

Choreoscope: Anatomy of a Festival

By Loránd János

Abstract

This essay offers an intimate look at the evolution of Choreoscope, the Barcelona Dance Film Festival since its birth in 2013 through the eyes of its founder, Loránd János. It explores how personal experiences, artistic passions, and societal challenges shaped the festival's identity over its first decade. The narrative weaves together János' journey in dance and film with the growth of Choreoscope, highlighting the festival's role in promoting screendance, fostering talent, and aiming to create positive social impact through art. This opening sets the stage for the personal narrative that follows, introducing the main themes of the essay and its autobiographical nature. It also hints at the broader context of the festival's development and its aspirations.

Choreoscope: Anatomy of a Festival

I cannot talk about Choreoscope without talking about my personal journey, as the two blur together.

Dance has always been a passion of mine. I was drawn like a moth to a flame in which I was reborn like Phoenix from the ashes. Although dance has always been present in my life, it never occurred to me as a child to follow it on a professional basis.

I grew up in a small town in Transylvania, Romania, and back then in the 1990s there were no possibilities of taking dance lessons... or at least not that I knew of. I was more than happy being the Tony Manero of every (improvised) dancefloor I could hit. Growing up in a communist country (actually the communist regime of Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania can be considered a dictatorship) I was exposed pretty young to cinema. Censorship was harsh, and most of the content we could watch on our small black and white TV or at the local cinema was Soviet produced (which in hindsight was quite a blessing). From time to time a blockbuster, such as *Star Wars*, made it to the movie theatre. But we also had clandestine film parties: a neighbor with a VHS player and another one with a Color TV (!!!) invited neighbors to Friday or Saturday evening marathons where clandestine VHS tapes of Western country films – basically Hollywood films – were played. The films, I remember, were dubbed (if you could call that dubbing) – spoken over by a single female voice, who was basically translating the dialogue. She was the voice of freedom. My family, and hence I as a child, were lucky enough to be invited to these film sessions, allowing me to step into the magical realm of movies. This is where I saw movies for the first time like *Dirty Dancing* and *Total Recall*.

Then came the revolution in 1989, and opening the borders allowed us to get easier access to Western culture. My first audio tape was Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. That was a life-changer. Then came our first color TV in my home in 1992, with a satellite dish and MTV. The first time I saw *Thriller*, the Michael Jackson film directed by John Landis, I was blown away. I felt an instant connection towards cinema. I knew this was the path I wanted to follow, and I surely did. Life, however, is not a straight path. I first ended up in Bucharest when I turned 18 studying directing at the Film Academy. I only did one year, year zero, as my pragmatism, my ego and inexperience made me decide that the people teaching there were not good enough for me to learn filmmaking, so I



quit. I do not regret past decisions I made in my life, as they cannot be changed. They serve a meaningful purpose, but I wonder what would have happened if I would have stayed and finished my studies there. Fun fact, my roommate in the Film Academy's student house went on to win the Berlinale with his feature film a few years ago – so it seems I was wrong regarding the teachers.

Then came the big change, me moving to Barcelona in 2001. And as I stepped into adulthood my dreams went on pause: when you have no papers, no money, you prioritize basic human needs. Survival has no place for dreams. I started working at the Hotel Paral·lel, the place that gave me stability in life, the place where I became an adult. I am to this day grateful to my two bosses, Àngel Font, the director of the hotel, and Angélica Revoredo, the housekeeping chief of staff, who took care of me as if they were my second father and mother.

Once I started reaching financial but also psychological stability (it was a hard and long process to understand and accept my cultural and sexual identity, while juggling being an immigrant and integrating into a different cultural context), the kindle of my filmmaking dreams started sparking again. I started experimenting with the cinematographic language through some poorly made but well-intentioned short films. But I also rediscovered as an adult my passion for dance, so I started taking dance lessons. I was just as bad at dancing as I was at making films, but I didn't care. I loved it.

