

SUSAN JONES

Thoughts on Mats Ek and Metatheatre



Letizia Galloni as Carmen (Mats Ek) at the Opéra National de Paris, Palais Garnier, May 2022. Photo by Ann Ray. With kind permission from the Paris Opera.

IN MAY 2022, the Ballet de l'Opéra National de Paris presented an enticing triple bill of dance works by the eminent Swedish choreographer, Mats Ek. The programme opened with a revival of Ek's one-act *Carmen* (1992), and the whole evening was performed by dancers of the Paris company, attracting packed audiences to the Spring season at the Palais Garnier. For this programme, *Carmen* was followed by performances of two of Ek's more recent pieces, *Another Place* and *Boléro*, which Ek created for the Paris Opera Ballet in 2019, despite having announced his wish to retire from choreography four years earlier. *Another Place* explores the interactions of a couple through an enigmatic *pas de deux*, and *Boléro* is an abstract work inspired by Maurice

Ravel's popular composition.

By opening with *Carmen*, Ek initiated an evening's preoccupation with the devices and traditions of theatricality. The 1992 *Carmen* is a reinterpretation of the famous figure from Prosper Mérimée's 1845 novella and protagonist of Georges Bizet's opera (1875), whose popularity has lent itself to endless readings of the "Carmen myth" in music, film, and dance, including versions by Bronislava Nijinska, Roland Petit, Maurice Béjart, Cecil B. DeMille, Jean-Luc Godard, Antonio Gades and Carlos Saura, and Peter Brook. But rather than analysing this ballet in isolation, I will explore Ek's distinctive interpretation of a popular classic by considering issues beyond the ballet *Carmen* itself, showing the ways in which *Carmen's* place in this particular triple bill, as this programme is ordered (with *Carmen* first, followed by *Another Place*, then *Boléro*), illuminates Ek's ongoing self-consciousness about his own artistic practices in relation to the business of staging and theatricalism.

Speaking broadly, we can use the term metatheatricality to indicate Ek's sophisticated understanding of dance and theatre, although the term does not cover all strands of this discussion. According to conventional definitions, metatheatre describes a work that draws attention to aspects of its nature as drama or theatre, or to the circumstances of its performance. But in addition I consider Ek's alertness to the sources and histories lying behind his works, the ways in which he inserts his version of popular ballets into a tradition of many former interpretations (especially with *Carmen* and *Boléro*) as well as considering his sensitivity to staging a work in a specific location. This triple bill also reveals the meta-choreographic nature of Ek's dances as he gestures to others' choreographic material as well as referencing his own choreographic and theatrical forms across an entire evening's programme. In the case of *Carmen*, we also discover Ek's sensitivity to intertextuality in his dramatizing certain narratorial aspects of the *Carmen* story found in Mérimée's novella and in the scenario of Bizet's opera of that name. What transpires over the course of the triple bill is Ek's highly individualised metanarrative of the role of theatricalism in choreographic expression.

Ek's family background provided him with strong credentials for his profound understanding of theatre. Born in 1945 in Malmö, his mother, Birgit Cullberg, founded the Cullberg Ballet in the 1960s. (Ek became co-artistic director with her in 1978; his father, Anders Ek was

a professional actor with the Royal Dramatic Theatre.) Ek has spent his career challenging and transforming the possibilities of contemporary dance and modern ballet and is renowned for interrogating the dance classics. His reworking of *Giselle* in 1982 is set in a psychiatric ward, and other radical productions of nineteenth-century, full-length narrative ballets that followed, such as *Swan Lake* (1987) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1996), are among his most acclaimed. When these works were first performed, critics spoke of Ek's "updating" the ballet, not just in technique and style, but enlivening ballet through his unconventional transformation of plot, and the revelation of character and identity in a contemporary idiom, reflecting the preoccupations of a twentieth-century audience.

Several of these classics were performed over the years by the Paris Opera Ballet, and the hallmark of Ek's response to the conventions of popular ballet subjects were repeated in the "Spanish" favourites, *Carmen* and *Boléro*. But when these two pieces were revived in May 2022 in Paris, along with the strident, searching, and often thoughtful duet, *Another Place*, performed in the middle, the triple bill extended Ek's critique in distinctive new ways. The three ballets, a narrative piece, a *pas de deux*, and an abstract group dance are not on the surface related generically. But on reflection, the thread running through the triple bill, so ordered for this occasion demonstrates in a new light Ek's ongoing discourse with the situations and conventions of drama and dance and also draws attention to the popularization of these themes, their reinterpretation in different media, and their distinctiveness according to their place in dance history.

