

Dancing with the Ancestors: EXÓTICA by Amanda Piña/nadaproductions

Written by Giulia Casalini.

Text elaborated from experiencing the show in front and behind the scenes during the premiere days, on 1 and 2 June 2023, at Kunstenfestivaldesarts (Brussels).

A melody of chanting colourful birds and the dripping of fresh water follows my steps as I cross the foyer of Brussels' Théâtre Royal des Galeries. The sound of the tropical rainforest helps me visualising its dark shining green leaves, waterfalls, climbing plants and strange insects. But I am in Belgium, in an 18th-century theatre that, with its Italian-style architecture and red velvets, reminds me of many other theatres across Europe and its colonised world. With the forest's humid sounds resonating on my skin, I walk to the second floor, where I find a lateral seat on the balcony (the best seats being reserved for the patrons and VIP guests). *L'union fait la force – unity makes strength* – says the heraldic emblem of a lion above the stage, and I ask myself: who is this union for? I get lost in the tangential thought of the aggressive power that such a small European country exercised towards faraway lands, its dark history of brutalities, extraction and slavery.



Amanda Piña smearing copal in the theatre © Tammo Walter.

As I drift towards central Africa, the smell of copal brings me back to my soft seat. I recognise this incense from other performances by Amanda Piña: copal is a tree resin burnt in Mesoamerica for ceremonial purposes. Two incense bearers are standing at the sides of the theatre, using a feather to smudge the entire space in the aromatic smoke. There are not many people of colour besides them in the whole theatre. Meanwhile, other performers approach the altars prepared at the sides of the stage: among votive fruits and colourful flowers stand several black and white photographs of ancestors, enclosed in gilded frames. The artists bow and kiss them; then they pour Mezcal into small glasses that they offer to the altar before drinking its intoxicating liquor to the drop. I could say that the show has already started, but this is more like the start of a ceremony. Tonight, the theatre is our temple, holding the space for our individual and communal healing. What did we come to heal?

Throughout her extensive dance practice, Amanda Piña has been learning from (and working with) various indigenous populations, integrating their dance, music and rituals into her performance repertoire. Born and raised in Santiago de Chile from a Chilean-Mexican family, the artist has been very close to the worldview and struggles of Abya Yala's indigenous populations, and her environmental activism testifies to the anti-extractivist decolonial practice embedded in her work.¹ When collaborating with marginalised, non-white or indigenous communities for her performances, the artist has been mindful of the care work required to communicate their contribution across different publics.² For instance, when possible, the performances are complemented with a parallel programme of conversations, exchanges or texts that make more tangible the struggle and lives of these populations and their relation to the presented work.³ Yet, how can the mainly white European audience attending these shows not fall into the same lens of exoticisation that their predecessors used towards the non-Western 'exotic' dancers?

Amanda comes up on stage to give her public some explanations about what we are about to see. She is pre-emptively protecting the dancing ancestors that will be summoned in tonight's piece from being reified, once again, into a representation that serves whiteness – the unmarked subject – to construct its own image. Exotism, she would say in the show's Q&A, 'it's in the eye of the one who watches... [it is a] fascination with the other, which is

¹ Abya Yala is the name given to America by its original inhabitants. It is more and more used in the contemporary anti-colonial struggle as a tool for self-determination. See: Carlos Walter Porto-Gonçalves (2011) *Abya Yala, el descubrimiento de América*, in Norma Giarracca (ed.) *Bicentenarios (otros), trasiciones y resistencias*. Buenos Aires: Una Ventana, pp. 39-46.

² I can speak of the care work Amanda employs in her relations from my direct experience of having lived with her and Mara'akame Katira (a Wixárika healer and shaman) during the preparation and performances for *The School of Mountains and Water* (24-26 June 2022, Tanz Quartier Wien, Vienna).

³ For example, for both *The School of the Jaguar* and *The School of Mountains and Water* the artist has devised various types of engagement through texts, interviews, public discussions or publications.

[really] about the construction of the self as white.⁴ Even if European colonisation is officially over, the persistence of coloniality is still a form of dominion that has globally imposed certain values as culturally superior.⁵ The theatre has, in one way, provided the avenue for self-sustenance, expression and resistance for the migrant, racialised, queer and gender non-conforming subjects whilst simultaneously framing them through primitivism, sensual orientalism or, more generally, through processes of othering.⁶ Is the theatre itself being summoned for healing through this ceremony?