A most crucial moment in my journey occurred when I got an injury. I needed surgical intervention and had to quit dancing. At the same time, I discovered Lloyd Newson's *The Cost of Living* and Wim Vandekeybus' *Blush* and slipped into the rabbit hole of viewing dance films. It was at that point in my life, turning 30, when I realized the urge to combine these two amazing art forms. It came organically. I started experimenting in creating short dance films.

New Avenues

My first attempt never made the final cut, its shooting turned out to be a horrible experience. It was the story of a Robinson Crusoe stranded on an island, where each day an empty bottle emitting a sound was washed to the shore. When putting all the bottles together that have arrived at the seashore, the different sounds combined into a beautiful melody, prompting the man to dance. Everything that could go wrong with the shoot, did. The location failed. The “abandoned” beach we were filming on was actually a pretty busy spot on the weekends. I never again ignored the importance of doing good location scouting. The camera lens was not cleaned properly, hence all the material had sand spots on it. I almost drowned trying to alert the boats passing, not get into our shot. The dancer got a horrible sunburn and never spoke to me again, nor did he venture into another film.

My second attempt was better, but the work was different: I was entrusted to edit pre-shot material that seemed not to make much sense into a film. It was fun, and the result was quite acceptable.

Then came my first truly finished short film. *Ego* brought another passion of mine to the creative process, horror films. It began as a collaboration with a fellow dance student of the dance academy where I was enrolled. Since then, Elisa del Pozo became a close

friend and a true inspiration in my life. The three years I spent at the dance academy doing some jazz, some ballet, and some contemporary were some of my happiest ones, but I always felt like an outsider. Most of the dancers never accepted me into their circle. Elisa was an exception. She was, and is, not only an amazing dancer, but an amazing and generous person. When finishing her studies, she decided to move back to Seville, her hometown, and founded a dance and music school for children with her husband, a pianist. Flashback to Elisa at the dance school, where one day she told me she would like to make a film with me. My answer in today's politically correct context might come as a shock, but the intention was always a creative one. I told her that she inspired in me so much kindness and goodness, that I wanted to challenge her by putting her in the most opposite place possible: to tie her to a chair, tortured and filled with blood, in order to push her creative boundaries. She laughed and accepted. We started working on *Ego* at a distance, she back in Seville, while I was still in Barcelona. A few months later the project came to life.

Ego is far from being a perfect film, but to this day I am very happy about how it all came together. The film is not about senselessly torturing another human being, but it is about facing your inner demons, your fears, traumas and scars, and trying to overcome them. The music was made by my then flat mate, Joaquín Escudero, a very talented musician, who also collaborated on my next short film, *Sueños* (Dreams), inspired by Japanese haiku and Kurosawa's *Dreams*. Both films had limited success at festivals, although *Sueños* did screen at a cinema in Barcelona.

Lynching, my next film, was a 12-minute twisted version of Snow White as an homage to David Lynch. Elisa was featured as the narcissistic princess with a truly amazing Lynchian soundtrack made by her father, Manuel Pozo. My intention was to screen it in a cinema setting as well, as I did with my previous short, but I felt that it was too short to justify renting a movie theatre. So, I thought to look for some other short dance films and put together an evening-length program. As I started doing my research it became quite obvious to me that there were so many amazing dance films out there, that showing them to the audience felt like an obligation. The program came together and in 2013, Choreoscope, my film festival, was born. The screening was a huge success and yet I was at a crossroads: should I carry on with this idea?

Íris Martín Perlata not only produced my short film, she also runs the Spanish Film Festival in Italy. One day I sat down with her to talk about the idea of transforming the Choreoscope evening into a festival, and I was explaining my plan, I could see her face changing, her eyes lit up. She was a very special partner who gave me the necessary push to take the idea and put it into practice.