All three pieces feature well-known music from the classical canon. While Bizet's *Carmen* and Ravel's *Boléro* have more obvious links to balletic traditions and popular themes, *Another Place* is also set to a familiar Liszt piano piece, the Sonata in B minor, and Ek here considers the function and generic development of what constitutes a *pas de deux* as a mode of expression. He thus meditates on the meta-choreographic potential of one of ballet's most important conventions. Ek extends the idea of duet to contemplate a larger "cast," focusing also on the presence of the pianist, and gives equal dramatic importance to accompanying objects and furnishings—the piano, a table, and a red carpet. *Boléro*, by contrast, fizzles with the continuous energy and movement of groups of dancers in minimalist attire appearing and leaving the bare stage, but the setting undercuts former inter-

pretations of this piece as conventional spectacle with the presence of an enamel bathtub onstage that is being constantly and doggedly filled with buckets of water by an extraneous “stage-hand” character. Each ballet is distinct in theme and treatment, yet the programme as a whole unifies Ek’s focus on the specific situation of the performance of three ballets in one evening in a particular theatrical space. In this context, *Carmen* may be received, not so much as a single dance work, but as a performance that occupies a relational space within Ek’s more extensive discourse on theatrical construction.

First, we need to consider the references associated with Ek’s *Carmen*. The story is well-known and has solidified into almost mythological status. The outline of the narrative provided by the IMDb online catalogue of the 1915 film works well as a reminder of the most memorable points universalized by most versions of *Carmen*: “In order to help her smuggler kinsmen, a sultry gypsy seduces and corrupts an officer of the Civil Guard, turning him into a traitor and murderer.”¹ Of course this blurb is wildly Orientalist as well as reductive, and in any case, it is now impossible to talk about any version of the work (however critical of *Carmen*’s Orientalist past) without addressing theoretical perspectives that have shifted Western mindsets during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As José Colmeiro pointed out in 2002:

Contemporary critical readings of the *Carmen* myth, particularly in cultural studies, follow two contradictory tendencies. Those informed by feminist theory see her as an affirmation of free will, independence, and liberation; those informed by postcolonial theory seek to unmask the misogynist and racist undertones toward the other, which ultimately neutralize those emancipatory impulses. The ambiguous nature of the *Carmen* myth, as conceived by Mérimée and developed in Bizet’s opera, invites both readings. In fact, the key to its continual renewal and adaptability might be its fundamental ambivalence about issues crucial in the construction of our modern consciousness, an ambivalence which reveals cultural anxieties about gender, race, class, nation, language, and sexuality.²

Colmeiro hits on the attraction of the *Carmen* myth to future interpreters by identifying the ambivalence at the heart of the story’s expression of issues that continue to “construct our modern consciousness.” Already in 2002, he successfully extrapolated the creative balancing act which has been required to sustain the relevance of the

myth twenty years later. Ek, in many ways, gestures to the ambivalence identified here by Colmeiro, inviting and questioning the kind of theoretical response to his ballet which Colmeiro identifies, but in addition the Swedish choreographer cleverly situates his interpretation in a context that interrogates the very notion of the theatricality the myth produces. To some extent postcolonial and feminist responses are invited by Ek's version. But when Ek deliberately places his version of *Carmen* first in the triple bill, in front of the cooler tones and strenuously northern-European style of *Another Place*, and then offers *Boléro*, with its spectacularly comic, rather than merely spectacular climax, he specifically offers a wry reply to the Orientalist assessments that can so easily be associated with almost any interpretation of the "quasi-Spanish" theme of the first and third piece. By means of juxtaposition, we are invited rather to assess the theatrical constructions associated with all three ballets and perhaps question the ways in which forms of theatricalism contribute to our "modern consciousness" of specific theoretical perspectives.