We are asked to find a small object and hold it in our hands: our task is to recall an ancestor whose pain has been transmitted to us and host their presence in our bodies. My father's mother comes potently to my inner vision: I only saw a black and white photo of her (the one at her burial place), but I know she was a farmer who never had a holiday in her life, with a passion for cats and dance. I get emotional knowing that she can see this show with me tonight (although I might have to explain a few things afterwards). Invoked on the stage of *Exótica*, and channelled through the bodies of the dancers, are also Clemencia Piña 'La Sarabia' (1894–1970), Nyota Inyoka (1896–1971), François 'Féral' Benga (1906–1957) and Leila Bederkhan (1903–1986).⁷ La Sarabia, Amanda reveals to us, was her father's great-aunt, who left Mexico to study dance in Paris, and who became so famous that she even performed for the last Russian Tzar. Yet, she died in poverty and was buried in a common grave in Marseilles.⁸ I would immediately recognise her face when – at the end of the show – I walked near the altar to have a closer look at the portraits: wearing a gipsy-style dress and a tambourine on her right hand, she looked like a lipstick femme version of Amanda Piña, posing before a dance.

The stage performance starts with a beam of light reflected through a half-moon headpiece positioned on the head of Venuri Perera as a cross-legged avatar. The flute music and many other sounds during the performance are played live by the dancers, out of the audience's sight.⁹ With this wind instrument, we are transported into the world of Nyota Inyoka and her

⁴ Amanda Piña (2023) Interviewed by Dries Douibi, 2 June.

⁵ Aníbal Quijano (2007) Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality, *Cultural Studies*, 21(2-3), pp. 168-178.

⁶ I use the word orientalism as 'a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (Edward Said (2003 [1978]) *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, p. 3). Often connected to the cultures of sub-Saharan Africa and its diaspora, the 'primitive' has been framed as 'regressive and atavistic: the untutored subject of non-history whose customs and traditions have not been caught up in the idea of Enlightenment and progress, and later, modernity.' See: Carole Sweeney (2004) *From fetish to subject: race, modernism, and primitivism, 1919-1935*. Westport, London: Praeger, p.13.

⁷ The living dancers participating in this piece are: Ángela Muñoz Martínez, André Bared Kabangu Bakambay, Venuri Perera, iSaAc Espinoza Hidrobo and Amanda Piña.

⁸ Amanda Piña (2023) Personal communication with Giulia Casalini, 1 June.

⁹ Watching the show from the backstage the day after would reveal to me all the artifice and effort needed to orchestrate this show. In this specific scene, for example, I would help Amanda changing her clothes and

dances, inspired by the visual representation and imagining of Hindu gods and goddesses Vishnu, Parvati and Shiva. Born from a mixed marriage in Paris (from French and Nord African or Asian parents), Nyota worked in cabarets and colonial exhibitions between France and the US. Her legacy has been resurfaced by *Exótica's* dramaturg – dance studies scholar Nicole Haitzinger – who first saw Nyota Inyoka being mentioned in a book André Levinson, a critic of her time.¹⁰ Nyota was profoundly attracted by Indian dances, and the name of the company she formed – Ballet Hindou – directly referenced her dedication.



Venuri Perera as Nyota Inyoka © Tammo Walter.

Venuri's interpretation of Nyota's Nagi – the serpent goddess – closes the first sequence performed on the stage of *Exótica*. She then steps towards the right side of the stage and opens up a letter dedicated to the ancestor she has just channelled. The South Asian dancer compares the way they have responded, as racialised dancing subjects, to their audience's stereotyping projections: 'My initial response to the Western gaze was a refusal to dance, to embrace opacity as a tool of freedom, in an attempt not to be positioned to represent my country, or to be reduced to an exotic other...' Nyota, instead, embraced cultures that she did not know by birth. Venuri dissects the problem of cultural appropriation in the closing of her letter, where she elaborates on the potential universality and impurity of any dance,

placing her Parvati crown immediately before she would jump behind the left wing to play the flute. The costumes have been created and sourced by Federico Protto.