Brigid Greene was the programming director of the Dance Films Association (DFA) in New York back in 2014. By then *Sueños* (Dreams) screened at the Dance on Camera festival and we established a cordial dialogue. I contacted her and explained the idea, asking for DFA's support. Brigid opened a world of endless possibilities for me and Choreoscope and I am eternally grateful for the positive impact she had on my professional goals. DFA went on to support Choreoscope at the beginning, and the festival started to develop. The funniest thing (I say funny to avoid calling it shocking) was, that while the international support for the festival has been crucial for its existence, at the beginning, Choreoscope was received in a pretty cold manner by the professional dance community in Barcelona. I'm not talking about the audience that flocked to the festival from the first moment. There were many moments during the

festival's trajectory when I had the feeling that Choreoscope was considered a menace, rather than a platform for showcasing, promoting talent, and knowledge. This has changed over the years.

What is amazing to see is that a huge percentage of the festival's audience are movie-goers, people who like good films and want to see or discover something new, something different, people who enjoy dance. Yet despite the fact that there is a huge dance community in Barcelona, many dancers do not attend the festival. It is sad, because one important objective of the festival is to provide knowledge and to inspire and show people what is being made choreographically in the world, providing content which they may have difficulty accessing otherwise.

Quantity and Quality

There is a paradigm shift happening due to the Covid-19 pandemic. When the lockdown occurred live performances were shut down too, and many dance artists shifted towards the audiovisual medium, even those who were against it. On one hand, this is a good thing, as this meant a significant increase of audiovisual dance productions, with many creators "making peace" with the audiovisual medium. This is something that could benefit us all and could mean a new "golden age" for screendance; however, the biggest problem is that many artists seem to think that they are inventing the wheel, and do not do their homework, in terms of their research of what is out there and what has been done before. The result has been an increase in the quantity of screendance productions, but not as much in quality. We see the same stories, the same filming mistakes, the same locations that have been used and done so many times before. What's lacking is the element of novelty, what an artist might consider as experimentation and doing something new or even revolutionary has in fact been done before. As a festival curator I tire of seeing works made in abandoned spaces (if you do something in an abandoned warehouse it needs to be better than the Sigur Ros/Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui *Valtari* dance/music video), or that focus only on capturing dance, but do not take advantage of the audiovisual language – unjustified camera shots/angles, beautiful but soulless/meaningless images – or stories where dance is not really integrated into the film. I always recommend filmmakers or dancers/choreographers who venture into screendance to do their research first.

The Covid-19 pandemic had an impact on Choreoscope as well, as it forced the festival to reinvent itself to a certain degree. As live events got cancelled, the festival was celebrated online. What at first seemed as a survival technique turned out to be quite positive, as we were able to reach a wider audience. Choreoscope went from targeting the Barcelona audience (a reach of around 3000 people) to target Spain and Andorra, reaching over 36,000 people in 2021. With the future of live cinema being still discussed, the streaming platforms are becoming more and more powerful, changing consumer habits. I couldn't be happier providing the platform and the opportunity for the creators to reach an even wider audience, and to give access to a wide audience to these amazing films. It does make me wonder about the purpose of the festival if people will not be attending live screenings as before in favor of home viewing. The collective experience, to meet and interact with people, the possibility to discuss and exchange ideas is in my opinion the essence of a festival. That exchange of positive energy, to be inspired, uplifted, is what a festival's goal should be. If the future is online, there is an important emotional, connective part of the festival that will be lost. And it would be a great shame.

Times are changing, and Choreoscope is changing too. I believe I can talk about two types of changes: an organic change, and one that resulted as a necessity to adapt to reality.

To talk about organic change, I need to compare the festival to a human being that is born and grows bigger each year. Choreoscope was born as a small project, with one screening the first year, then two screenings the second year, each year getting bigger and bigger, from a toddler to a child to an adolescent searching for its maturity and its sense of life. The ninth edition of the festival in 2021 had 13 live screenings (in 6 days) followed by 3 weeks of online festival. The reasons for this organic growth had to do with the festival's burgeoning identity, motivated by several things, such as programming not only short films, but also feature length films, an increase in the amount of films received in the open calls (including a palpable increase of Spanish and Catalan productions), the audience's interest in the festival, and the necessity to introduce special awards for films or personalities that made outstanding contributions in the screendance field.