The most fundamental way in which Ek expresses the ambivalence identified by Colmeiro is by harnessing his unconventional choreographic language to a conception of the myth's theatricalism. He nods to conventional assumptions about "Spanish" theatrical dance in moments of choral bravura (ones that perpetuate the myth of Orientalism), but also cuts through these passages with the integration of unballetic dance forms to suggest a critique of those assumptions. Ek's *Carmen* bears the hallmark of his combination of balletic grace with a contemporary lexicon, reflecting his distinctive integration of European and American histories of dance modernisms. He may have absorbed the traditions of Tanztheater through Kurt Jooss, but he also trained with the American pioneer choreographer of modern dance, Donya Feuer, who relocated to Sweden in 1963. In an e-mail exchange with Mark Franko, who knew, worked with, and wrote on Feuer and Paul Sanasardo,³ I discovered that Ek's movement reminds him of Donya Feuer's aesthetic: "In a strange way, because she was so unusual, he is also unusual. But because Feuer is largely unknown outside Sweden, no one knows this. And Feuer was influenced by Antony Tudor, who became very popular in Sweden in the 70s."⁴ In addition to these influences, Ek avoids straightforward storytelling throughout his choreography and incorporates an element of abstraction and symbolic form. The outcome of Ek's mixed choreographic mode is to

invite from his audience an equally mixed perspective on the “Carmen myth,” one that can no longer “read” the work simply through a feminist nor a postcolonial lens (themselves often at odds, as Colmeiro notes). By taking into account Ek’s manipulation of the material of theatrical dance, the choreographer also promotes an awareness of the historicity, the content, and the performance of the myth as it is reinterpreted over time.

Of course, Ek establishes his place in a series of notable extant interpretations of the Carmen story by gesturing, responding to, as well as interrogating its contexts, tropes, and histories of production. His version questions aspects of the novella, the opera, music, and films, triggering comparison with other famous one-act ballet versions such as those by Bronislava Nijinska, Roland Petit, and Maurice Béjart. As we shall see, Ek perhaps most strikingly engages (whether he acknowledges this or not) with elements of the political critique presented in the Mérimée novella, through his allusion to those excluded from society and its authoritarian structures. Like Mérimée, Ek also emphasizes the class and economic status of those displaced persons forced to work in the cigarette factory or pursue smuggling as a means of survival. A strident choreographic illustration of this critique appears in Carmen’s outrageous expression of frustration with her lot through her performance of extravagant extensions, violent jumps, disdainful poses, and her presentation of an utterly forthright and sexualized aspect. We sense throughout the ballet (following Mérimée) that Carmen’s lustful excess is beyond any moral judgement, and not so much an individual character trait, but instead a function of her lack of autonomy and economic independence. Yet it is important to bear in mind that, in spite of its revelation of class and poverty, Mérimée’s text is nevertheless saturated with romanticized perspectives on the Spanish “exotic.” As Colmeiro points out:

The novella encapsulates Mérimée’s ambivalence toward the figure of the other represented by the Gypsy and a mixture of attraction and fear toward “la vie bohémienne” or “gypsy life.” But ultimately the novella illustrates the disavowal of those bohemian ideals by Mérimée, an imperialist at heart who was appointed senator by Napoleon III during the Second Empire. (134)

Indeed, it is difficult to evaluate any interpretation of *Carmen* without acknowledging its embeddedness in its originally Orientalizing status. So we might question the degree to which it is possible for Ek to dis-

sociate his version from these overwhelmingly persistent associations.

To some extent, Ek does manage to achieve this separation. Strikingly, Ek's choice of score already finds the choreographer highlighting *his* critical intention to privilege a mood of anti-authoritarianism. By using composer Rodion Schedrin's reinterpretation of Bizet's *Carmen Suite* for his ballet, with its disjunctive, jazzy, and percussive effects, he pays homage to a 1967 Bolshoi version of the ballet that had itself suffered considerable opposition (it was initially banned by the Soviet authorities). Ek's move recalls the political gesture made by the creative team for the Bolshoi version, in which ballerina Maya Plisetskaya (who played Carmen) and her husband Schedrin defied the Bolshoi Theatre's promotion of socialist realist aesthetics and set about creating a radical *Carmen*: an almost abstract, experimental one-act ballet, set in the confines of the bullring and pared down to a minimalist cast with modernist, neoclassical choreography by the Cuban, Alberto Alonso. Given the circumstances, it was a major achievement that the production prevailed, and twenty-five years later Schedrin's score, with its episodic nature and discordant coloring, provided Ek's production with inspiration for the choreographer's late-twentieth-century questioning of political authority and interrogation of the female role. It is a credit to the commitment and power of Schedrin's score that it continues to work dramatically today.