¹⁰ Sandra Chatterjee, Franz Anton Cramer and Nicole Haitzinger (2022) Remembering Nyota Inyoka: Queering Narratives of Dance, Archive, and Biography. *Dance Research Journal*, 54(2), pp. 11-32.

rather than having some of them being 'delegated to the narrow representation of a single culture'.¹¹

Bared enters as François Benga: he is wearing a feathered black underwear, imitating, with statuesque poses, some of the exotic dancer's most known photographs. The 'feral' – as his self-given nickname performatively anticipates – is firmly and sophisticatedly holding a machete. Although each performer might be more strongly connected to a specific ancestor (because of race, gender dissidence or migration background), in *Exótica*, all of the latter can be revived by any of the former. In this passage, for example, the expectation of what a specifically gendered and racialised body can do is dismantled by the swift change of performers reproducing Féral's poses: the Black African body of Bared makes way for Ángela, whose light skin and feminine European features would probably make her the furthest candidate to impersonate another African dancer. Instead – as I would notice when watching the show backstage the day after the premiere – her fierceness would make my body shiver: for a moment, I thought I could see Féral himself, manifested through a sparkle in her eyes. At the same time, Amanda hands me a shot of intoxicating Mezcal and tells me – nodding in her direction: 'Féral is here.'

In *Exótica*, the strategy of performing identity comes from a place of fluidity, multiplicity and transformation rather than identitarian fixity. This transbordering transfeminist approach is not only part of Amanda Piña's artmaking, but could also be attributed to the early XX-century exotic dancers who tried to escape the entrapments of their biological origins through dance.¹² François Benga, for instance, in 1923 left colonial Senegal, his family, and a wife he was forced to marry, to live the life he desired as a homosexual man in Paris. Disinherited by his father, he became an icon and a model for artists of the likes of Jean Cocteau and an acclaimed dancer alongside Josephine Baker. We are told by Bared, who reads an intimate letter dedicated to him, that a dance piece he authored was accused of being 'not African enough.' But what is 'African enough' anyways?¹³ Especially for a white colonial gaze that has historically disregarded (and divided with violent, arbitrary borders) the rich diversity of Africa – a continent with over fifty states in which hundreds of different languages, ethnic groups and traditions cohabit.

¹¹ Text excerpts from the performance, read by Venuri Perera.

¹² With transfeminism, I am specifically referring to the anti-identitarian, intersectional and transnational positions articulated in the Latin American and Southern European contexts since the early 90s. Here, transfeminism 'informed autonomous, anti-institutional, direct action politics not only on trans liberation, but also more broadly about gender-based violence, sex-work decriminalization, reproductive rights, homonationalism and migration, anti-austerity critiques of neoliberalism, gentrification, and assimilationist gay and lesbian politics.' See: Elia A.G. Arfini (2020) Transfeminism, *Lambda Nordica*, 25(1), pp. 160-165.

¹³ Text excerpts from the performance, read by André Bared Kabangu Bakambay and translated from the French by me.

The part of the show dedicated to Féral includes a 'dance of bananas,' where iSaAc makes a glorious appearance on stage, energetically twerking her behind covered in golden foil stripes and cocoon rattles,¹⁴ and a contemporary ndombolo Congolese dance, where all the performers come up on stage dancing in a circle to its syncopated rhythms. My queer-feminist anti-colonial gaze finds excitement at what I interpret as a radical reclamation of the stiffened theatre space through iSaAc-Féral's unapologetic sexiness and the whole group's joyful complicity. Healing – as Amanda clarified at the beginning of the show – is not a solitary process: it needs 'a collective endeavour that has to be sustained by our bodies and intentions.'¹⁵ Although most of *Exótica's* content derives from well-sought archival materials and texts that describe or showcase the exotic dancers' repertoire, the performance is not a clinical reproduction of the latter, but a ritualistic invocation of the dancing ancestors' presences through the bodies of those who are living.¹⁶ The resurfacing of their work, therefore, overcomes mimesis via a process of quasi-possession, where the exotic dancers are also reincarnated through contemporary homages, such as Bared's afro hip-hop or the cumbia-reggaeton songs that Amanda has specifically created for this show – thus channelling the spirit of Clemencia Piña, who was also a singer.