With each year this organic growth required adaptability: the bigger it got the bigger shoes it needed to fill.

Adaptation and Growth

This process of adaptation however, came many times in conflict with reality. You want what's best for your child, but it gets what you can afford. Two main undeniable issues were budget and the team. Unfortunately, Choreoscope's budget is still very small. Government grants are small and cover only a part of the total. The regional Catalan Cultural Department remains today one of our key financial supporters, with representatives who come each year to the festival.

Besides government funding, there is little hope to get the private sector involved. Sponsorship is pretty much non-existent in Spain, except for mass-appeal projects. Basically, marketing departments in Spain want immediate results. Sponsors would rather pile up with other logos on the billboard of a popular festival, then support a singular project. Corporate brands are hypocritical. They use dance in their advertising, because they know it connects very well with the audience, but they rarely support dance, or dancers. There are of course a few exceptions. Patronage does not truly exist in Spain either. Here I must say Choreoscope does have a patron. The festival was able to thrive thanks to the generous and unconditional support of Cynthia Odier from Flux Laboratory/Fluxum Foundation, located in Geneva, Switzerland.

External factors such as budgetary limitations have not stopped the festival from evolving and getting bigger, but they definitely make the work a lot more tedious. The impact on the team is clear. The people administering the festival do it first of all out of love and illusion, since the annual budget cannot retain them throughout the year. Further, professional growth inside the project is limited, so workers move on to financially more stable positions, slowing and limiting the growth of the festival. One cannot pay the bills with love only. It is a sad thing to lose brilliant people, as they would definitely carry the festival to even higher grounds, but at the same time it is very rewarding to see that many of the people involved in the project during these past ten years have gone on to become amazing professionals in their selected fields.

All these external and internal factors also shaped the personality and identity of the festival. If at the beginning I felt an urgent need to showcase screendance in Barcelona, to connect the audience with amazing works and artists, there was a turning point when that felt like it wasn't enough.

The Narrative Element

One of my fondest memories growing up is my grandmother, my mother and my sisters reading me bedtime stories. I could never get enough of them. They opened a world of endless possibilities for me, they made me dare to dream. These three generations of women shaped my world view, made me become the person I am today, helped me see that the world is full of amazing stories worth living and sharing. Narrative had a huge impact on me, so for Choreoscope, narrative started becoming more and more relevant. As a curator, you say, "Okay, nicely shot, brilliantly danced, but what's your story? What are you trying to tell me, to communicate to the world?" The more abstract work became secondary. Screendance became a broad realm and term, and yet for me it became about telling stories through dance, through movement, by using the language of cinema. Stories, narrative, and dance are primordial elements in human evolution. In my view, these elements form part of our genetic structure, making us who we are. Everybody enjoys a good story. Stories can make us dream; stories can also crush us. Dance goes beyond words. It is a universal language that connects people by breaking the boundaries of spoken words. The combination of these two elements, story, dance with the audiovisual generates something unique, something spectacular. While abstract projects might still find a place in our programming, Choreoscope is about telling stories.

On a subconscious level I understand why the dance films *The Cost of Living* by Lloyd Newson and *Blush* by Wim Vandekeybus had such a huge impact on me: they incorporated a strong cinematic narrative. While the fascination towards dance films has always been there (I'm thinking about blockbusters such as *Billy Elliott*, *Dirty Dancing* or *Flashdance*, and a very special mention to Bob Fosse's films, that truly marked my childhood and forged my professional path), I discovered Newson's and Vandekeybus' films quite late, around the age of 27, when I was already working in the audiovisual field, but had still not related dance and film. I can honestly say that dance films marked me twice: in my childhood (unconsciously) and in my adulthood (consciously). The latter made me realize the beauty of bringing these two art forms together. It pushed me in the right way, to (first) start making dance films and a few years later to start the festival.