Ek's choice of music already set the gestures of referentiality in motion. At the same time, Ek deconstructs many of the familiar interpretations that focus primarily on the self-destructive love affair and recovers aspects of the political and social critique embedded in Mérimée's novella that have over time been subsumed or eroded by more popularized and less politically astute interpretations of the Bizet opera. Ek's *Carmen* in fact *does* repeat the familiar tropes associated with the power of seduction, the romance of smuggling, the excess and tragedy of unfulfilled passion, the drama of the bullring, and a sense of fatal inevitability. But Ek's *Carmen* borrows from Mérimée the emphasis on the eponymous protagonist's independence and insistence on self-expression, which in the text of the novella is focused on the characterization of Carmen, and which Ek reveals in the ballet as dramatization of character choreographically—in the dance material given to her, in her carriage and posture, and in her choreographed interactions with others. Ek also reflects aspects of the novella that gestured to the rebellious political fervour of 1840s Europe, the notion of

individual free will set against militaristic authority. And he includes the questioning of traditional female roles—post-Mary Wollstonecraft and other proto-feminist writers—that are echoed to some extent in Mérimée’s text, by making clear that Carmen acts always in order to survive the accident of her birth into harsh and brutal circumstances. Ek extends Carmen’s single-mindedness further. In his ballet, her expression of lust is undiminished by any pretense at a pursuit of idealized romance, and her signature pose in his version is an uncompromising stance of indifference, with a cigarette drooping from her mouth, or of control, with the repeated trope of her drawing out from the male protagonists’ genital area long string-like strips of material, to suggest her leading the relationship and lack of subservience. Her lasciviousness is utterly unapologetic, and Ek foregrounds Carmen’s self-possession and search for autonomy, almost as if he too dismisses any attempt by history to romanticize and exoticize this story.

Carmen’s role in the opera has solidified over the years: she has become the seductress whose actions are somehow responsible for, and indeed lead to her own death. In this respect, Ek questions such assumptions and draws on something closer to the ambivalence and openness of the Mérimée text, in which the narratological focus falls on Don José’s account, but where an oblique empathy lies with the ferocity of Carmen’s desire for self-expression. Mérimée—whose text has been read, as in Colmeiro’s article, as an example of nineteenth-century Western European “invention” of an Orientalist version of Andalusian/*gitanos* culture—drew the story from his scholarly interests in travel and archeological study. He prompted in part the framing of the story as a quasi-anthropological exploration of the history and culture of displaced peoples who survived as low-paid factory workers or engaged their wits in smuggling enterprises in southern Spain, frequently moving into areas further north, such as Galicia. In the novella, a first-person, unnamed narrator meets the main protagonist, the soldier/smuggler Don José, on his travels and receives, on the eve of José’s execution for murder, the brigand’s confession of his encounter and relationship with the seductive Carmen—the girl of unclear “gypsy” origins, from the cigarette factory, who eventually betrays him and whom he murders in a crime of passion. The narrative strategy—not dissimilar to that of *Manon Lescaut* (1731), with its first-person narrative frame that transfers the story to the reported third-person voice—sets up those gaps between voices, between the said and the

unsaid, in a way that became familiar in the late nineteenth century as proto-modernist strategies of scepticism, e.g., tales like Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* (1898) or Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), where narrative unreliability places the story's onus of interpretation on the reader. Thus we are left without answers from the text as Carmen's quest for independence is unrealized but where the narrator's final empathy lies with her as much as with Don José.

Something of Mérimée's equivocation and unreliability survives in Ek's version of *Carmen*. But Ek cleverly translates into theatrical form the element of critique governing the written text, by framing the ballet with Don José's very last moment before execution, where the events leading to his death pass through his mind in often dream-like and non-linear flashes of memory. His ballet is not plot-driven, inhabited by psychological characterization, nor predominated by temporal linearity; instead, following the episodic nature of Schedrin's score, it introduces an often stylized, symbolic form to indicate, rather than reproduce mimetically, a conventional linear story. The set's references to the universality of the story appear in various guises. For example, a large metallic globe (which also looks like an exercise ball or a gigantic, enlarged metal bullet), on which Don José appears draped at the beginning, is placed downstage right. It might refer metaphorically to the world, or to the metaphorical "bullet" with which Carmen's initial gaze hit José, or the means of his death (in Ek's version he faces the firing squad; he is not garrotted as in Mérimée), or the chance brushes with fate as various characters interact with the object.

