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Blurring of boundaries in *Homeostatic*: a dance film review

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Abstract

With the closures of theatres and performance venues around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has inadvertently led to the reinvention of dance and how it is presented to the audience. Dance film *is* the new dance. This is a review of the dance film *Homeostatic* (2021), which brings home a tale that is conceived during the prime of human confinement in recent history. Inspired by the quarantine and surveillance of bodies brought upon by states of emergency, the film tells a story of a man and a woman dancing together and apart, and together again, inside and outside, blurring the boundaries between what has now become private and what is no longer public until a new equilibrium is reached.

Keywords

homeostasis, body, COVID-19, dance film, equilibrium

Biography

Shanny Rann is an editor, dance scholar and Taijiquan artist. Shanny completed a Master of Arts in Dance Studies from York University and Erasmus Mundus Masters in Dance Knowledge, Practice, and Heritage (Choreomundus). Her previous research on ‘cham, a Tibetan Buddhist dance ritual, was conducted in the Himalayas with refugee monks and was published in *ausDance* and *Recherches en Danse*. In 2022, she founded and directed Choreo Dance Film Festival in Clermont-Ferrand, France. She is completing her PhD in Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University.

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Name of the performance reviewed:

Homeostatic (2021)

Name of Organisation / Individuals:

Choreographer/performers: Brian Jay de Lima Ambulo and Megha Shekhawat

Artistic Director/ photographer: Ilaria Sponda

Videographer/ editor: Duarte Laranjo

Sound director: Jacopo Stofler, Davide Tarragoni

Original Hindi Poem by Yashwant Shekhawat

Voice Artists: Kinjal Joshi (Hindi) and Brian Jay de Lima Ambulo (Filipino)

Translation by: Brian Jay de Lima Ambulo

Date and location of performance:

Premiered at the XI Lisbon Summer School for the Study of Culture, Portugal in July 2021

YouTube link: <https://youtu.be/dL9GfZypDVO>

Homeostatic (2021) is a collaborative dance film conceived during the prime of human confinement in recent history. With a running time of 4 minutes 34 seconds, it tells a story of a man and a woman dancing together and apart, and together again. The title of the film, *Homeostatic*, is the adjective of “homeostasis,” which combines the Greek words—*homoios* (similar) and *stasis* (standing still). As a biological term, homeostasis reflects a steady state of the internal environment where cells of the human body thrive. First coined by an American physiologist, Walter Bradford Cannon, in *The Wisdom of the Body* (1932), homeostasis has since evolved to represent the overall equilibrium of society, achieved through a delicate balance between

individualism and collectivism. These two seemingly opposing forces were brought to the forefront more than ever during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown years.

True to the creators’ claim of “a performative exploration and inquiry into restricted and suffocating bodies of a pervasive panopticon” (*Film synopsis, 2021*), Brian Jay de Lima Ambulo and Megha Shekhawat’s corporeal images take centre stage and are shown in close-up shots throughout the dance film. There are no other human bodies to be seen except the dancers’, moving together in isolation. A dark tunnel leads the audience to two silhouettes at the opening scene of the film. In the distant background, voices can be heard in foreign languages. The scene changes suddenly to inside a room leading to a balcony, then back to the tunnel. Between the alternating scenes, the dancers remain as shadows against the light, but there is always light at the end of the tunnel.

Next, they are seen dancing in a deserted house filled with graffiti. The brightness increases and their faces can finally be discerned. Their expressions are made clear with a jolting effect that follows when one is confronted with bad news. Shekhawat is worried; her eyebrows are furrowed, her eyes gaze into the far distance as her hands form what seem like an Alapadma mudra with outstretched fingers. Offering of a lotus flower does not however sit well with her troubled look, she is reaching out for a plausible explanation for what has befallen. Ambulo, hovering right behind her, has his eyes closed as he clasps his hands around his neck in a strangling gesture. Desperate, their hand gestures

pick up speed and intensity as the tension of the music continues to mount.

Just past the first minute into the film, there is gradually a release, and the music starts to change. The voices disappear. It seems as if the pervasive tension that has set the tone from the beginning might be coming to a resolution. The dancers lock elbows and step into an aramandi half-sitting position with their feet apart and knees bent. The mood of the film shifts quickly following their stepping into power. Their eyes, resolute, are wide open as if resurrected. Their faces are now fully lit in broad daylight. Their bodies start to sway from side to side as they synchronize their rhythm and pulses. They appear to be ready for what is to come. The dancers become oblivious to the change of sceneries and appear to be static against the alternating backgrounds. The throwing back of their necks happens outdoors and continues inside an apartment, their embrace extends from a deserted house to an alleyway. Ambulo does a somersault in the river and lands in a bamboo grove. The cinematography brilliantly captures the site-specific dances and threads them together in a narrative that blurs the boundaries between the private and public, the inside and outside. Lingering frowns and confident smiles alternate on the glowing faces of Ambulo and Shekawat. As the music composed by Italian duo Jacopo Stofler and Davide Tarragoni transports them into an elevated dimension, Shekawat stands on Ambulo's thighs, and together, they form a towering figure. They seem unstoppable now, perhaps even invincible.

The film builds up towards the climax with Ambulo sliding along the ground from one place to another and Shekhawat knocking her fists resolutely

against the invisible walls in the four directions. At four minutes sharp, the location changes abruptly from enclosed spaces to the open sea for the first time. The change of scenery is refreshing! It brings a burst of joy to see them out in the open without anything enclosing on them. Liberated, they spin round and round until Ambulo falls to the ground on his knees with his chest lifted high up towards the sky. Shekhawat stands tall behind him, indignant with her arms joined above her head. Whatever they were going through, they have emerged triumphantly! The dance film ends on a hopeful note that we too will survive the pandemic stronger, if we hold on to what moves us and not succumb to what has tied us down during the times of heightened surveillance.

For better or worse, the COVID-19 pandemic has redefined homeostasis for our society as we found ourselves constantly in situations having to negotiate and strike the optimal balance between our individual rights and what is best for the public good. As theatres closed and performance were cancelled due to the lockdown measures, streaming of dance performances and dance films came to replace live performances as the new norm. Apart from the two dancers who are completing their postgraduate degrees at the Catholic University of Portugal, Ilaria Sponda is the Italian artistic director and photographer, based in Portugal. Duarte Laranjo is the Portuguese videographer and editor, while Jacopo Stofler and Davide Tarragoni are the Italian music producers based in Dublin. The music draws inspiration from a reading of a Hindi Poem "Birth Pangs" by Yashwant Shekhawat and the voice artists are Kinjal Joshi in Hindi and Ambulo in Filipino. *Homeostatic* premiered during the first week of July

in 2021 at the Lisbon Summer School, and showed again at the Copenhagen Summer School in August that year. The dance film sets a classic example of how artists have creatively pivoted during a time of crisis and stands as a testament of the resilience of artists who reached out to one another beyond borders to bring transnational collaborations into manifestation.



Figure 1 Ambulo and Shekhawat Photo credit: Ilaria Sponda



Figure 2 Ambulo and Shekhawat Photo credit: Ilaria Sponda



Figure 3 Ambulo and Shekhawat Photo credit: Ilaria Sponda

References

Cannon, W. B. (1932). *The Wisdom of the Body*. New York: Norton.

Homeostatic (2021). Film synopsis available on <https://youtu.be/dL9GfZypDV0>