Past Informs Present

I believe it is important to acknowledge both the positive impact and the traumas that forged my path towards Choreoscope. Doing some introspective work during the Covid-19 lockdown I realized that two of my adult traumas are dance-related. We tend to give a lot of importance to our childhood traumas, while maybe we do not pay as much attention to those that occur during our adulthood. Yet here I was, working in the field of dance, loving and enjoying it, while some scary experiences from the past began to surface.

The first one occurred when I was around 22. I had recently moved to Barcelona all by myself, discovering my new life and freedom. Coming from a small Transylvanian city (Csíkszereda in Hungarian, Miercurea-Ciuc in Romanian), and growing up in a

conservative and homophobic community in the 90s, made my coming out as a gay person very difficult. Like so many young gay boys, I lacked support and understanding of what was going on with me. Belonging to a sexual minority has been even more difficult to accept, as at the same time I belonged to a cultural minority, the Hungarian minority in Romania. So, my cultural identity crisis added to my sexual identity crisis. I must state at this point, that being Hungarian is not something I'm currently proud of, due the current political situation with Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán's dictatorship masked as democracy. It has been quite difficult to accept myself for who I am, and I might say that it is still a work in progress. Moving from my small city to Bucharest, the capital of Romania, where I studied and lived from 1998 to 2001, was a first step towards my self-healing process, but moving to Barcelona was the larger step I needed. As the years went by, I learned to love and accept myself for who I am. I was lucky: I was loved, supported, and guided, and I had a strong personality to overcome obstacles. Many people in other parts of the world are not so lucky.

When I moved to Barcelona I did not know many people, I did not have any friends, but that was not an obstacle for me. I felt free, I was enjoying my life, my gay life. I loved music and I loved to dance, it was not an issue for me to go out by myself and have fun. I remember one night at the disco, where I gave my all (as I usually do) on the dance floor. Once again, I danced till the music stopped and the lights turned on. I was alone, but I was happy. I had fun. Then this random guy came toward me, planted himself right in front of me, scanned me from top to bottom and then said "yes, but no". Then he turned and walked away. His words cut deep. Not because of the so-called rejection, but because my safe space and my healing activity has been desecrated. Cut to a few years later, me dancing in Space Ibiza with my friends at an amazing party. There I was again giving my all, dancing like there was no tomorrow. When another random guy approached me to insult my way of dancing, my moves. It was not about how good or bad I was dancing, but about how "faggoty" I was. Fortunately, nowadays the concepts of masculinity and femininity are more fluid. Yet these two events are still very present in me, defined the way I am and how I act, and it definitely shaped the identity of Choreoscope. The festival wants to, needs to be a safe place for everybody to feel love, acceptance, community, positivity.

It takes a lot less energy and it is so much more rewarding to make people happy, than to focus on the negative. It's true, humans tend to project their frustrations on others, finding a perverse pleasure in seeing others suffer. Our differences make us unique and uniqueness makes us richer, yet many perceive difference as a threat. This is something I can absolutely not relate to and try to avoid at all costs. While the world seems to be falling apart, a cruel place lacking empathy and good will, it made me question the festival's purpose beyond showcasing quality films and good stories. On a personal level, as well as a festival director, I feel the obligation to contribute as much as I can to make this world a better place. I believe that a festival has a responsibility toward society. It needs to thrive to be a platform for change. It needs to generate debate, to encourage constructive criticism. It needs to connect the audience with different realities and different points of view to which they might not be accustomed. It needs to motivate, to inspire, to push forward.