One of the most powerfully symbolic effects is embodied by the character "M" (potentially referring to Micaela from the opera or to Madre, a mother-figure), who appears throughout the piece, dressed as if in mourning, in a muted violet. She is a quasi-mythical, Fate-like commentator, a woman whose function in some ways incorporates the element of ambivalence of Mérimée's narrative. She goads or initiates others' actions, or interweaves danced responses, chorus-like, and without definitive gestures throughout the ballet, she imposes on it a dominant atmosphere of foreboding. This character is one of Ek's most original choreographic interventions; it holds the dynamism of the narrative in play between a state of precariousness, controlled inevitability, and violent outbursts of frenetic expression.

The set offers its symbolic suggestions too. A vibrantly colored backcloth and large, cartoon-like moveable cut-outs with polka dots

that represent playing cards (or the shape of the mantilla) suggest the smugglers' activities and the element of chance governing the plot, as well as its universal themes. The shifting mood of the piece is registered through a bright modernist palette of primary colours for the set, the women's costumes, and Escamillo's garish toreador outfit, set against the somber grey lighting of the opening scene and the darker tones of military uniforms.

Ek's unconventional choreographic style ensures that lyrical line is punctuated by violent interpolations of contraction and release of the upper body throughout. The importance of the choral work is paramount, overwhelmingly exuberant in the bravura of those moments of association with Andalusian or "Spanish" dance and in the severe, commanding expression of a chorus of military guards. The Schedrin score complements Ek's reinvention of the story: its jangling percussive elements matching the disjunctive elements of his choreographic lexicon as well as its lyrical passages. The dance veers between uses of choral exuberance and occasional lyricism, dancers' breathtaking leaps and plunging renversé turns, passages evoking balletic line juxtaposed with the shock effects of suddenly turned-in legs and flexed feet, executed with jagged, puppet-like arm movements, and purity of arabesque line combined with the muscular contraction and release of body and breath.

The dance vocabulary conveying the authoritarian nature of the military group is memorable for the soldier-chorus's signature pose, when all stand in line downstage front, all facing the wings, or in a diagonal facing the corner. They appear suddenly arrested mid-movement, each in over-extended fourth position, both feet in parallel, planted flat on the ground, weight distributed evenly but awkwardly straining to hold the position with one arm outstretched in a suggestion of salute or poised weapon. At times there is a sense that the military achieves command as if balanced on a tightrope, while at the same time their feet planted on the floor convey stolid immovability. Throughout the ballet there are hints of Roland Petit's bravura coupled with northern European restraint.

Carmen overwhelmingly presents an exuberant, fiercely aggressive as well as expressive character, the un-feminine postures in part borrowed from Mérimée's descriptions, with their inflection of sympathy for the powerful gypsy woman who must deceive men to achieve a living as well as attain her desires. Yet the interpolation of choreographed

passages of jerky, puppet-like movements interspersed with the puppet's sudden physical deflation, as Carmen's whole body "flops" into the arms of her partner, gestures to her inevitable manipulation by social forces beyond her control. One of the most powerful choreographic tropes is achieved with Carmen's physical presence in both solo and *pas de deux* work where she throws herself at the wall, her whole body audibly slapping her frustration on the immovable surface of the set, expressing her desire, lust, and the hopelessness of freedom thwarted. Such moments encapsulate an exasperation that is repeated as Don José later flings her in similar fashion against the backdrop. Echoing Expressionist traditions (perhaps most significantly from Rudolf von Laban and Kurt Jooss) that absorbed at different moments Heinrich von Kleist's 1810 essay on the Marionette Theatre, Ek uses the reference to mechanical marionette figures to express this conflict. The duet in which Carmen finally accepts Don José's advances and gives in momentarily to emotional attachment is the moment of collapse of the deflated puppet. Paradoxically, given Ek's championing of Carmen's independence, it is curious that emotional authenticity on stage—where the protagonist escapes the world of persistent theatrical show—is achieved most successfully during the representation of her brief capitulation to love for José.

Thus, as a mode of storytelling, Ek's method sometimes strains to modulate the emotional pitch in such a way as to express the perpetually conflicted personal and social/political drives that force Don José's narrative to its tragic conclusion. Yet this is at other times brilliantly achieved, most powerfully with the intervening manipulations and responses of the figure of Fate. The choreography given to "M" is extraordinary, the use of arabesque in parallel, flexed foot, and contraction and release through the whole body to facilitate movement between still poses expresses restrained authority. She sustains the prolepsis of the narrative and manipulates the action positioning people, gesturing to José, lit through a gap in the set, or moving seamlessly across the stage to indicate the inevitability of the action. Accompanied by Schedrin's score, the bells and jazzy interventions suggesting fragmentation and an edgy, nervous quality, "M" dictates the episodic framework that makes this *Carmen* a predominantly twentieth-century modernist version.

