

Joana Tischkau / Jeremy Nedd / Sophie Yukiko / Malpaso Dance Company “TRAPICANA”

About “TRAPICANA”

András Siebold (Artistic Director – Internationales Sommerfestival Kampnagel) in conversation with Fernando Sáez (Malpaso Dance Company), Joana Tischkau, and Sophie Yukiko.

AS TRAPICANA came about as an intercontinental collaboration, one you developed with a special team constellation. How did that come about?

JT In 2024 I was invited to Cuba by the Goethe-Institut, which interested me initially for research reasons. Before that I had already been engaging with Afro-Cuban music and, for earlier works, with the German-Cuban schlager singer Roberto Blanco. Annesusanne Fackler, the director of the Goethe-Institut in Havana, introduced me there to the Malpaso Dance Company, and I then invited two dancers from the company to Germany to take part in my 2024 work “ICH NEHM DIR ALLES WEG – EIN SCHLAGERBALLET”.

AS That same year you also won the Tabori Prize.

JT Yes, which gave me some money for a second trip to Havana, where I traveled with the musician Frieder Blume and a title for a piece: “TRAPICANA”. I’d had that in mind since my first visit to the Tropicana revue, since with its 100 USD admission prices and an overstimulation of the senses, it’s also a kind of tourist trap. A fascinating place with waterfalls on stage and a huge light show – and an extreme contrast in a country where there’s a shortage of electricity or water.

AS The political uncertainty and the massive economic crisis in Cuba have been further intensified in recent months by the United States.

FS We discussed whether we should postpone the work. But for us it was clear: even if we have no electricity and don’t know whether we’ll even be able to fly next month – we keep working, because for that we need nothing but our bodies and the hope that things can also change.

AS Fernando, with the Malpaso Dance Company you lead an ensemble made up of technically highly skilled dancers who specialize in contemporary dance works. Joana works across dance, performance, and theater, often with themes from popular culture. What interested you about this collaboration?

FS For me, the starting point for any serious collaboration with choreographers is first a fascination with their work, no matter how different it is from our own practice so far. And once you find a common ground, a shared language for understanding one another, you can set out on a shared journey that can be especially valuable for the dancers. The journey that matters most to me is the one to ourselves, to our essence – and here that worked very well through the theme of the Tropicana.

AS Joana's journey then took a somewhat different path due to her pregnancy with twins, which led you to expand the artistic team to include the choreographer Jeremy Nedd and a performance artist: you, Sophie.

SY Joana and I have known each other for more than 20 years, and I worked with her as a performer in Zurich and on "SCHLAGERBALLET". When the question arose of how we could make artistic creation sustainable, accessible, and diverse, and also make motherhood possible within artistic work, we developed a system like an exquisite corpse drawing, where one person continues another's image on a sheet of paper. Jeremy was available and continued rehearsing Joana's material in Cuba; afterward I took over the rehearsals in Germany. And now Joana, the twins, and all of us are in Hamburg to finish the work together.

AS Let's talk about the word 'trap' in the title. "TRAPICANA" is also a work about the trap of the ambivalent Cuba cliché. A place like the Tropicana holds, on one hand, the status of a national cultural monument, while on the other hand fueling exoticism. Just as the songs of the Buena Vista Social Club underscore every Cuba documentary while simultaneously being part of Cuban music history. Their earworm cover of "Chan Chan" by Compay Segundo from the '80s also appears as a ghost song in your trap music soundtrack.

JT There is perhaps a common fate that people in the diaspora share: because of colonialism and the history of racism, there is always a preconceived notion of who you are, what you are, what your own culture looks like, how you behave, and how you present yourself. But as soon as you perhaps also identify with the stereotype – because it isn't always negative – you're sitting in that trap, right? That applies to a show like Tropicana too, or to a song like "Chan Chan." It becomes a trap because people expect to hear it. But maybe you like it anyway.

AS With trap you're using a musical form with deep basses and fast hi-hats that emerged as a hip-hop subgenre in the southern United States, whose name originally referred to drug scenes that are hard to escape, like a trap. How did that come about?

JT For me it's always helpful if there's something concrete at the start of a work. We had that with the term 'trap.' At first glance, the piece might have nothing to do with the American trap music scene. But this music has a cyclical rhythm that draws you in, and besides, the source of trap is African drum music, which also underlies much of Cuban music.

SY For me there's another connection, one that lies in the dynamics people are exposed to who are associated with trap culture in the US or with Cuban culture: they're subject to prejudice and have to answer questions about their identity. If you think, for example, specifically of female trap artists who present themselves in an extremely sexualized way, questions arise: Is that self-empowerment? A deliberate decision to capitalize on that image? Where does it come from? Am I presenting myself as I am, of my own free will? Or am I serving a fantasy that others have imposed on us? That's a threat that different diaspora cultures are exposed to, Black people in the US just as much as Afro-Cubans.

JT The question is always: is this a trap, or does a person have agency in it? We talked a lot about that with Fernando and the dancers during rehearsals. I couldn't teach this company anything technical, since they're trained in so many dance styles, including classical. I could only try to spark their interest, maybe to develop choreography themselves, or bring in their own material for me to work with. Jeremy Nedd, who has classical dance training as well, could then structure that, and Sophie finally worked out the pop-culture references.

FS That's what I meant by the journey to our own sources. That connection from the Tropicana dances you see in the piece to very personal dance identities.

JT The dancers repeatedly made very clear that they have great respect for the history and the work of the Tropicana.

SY During rehearsals, both the dancers and we became aware of how much work goes into these revues; what it means to execute specific movements, to smile and perform in a particular way. That requires great skill, a lot of strength and endurance. And then you think: wow, if I had to do that every night.

AS Currently the Tropicana is closed as a result of the catastrophic global political situation. For the first time in its history, the show isn't running.

FS Yes, because at the moment there's no tourism in Cuba. That may not directly affect the audience here at first. But it's the backdrop against which "TRAPICANA" is now being shown, one we can't ignore. The reality, which keeps changing unpredictably, gives the piece an additional dimension.