple who could keep up the longest. The couples would dance endlessly, and they could eat, drink, even shave while dancing. They weren't allowed to sleep or rest more than 10–15 minutes per hour. If their knees dropped to the floor and stayed there for more than five seconds they would be out of the game. So I wonder "why on earth would people do this?" Was it poverty which motivated a contest for a financial award? Or was it a desire to be part of a larger collective event? It's a dark spectacle and a weird form of entertainment, as it included desperation and craving in a moment of deep financial crisis.

*I am interested in the performance as a moment of sharing, together with an audience immersed in a space constructed by light, sound and music.*

**BC:** Returning to your solo, I want to acknowledge that it is impressive for me to watch you perform something you constructed in most of its elements by yourself. You wrote the text and you made the music track, which was then arranged by Anne van der Star, while Minna Tiikkainen, with whom you collaborated on so many works, designed the lights.

**MI:** Solos give me time to experiment. When I work alone I feel I have all the time in the world. Working alone is also important for me as I need my choreog-

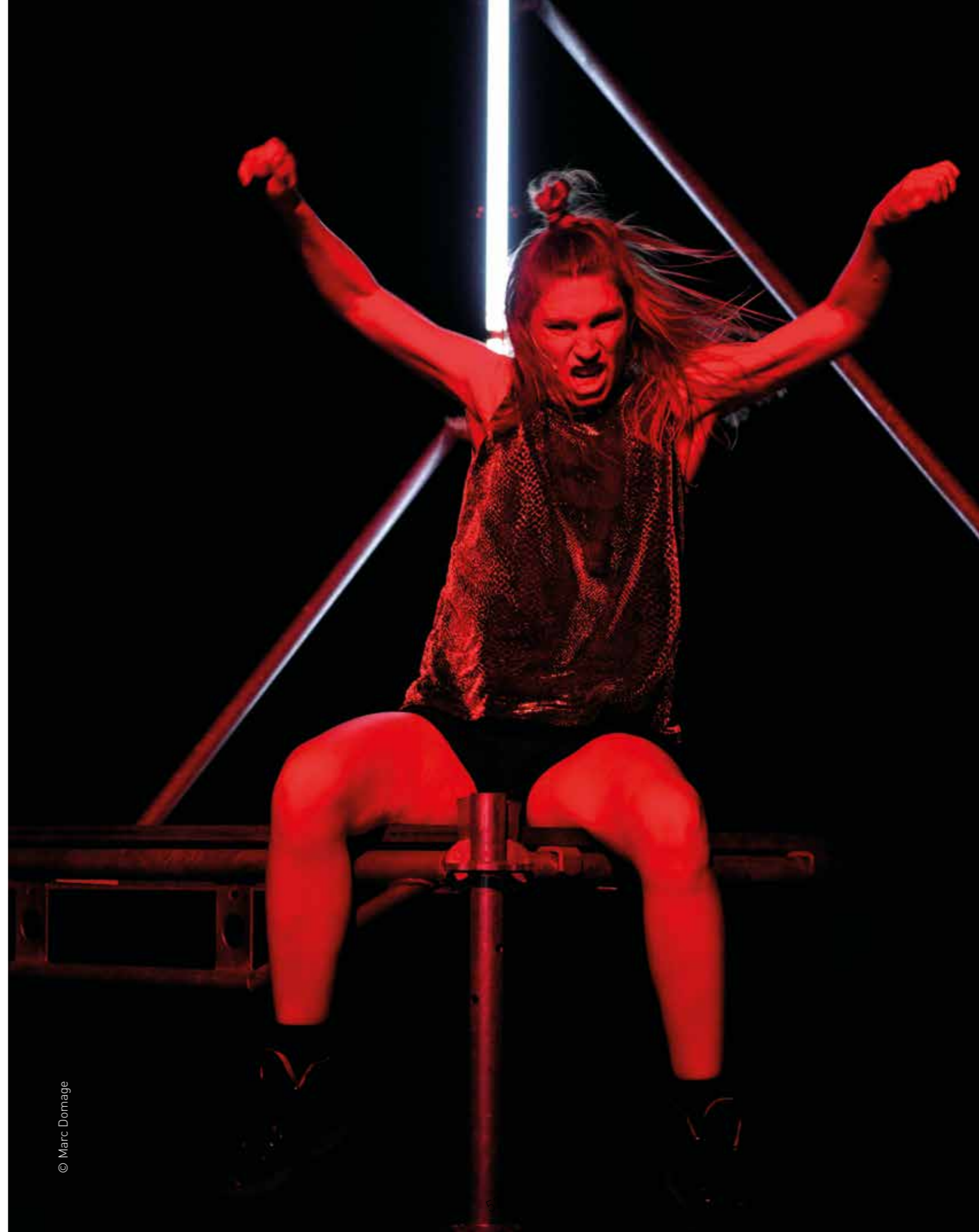
raphic ideas to pass through my own body before I work with other people. I am not the choreographer who works from the outside. I first need to know what it is that I am proposing. Additionally, because what I often want to do is excessive, I cannot ask others to be involved in it before I've put my own body on trial, testing fragility and limits. As you know, I've also worked on sexuality, where personal boundaries are renegotiated. Therefore I need to know myself what I am dealing with and what kind of emotional response it will bring forth, in me, in other performers and finally in the audience. This time the material is also very exhausting. I get high from dancing this solo. Sometimes I am so energised that I cannot fall asleep until late in the night.

**BC:** You gain a corporeal level of knowledge by using your body as a vessel for this experiment.

**MI:** I am interested in the performance as a moment of sharing, together with an audience immersed in a space constructed by light, sound and music. Regarding the participation of the audience, this performance is divided into two blocks. In the first the audience is inside a performance I am creating for them, where they can choose to dance along with me but don't have to. The second block is a kind of extension, an open-ended party which is in their hands; it is up to their bodies. ➡

Full interview available at [metteingvarsten.net](http://metteingvarsten.net)

**Mette Ingvarsten**  
**The Dancing Public**  
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