For all of his tinkering with plot and character, Ek's piece resonates with the assumptions that have developed around the scenic

and theatrical presentations of the tale: the cigarette factory, the gypsy community, the garrison, the card-playing in the smugglers' cave, the flamboyant choral effect of "Spanish" dance and its costuming. By contrast, the second piece, *Another Place*, reveals a modern couple's awkward, edgy intensity with an altogether different inflection from that captured in *Carmen* and Don José's violent yet passionate conflict, and this work seems to reflect a northern rather than southern European tone. In terms of self-referentiality, *Another Place* follows from Ek's 2008 *Place* for Ana Laguna and Mikhail Baryshnikov, which also featured an ordinary table as a third "character". In *Another Place*, however, the references also gesture subtly to Danish experiments in contemporary dance, the use of piano and mirror echoing Fleming Flindt's *The Lesson* (1963), while the inclusion of stage hands who move table and carpet about the stage throughout the ballet focuses the viewer on its deliberate revelation of the mechanisms of theatre, its exposure of the stage as a place of illusion.

The three main characters are the pianist/music, the man, the woman. At first the man initiates a simple table/piano metaphorization, joined by the woman, where the movement explores the idea of being both in the music and out of it, following its repetitions, phrases, and structural possibilities and sometimes defying its progressions. The choreographic style is sometimes expressivist, romantic, but often movements are foreshortened, leaving the equivalent of spaces in the sound palette of Liszt's expansive piece, defeating expectations of flow in the gesture and often cutting short the traditional embrace and high reach of the romantic *pas de deux*.

As with *Carmen*, we are invited to fall into our conventional expectations of story, but these are always defeated, challenged. And unexpected echoes take us surprisingly back to *Carmen*. The conventionally Orientalist signifiers of the *Carmen* work are illustrated to some extent by sets and costumes, e.g., by *Carmen*'s symbolic, voluminous "red dress," in which in Ek's version she parades and swirls exuberantly to attract her lovers. This may initially appear germane only to that ballet, but then the trope curiously resonates as well in the spare designs of *Another Place*, where the couple, dressed in everyday contemporary clothes, manoeuvre themselves beneath, inside, under, and around a red floor covering. Echoes of *Carmen*'s attitude to her partners, lurching between indifference, conflict, and lust more quirkily in *Another Place*, and with cooler tones, suggests strife throughout this

couple's entangled interactions, albeit in a mode of far greater control and restraint than displayed by the protagonists of *Carmen*. Yet as the woman wraps herself in the red carpet, the image triggers a fleeting visual memory of the Carmen costume and Carmen's manipulation of the material for seductive effect.

Curiously, I am reminded of a phrase by Tamara Follini I read in 1993, in her review of a short story by Marguerite Duras, in which Follini praises the deft and captivating skill of Duras's indication of the connectedness of people's lives across time and place through the sustained presence of objects: "The mysterious presences of other lives attain haunting persistence through sustained attention to a single image."⁵ In a distinctive, but somewhat related fashion, Ek's protagonists here manipulate the materiality of that image of red cloth in both these ballets to suggest the haunting continuity and haunting presences of his work.

Ek further draws attention to the continuity between pieces in the situation of theatre in the ending of *Another Place*, when he focuses on the relationship of rehearsal, performance, and the artificiality of stage-craft as the ballet proceeds seamlessly into *Boléro*. Towards the end of *Another Place*, the backcloth is taken out, revealing a studio with mirrors and the chandelier of the crush bar (the "outside" world reflecting the dancers' movements). During the ending of *Another Place*, the dancers for *Boléro* warm up in minimal outfits (resembling practice clothes) on stage, and as *Boléro*'s set (consisting of a large enamel bathtub on a bare un-dressed stage) is struck by stagehands in front of the audience, viewers are prompted to consider the self-consciousness about theatricality throughout the entire programme. With no formal division between *Another Place* and *Boléro* (the two pieces are only linked formally at the very end, when the performers take a curtain call together), we are now manipulated into thinking about "endings" and the boundaries between audience and performing space. *Boléro*, then, pushes the challenge to popular assumptions about dance spectacle and Orientalism as far as it will go. There is no trace of "Spanish" choreography here, in either costume or context, and choreographically, with its sense of *perpetuum mobile*, there is an energy of unstoppable dance matching the musical structure of increasing crescendo.

