



Building Bridges

Berlin's Urban Dance Scene on the Move

Interview: Alina Scheyrer-Lauer

Berlin-born Nasrin Torabi is the founder of the battle “Outbox Me”, which takes place regularly in Berlin and has been able to establish itself as a central interface of the city’s urban dance scene. “Outbox Me” welcomes dancers from all styles to a knock-out after the preliminary round. A cooperation with “Outbox Me” had been planned for Tanz im August 2020 as part of the three-year special project “URBAN FEMINISM, which supports female urban choreographers from Berlin and accompanies their artistic development. Ten Berlin dancers and choreographers were invited, and they will now realise an online programme for the Tanz im August Special Edition 2020. In the following interview Nasrin Torabi opens a window onto Berlin’s urban dance scene.

Alina Scheyrer-Lauer: How should an outside person imagine Berlin’s urban dance scene?

Nasrin Torabi: Just up front: I speak from personal experience here, not from an academic context or similar. And I’m not living in Berlin any more, because of my social science studies, so I can only describe what I know from before and from visits.

Berlin’s urban dance scene is firstly a subculture that’s strongly oriented to the social movements that have emerged in the United States. It’s organised in open training sessions, jams and battles (local to international), where people

come together and interchange. Urban dance can be subdivided into various styles, such as house, funk, hip-hop, popping, krump, etc. The different styles are often associated with particular lifestyles, types of music, social attitudes and of course with dancing itself. Urban dance is an outlet for emotion and a place of creative interchange, but it’s also a possibility to gain the recognition you lack and to realise yourself.

ASL: We all know urban dance moves from commercial music videos and films. How does the urban dance culture differ from these, and what do they have in common? Does this have to do with a particular style?

NT: The urban dance scene distinguishes between commercial dancers and freestylers, who mainly improvise. Commercial dance is familiar from video clips, films or concerts. It’s often choreography that uses existing movements and has a majority appeal. The urban freestyle scene marks itself off from this, and doesn’t want to be mainstream. I’ve seen a lot of freestyle dancers who don’t want their dance to be seen as a commodity. For them it’s more a means of expression, a way of communicating without words, and they often keep it to themselves. What you call commercial dance is only a small part of what constitutes urban dance.

ASL: What values does urban dance represent?

NT: It’s difficult to generalise, but the following are often named: Everyone is equal as human being, and you compete on the dance level. Everyone has access, and what basically counts is dancing ability. There are individual crews that have earned their reputations through this – by winning battles, for example. It’s a complex culture, which you need to understand from scratch. You have to look at how the different strands came about, as every style has its own historical background and the designation ‘urban dance’ has just been applied from today’s point of view. The origin was

frequently a social movement that expressed its lifestyle through dance. The emphasis is on community, solidarity, support, exchange and artistic expression. For many dancers their crew is a kind of ersatz family.

ASL: What led to the founding of “Outbox Me”?

NT: The first “Outbox Me” took place in February 2015 as the final project of my training as an event organiser. I’ve been active in a lot of areas, mainly urban and modern dance, but also in tricking, acrobatics and martial arts. If you break it down simply, dance is movement to music – the way you express music physically. This can take an incredible number of forms. “Outbox Me” came about from my desire to make dance and the battle culture more open and accessible to artists of all kinds and to widen the interchange.

ASL: What do you need to win a battle?

NT: Seen quite objectively, the ability to dance, a good understanding of music and a certain kind of charisma. Exciting and innovative ‘moves’ geared to the music are also an advantage. Every category and each urban style has its own rules and patterns of movement. But people also talk a lot about ‘politics’ on the battle scene. This means that someone has the advantage of certain ‘connections’. If you know one of the members of the jury well, for example, or the crew you dance in is well respected. So sometimes people who are very strong dancers but haven’t stood out previously or don’t belong to a crew are overlooked.

AS: How important is music in battle culture?

NT: Very. Music is the dancers’ matrix. They draw their inspiration from it and embody what they hear. Dancers often study a beat from beginning to end and learn it almost by heart, so that they can react to every element in the music. The lyrics are often also a source of inspiration.



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AS: Are gender roles important on Berlin's urban dance scene?

NT: In general I would say so. In Germany the hip-hop scene is dominated by men and the 'male' way of dancing. This includes gestures and movements that men are often seen doing. Most of the jurors, organisers and winners are men. It's time to make more space.

AS: Are there many women in Berlin's urban dance scene?

The big challenge is to unite the scene's different parts and get something off the ground together.

NT: There are lots of young women and girls who are enthusiastic dancers. But they're often put off or timid, unfortunately – it's difficult for them to gain access. It's also my experience that behind closed doors, in dance schools, for example, there are more women than men in the courses. But male dancers are more represented in public.

AS: What challenges does Berlin's urban dance scene have to face up to?

NT: In recent years Berlin's urban dance scene has taken a huge leap. Lots of dancers have raised their voices and tried to collaborate. I think there's a need for more dialogue to find out what the dancers' concerns are. The idea of community has to be strengthened, and everyone should be included. The Reinickendorfers are just as much a part of the scene as the people who train in Neukölln. The big challenge is to unite the scene's different parts and get something off the ground together. We should move away from the idea of competition that now pervades the European urban dance culture. We should remind ourselves that the roots of urban dance lie in the social movements of marginalised minorities, that they grew from the need for solidarity and community. 🗣️

Translated from German by Michael Turnbull.

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Meet the Artist

URBAN FEMINISM | film

27.8., 20:00 | 3min | Online

→ Followed by Artist Talk