By defining the identity of the festival, it became also important to become a place for artists to be able to promote their work, to connect them with the audience. This was my goal from the beginning, but throughout the years it became more imperative to boost the dance and audiovisual community in Spain. We are accustomed to seeing high

quality productions from the US, Canada, France, or the Netherlands, but the audiovisual production of dance in Spain was quite limited (with some truly notable exceptions: we must not forget the important global impact of director Carlos Saura's indelible work with his cycles of dance films, or *Timecode* directed by Juanjo Giménez, Palme d'Or winner in Cannes in 2016 for best short film). When Choreoscope started back in 2013 there were barely ten audiovisual dance productions made in Spain. By 2019, the number of Spanish screendance films had increased to the degree that we had to introduce a screening category for Spanish-Catalan films. For the 2022 open call we received more than 70 films, only from Spain. We noticed an increase not only in quantity, but also in quality.

Choreoscope, the Barcelona Dance Film Festival turns 12 in 2024. And after so many adventures and pitfalls, it is maturing. It might not be a perfect grown-up (but then again, who is?), but it has found its purpose and its voice. The festival can be an instrument of change. An event that wants to leave its mark, a positive impact in the world. In the spirit of the butterfly effect, it moves its wings to influence people.

Life is but one dance.

Post Data

At this point in the writing, I thought I ended this brief chapter regarding Choreoscope, the Barcelona Dance Film Festival. But Philip (Szporer), my friend and accomplice in this writing, kindly reminded me that I did not talk about the future. I find it quite curious that at no moment while writing this essay did I think about how the journey might continue. And this is not because I cannot envision a bright(er) future for the festival, filled with success, but rather because at this turning point, celebrating twelve years of existence, the question is rather, will it be continued?

I remember when Loikka, the Helsinki-based dance film festival, announced that its 10th edition would be the last one. I was quite shocked. Loikka was one of my main references as a festival (together with Cinedans Amsterdam, San Francisco Dance Film Festival and New York's Dance on Camera Festival). Its quality programming and impeccable organization served as a role model and an inspiration. I was lucky enough to visit the festival in its last year. Artistic director, Kati Kallio, an amazing person and a great colleague, explained to me that it was time to move on to different professional challenges. Today she directs incredible dance films. Not that I could not understand her, but I did struggle with that decision, that by ending the festival, a cultural landmark, something that was imperative not only for the Finnish society, but also for our screendance community, would cease to exist.

Not that I'm comparing Choreoscope with Loikka, but as I stated before, we do have a responsibility as a festival to try to have a positive impact on society through culture. And also, towards the artists to ensure a safe space for their creations. To encourage connections, debates and constructive criticism. But organizing a festival is a very difficult task, especially when you run on a tight budget. The flame of illusion of the first years becomes but a kindle and it makes you wonder if all the effort and energy you expend is worth it. Facing the everyday obstacles in organizing wears you out, it drains you.

So, regarding the future of the festival, I will say that there is a multiverse of possibilities, of what the future can bring. On one hand, I'm still dreaming to have enough strength, financial support and people power to be able to push the qualitative boundaries of the festival even further in order to achieve the "Cannes" excellence of dance film festivals. On another hand, I'd wish to achieve an independence from the festival, to step aside from it, leave it in other hands, making sure that it will be continued. Or just let the fire burn out, to become a memory in the history of screendance festivals, as it happened to many others. Choreoscope's motion started twelve years ago. Obeying the laws of physics, it will persist until it comes to a halt, due to external, or internal forces:

No dance lasts forever.

Final thoughts

Remembering the past and reflecting about the future was a fun, but also difficult process, as at times I had to face my inner saboteur, nourished by my mistakes and traumas. In those points of the story, acknowledging the help and support of the people that accompanied me and made me the person who I am today was very important to me. It gave me balance, made me focus on the positive side. It humbled me; it gave me strength. It still does. But line constraints and story development limited my capacity to talk about many of the people that inspired, guided and accompanied me in my personal and professional evolution. These lines are dedicated to them (in no particular order), with a huge gratitude from the bottom of my heart:

First and foremost, to the Goddess that gave me life, my mother, János Irén.

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