However, this piece does undercut well-established expectations in unusual ways. Snippets of story are hinted at in group and solo sections, characterization is suggested by expression of individual bore-

dom, frustration, exuberance, speed, and lightning athleticism, against the powerful group dynamic presented throughout. Notably, a woman tries to get offstage but is always thwarted by the onrush of a group from the wings who thrust out admonitory hand gestures from behind the proscenium arch. The figure of an elderly man, moving on and off stage to fill his bucket and throw water into the bathtub with explosive splashes, increases a sense of expectation. Finally, at the famous musical climax, he jumps into the bath.

So, the question remains, how do the last two pieces of the programme reflect on the way we interpret Ek's *Carmen* in this context? The metatheatricality of the triple bill as a whole is finally revealed as a meditation on the artificiality of the business of "staging." In *Carmen*, the action is framed with a more conventional focus on the proscenium arch separating audience and performance, but given that *Another Place* begins after the intermission with the houselights still up, and then the transition from *Another Place* to *Boléro* collapses the divisions between one piece and the next, the audience is finally made aware of the process of dance/theatre-making, and the shared location of theatre as an "empty" space (Peter Brook) generating both audience and performers' experience of dramatic time as a continuous "present." In this situation, the collapsing of "the fourth wall," the conflation of rehearsal and show where real life and theatre worlds meet, choreographic action and form take precedence. This is an environment in which bodies' relationships to individual, often quotidian or domestic objects—a dress, a table, a carpet, a bathtub—determine theatrical "mood," "place," "tone," "narrative" rather than the lavish scenario and mimetic gestures associated with traditional performances of ballet danced behind the picture frame of a proscenium arch, distanced from spectators. In Ek's world, time is a continuum of space, potential forms, situations . . . except that of course Ek gets his "splash" ending and restores us to the clock time of theatre's reflected "real" world.

Ek has developed a specifically metatheatrical turn in many previous works, but his focus was sharpened here by the order of the triple bill, *Carmen* presented first, followed by an interval, then *Another Place* leading into *Boléro* without interval or curtain call. Each piece individually reflects its own contexts but also belongs to the idea of a continuous "evening of theatre" in which time is suspended in relation to a continuous discourse between stage and audience. Thus, Ek's conceptualisation of each dance piece in this programme draws attention

to its status as belonging in some way to a broader metanarrative of the role of theatricalism in choreographic expression. Ek provides this reflective analysis principally in two ways, each piece comments on its own internal structures and histories and Ek frequently quotes from his own work through his use of specific choreographic phrases or dynamics across each piece. But a second focus triggers in the viewer a greater self-consciousness of the nature of the theatre space and of “performance time.” As principal initiator of the creative ideas and director overall of the aesthetic processes and collaborations of each piece, Ek’s role as choreographer emerges as something quite close to a sociologist of performance. He reveals a range of contexts and discursive practices that arise from attending to the spatial continuum of theatre as reflection of human experience, according to its potential to acknowledge *and* deconstruct its larger histories and conventions.

Notes:

¹ Entry for *Carmen*, 1915 film directed by Cecil B. De Mille, IMDb website https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0005060/?ref=ttpl_pl_tt. Last accessed January 2023.

² José F. Colmeiro, “Exoticism: ‘Carmen’ and the Construction of Oriental Spain,” *Comparative Literature* 54:2 (Spring, 2002): 128 (127–144).

³ Mark Franko, *Excursion for Miracles: Paul Sanasardo, Donya Feuer, and Studio for Dance, 1955-1964* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005).

⁴ Mark Franko, Email to Susan Jones, 01/22/23.

⁵ Tamara Follini, Review, “La Vie matérielle/idéale: *Dear Departed* by Marguerite Yourcenar; *Practicalities* by Marguerite Duras,” *The Cambridge Quarterly* 22:4 (1993): 390–400.

SUSAN JONES is Emeritus Professor of English Literature at St. Hilda’s College, University of Oxford. She has written widely on dance, including Literature, Modernism, and Dance for Oxford University Press.