Amanda's ancestor makes her stage appearance via Ángela Muñoz, who quietly emerges from the theatre's tropical forest as a long-legged bird that swiftly metamorphoses into a flamenco dancer with castanets.¹⁷ There is no letter to read for La Sarabia because – as Amanda told me after the show – her presence is everywhere already. iSaAc then enters, reading her dedication to Leyla Bederkhan. The transfeminine Latina performer tells us about finding her ancestor in the exiled Kurdish-Jewish princess, and, in the process, the two figures merge romantically: '...you visited me giving me longer limbs and beautiful small breasts. We became an ancient princess... We fell in love with each other.'¹⁸ The power of this speculative encounter becomes increasingly political as Leyla is revealed to have helped queers and those seeking refuge during Nazism. The text ends with a powerful invocation: 'Through you, I am reminded to follow our heart, our Art, against our families, traditions, institutions, religions... to love women, to be lesbian, to be trans... to be the Other.'¹⁹ As I hear these words in a place that is so much charged with heteronormative rigidity, I scream internally for the excitement and dream of watching again the same show in a theatre overfilled with exclusively queer, trans, gender non-conforming, dissident bodies and

¹⁴ I read from the programme notes that this dance is called *La Folie du Jour: La Danse des Bananes* (1926), which Benga performed for Josephine Baker at the Folies Bergères.

¹⁵ Text excerpts from the performance, read by Amanda Piña.

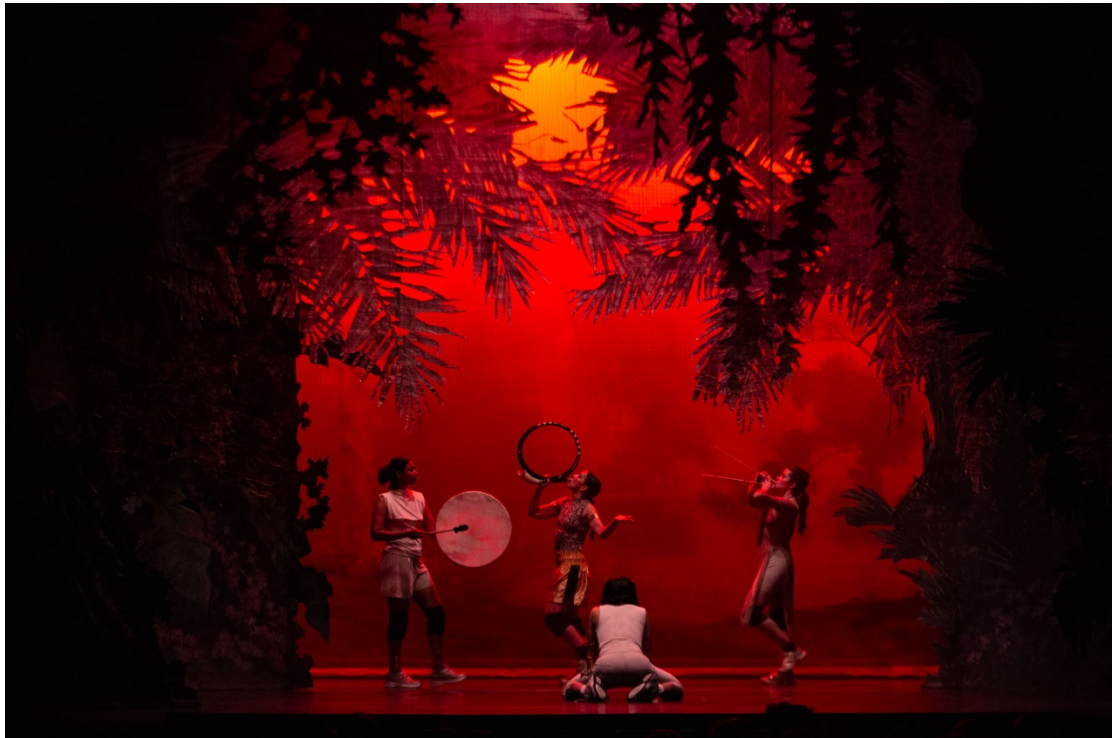
¹⁶ The programme notes of the show describe the various sources that have inspired the dances: photos, dance notations, films and family archives.

¹⁷ The stage set and scenography is inspired by the original Albert Dubosq's *Forêt Asiatique* (1921).

¹⁸ Text excerpts from the performance, read by iSaAc Espinoza Hidrobo.

¹⁹ Ibid.

people of colour. How different would the public reaction be at this point if this show was *just for us*?



iSaAc Espinoza Hidrobo as Leila Bederkhan, surrounded by the other dancers © Tammo Walter.

As I contemplate the potential of queer counter-publics, iSaAc has moved into a crouched position.²⁰ The lights have turned red, and the rest of the performers enter with a serpentine procession, playing percussions, flutes and other musical instruments. They surround the performer in a circle: everyone now is lying on the floor, moving sensually, like in ecstasy. The drone music partakes in this transformative ritual where Leila Bederkhan comes back to life via the performer's body, who recreates her snake dance wearing long, shining golden gloves.²¹ After her resurrection, the enchantment continues at the syncopated rhythm of hip-hop – the last dance of the show – and the performers become a configuration of snakes. As they slide closer to the public, they demonstrate how to become snakes through somatic movement: 'open and close your eyes – relax the back of your eyes... enter the snake – enter

²⁰ Michael Warner has said that queer counterpublics contribute to a worldmaking project: 'a first step in doing so is to recognize that queer culture constitutes itself in many ways other than through the official publics of opinion culture and the state or through the privatized forms normally associated with sexuality.' Michael Warner (2002) *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books, p. 199.

²¹ The original footage of the dance is available online: Kurdish Heritage (2020) *Rare Footage of Kurdish Princess and Ballerina Leyla Bedirxan (Leila Bederkhan) Dancing – 1920-1930*. 20 December. Available at: <https://youtu.be/pwXUcliKCL8> (Accessed: 14 June 2023).

the gaze...'²² For those who tried to enter the snake as I did, the experience was brief but dizzying – almost hallucinogenic. The perfect end (and potential continuation) for *Exótica's* ritual.



The dancers showing the pictures of the ancestors to the public at the end of the show © Tammo Walter.

I would like to end my reflections by analysing how some critics have responded to this show in a way that does not do justice to the complexity of its message, its thorough study and the unquantifiable affective labour that has gone into it.²³ As an anti-colonial, transfeminist healing ritual, *Exótica* cannot be fully understood without first attempting to enter its vision as a participant in its celebrations. In this case, critical distance will not help move beyond the imposed Western gaze and its claim of objectivity – which is exactly what this performance aims to dissect and dismantle. Together with many other queer-feminist performance studies writers and scholars, I have adopted ‘critical generosity’ as an essential tool for analysing work by rejecting the idea that criticism must happen ‘in opposition to’ – rather than ‘with’ – the object of study. In theatre studies, critical generosity ‘emphasizes thoughtful evaluation of a production’s elements while it simultaneously implies a willingness

²² Text excerpts from the performance, by Amanda Piña.

²³ I am referring, for instance, at the review published on et-cetera and pzazz: Eylül Fidan Akıncı (2023) *EXÓTICA – Amanda Piña*. Available at: <https://e-tcetera.be/exotica-amanda-pina/> (Accessed: 14 June 2023); Oonagh Duckworth (2023) *EXÓTICA – AMANDA PIÑA: Ritualistic admonishment*. Available at: <https://www.pzazz.theater/nl/recensies/toneel/exotica> (Accessed: 14 June 2023).

to be altered by its performance.²⁴ From a critically generous perspective, the willingness to be receptive to the performance's worldview is also a willingness to be contaminated by its transformative, affective potential – which most of the times refuses to manifest to the analytical brain. From an anti-colonial perspective, we must therefore try to move beyond the language and the tools that we have learnt throughout our mainly white, Anglo-Eurocentric, curricula and education; and approach, instead, knowledge coming from indigenous cultures and decolonial thinkers. 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,' Audre Lorde famously said.²⁵ With this call for critical disobedience, I also call for a generous engagement with transnational queer-feminist performance that dares to enter its spiritual, political and aesthetic manifestations in embodied ways. Only this way, I believe, can we understand its productions as practices of resistance for creating alternative modes of living and imagining on this planet and beyond.²⁶

Giulia Casalini's practice spans across curating, performance, writing and research. Her (eco)transfeminist and queer activism has the scope of building and bridging communities across the globe through the arts and (nature)cultures. Based in London, Giulia has been the co-founder of the non-profit arts organisation Arts Feminism Queer (aka CUNTemporary, 2012-2020). She now sits on the advisory board of Mimosa House gallery and she is a Technē-funded PhD candidate, researching queer-feminist performance art from transnational and anti-colonial perspectives.

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²⁴ Leah Lowe (2007) Toward "Critical Generosity": Developing Student Audiences. *Theatre Topics*, 17(2), pp. 141-151. David Román is the first writer to have used the term in the 90s, which has then been expanded upon by Jill Dolan.

²⁵ Audre Lorde (1984) *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, in Audre Lorde (2017) *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*. London: Silver Press, pp. 89-93.

²⁶ I would like to thank Nicole Haitzinger for checking this text.