

Interview with Ieva Kuniskis

March 6, 2013



"Gone To Get Milk" studijoje. Image (c) www.juditakunis.com

Every year The Place organises a festival of short performances Resolution!. Among many projects of the acknowledged centre, the festival is the only one open for proposals. This particular festival became an important professional stepping stone for many contemporary choreographic celebrities such as Russel Maliphant, Mark Baldwin, Wayne McGregor, Charlotte Vincent, Jasmin Vardimon and Hofesh Shechter. Quite unexpectedly, in 2013 programme we find choreographer Ieva Kuniskis with her work "Gone to Get Milk". Several weeks after the premiere, Raminta Bumbulyte is catching up with the author in one artsy King's Cross café.

RB: Tell me about your background: who are you? Where did you come from? What do you do? How did you start dancing?

IK: I took up contemporary dance at the age of 16, back in Lithuania. After moving to the UK, I studied graphic design and photography; although I wasn't considering a career in dance I continued taking classes for my own pleasure. One evening walking home after a class I thought: "Nothing brings me more pleasure than those few hours per weeks spent in a studio!". I made up my mind in ten minutes. At the age of 23 I went to my first ballet class surrounded by supportive 8-year-olds repeating, "well done, miss!" and later entered Middlesex University in North London. To tell you the truth, when applying I didn't know what I'd want in the future. I was just happy that I'd have three years with dance being at the centre of my life.

RB: Who was your dance teacher in Lithuania?

IK: I danced with Jekaterina Deineko. I was interested in dance before that – my most important event of the year was the New Baltic Dance. I used to go there and watch with amazement

“Provincialnyje tancy”. Later on I discovered J.Deineko and completely fell in love with contemporary dance.

RB: Tell me more about the beginning of your professional career. How did you get into the Resolution!?

IK: First year after graduation I sent out hundreds of applications for projects and festivals. I probably wrote more than for my thesis! Once I was accepted for the Resolution!, everything really got moving. “Gone to Get Milk” was my research project at university. I felt that there’s so much more to work with; thus, I continued developing the ideas further. For the Resolution! I auditioned for new dancers and while working with new people the piece itself transformed and expanded. At present “Gone to Get Milk” is a 25-minute piece, but I feel that there’s more room, I feel it can become a full-length piece.

RB: What inspired “Gone to Get Milk”? Where did ideas come from? What is it about?

IK: I work a lot with emotions, but the initial idea can come from anywhere. The idea for this piece came up when visiting a Francis Bacon exhibition. While watching his works I was gripped so much by loneliness, self-isolation and hopelessness in them... I couldn’t move. Afterwards I “walked around with this feeling” until I identified myself with it, then went into the studio. I shifted everything into a domestic setting and explored the emotional state when you’re stuck, when you don’t see a way out. I think we all have experienced situations like that.

In the piece the action takes place among three dancers whose interrelationship is undefined. The audience have the freedom to create an individual narrative using their personal experience. Every spectator interprets the piece in their own way.

RB: Tell me about the creative process. How is the dance born?

IK: Initially I worked alone improvising and searching for physical expressions of that feeling. I’m very interested in how emotions are expressed in the body. For example, we talk about ‘butterflies in a tummy’ we get ‘goosebumps’, we ‘carry weight of the world on our shoulders’ – you can actually see all of that in people! Everything is felt with emotion and emotion manifests itself through the body.

It’s very important that dancers relate to the piece and understand the ideas behind the movement. Sometimes this means discarding my own material and accepting their decisions, their interpretations to gain the authenticity. It is a joint process. If I see them executing the movement superficially, it means they don’t ‘get’ what I am trying to convey. Then we sit together unpicking the meaning, or bin everything and start anew.

RB: What would you recommend for a beginning choreographer searching for a studio? How’s the search happening?

IK: There are lots of studios, but also lots of people looking for space. I sometimes call thirty studios a day and not find a place. The prices vary – £8 to £30 and more.

RB: An hour?

IK: Yes. But there are alternatives: for example, offering lessons or sitting in reception for a couple of hours in return for studio space. There's also South Bank Centre's so called open space where one can rehearse. In the summer – parks. In the worst case, you can move sofas out of the way in your living room.

RB: Did you do that?

IK: Yes. When creating the material and working alone, without the dancers, I push the furniture aside and work on ideas, hitting my arms and legs on the edges.

RB: How do you choose your dancers?

IK: I care more about dancer's individuality, emotiveness, physical expression than their technique. It is a lot more thrilling to see a unique character, a person, on stage than just a body in space. Dancers that I am currently working with (Charlie Cooper, Zoe Georgallis and Helen Aschauer) all stood out immediately at the audition for these qualities.

RB: Let's get back to the Resolution! which is a significant stepping stone. Did you get a feedback? Maybe more invitations? How did you benefit from this achievement apart from the emotional satisfaction?

IK: Resolution! is indeed very important for the beginning choreographers because it is a recognised platform and The Place is a prestigious theatre. I gained exposure and came away with some great reviews. Now when looking for further performance opportunities I have more footing - somebody appreciated and recognised my work, it's not just me saying it.

RB: Are you applying to the festivals in the UK, Europe or all around the world?

IK: I look everywhere. Europe has many great festivals. For example, I'd love to participate in the Impuls Tanz festival in Vienna.

RB: Would you like to take part in the New Baltic Dance?

IK: It would be amazing to show my piece in the place that inspired me.

RB: What greatest challenges are you facing as a dancer and choreographer? What's the most difficult in this job?

IK: The hardest thing is not to lose energy and not to give up. Dance is hard work with an antisocial schedule. The body is constantly covered in bruises. Sometimes there's a creative block that you struggle to get past. Although I didn't feel it much this time – my dancers were very inspiring. Their energy, support and faith in this project helps significantly to move on and discover the path. I'm very grateful for their support.

RB: What would you say are the pros and cons of the London dance scene?

IK: London is full of everything. As a dancer you can train in nearly any technique; you can constantly improve and develop. If there's a creative block – there are performances, workshops, exhibitions, events, people.

There are numerous dance events. Of course, there are the big centres like Sadler's Wells or The Place to see renowned international companies. But there are also the small, fringe theatres, art centres, arches under a bridge and abandoned factories – spaces where one discovers everything, where one can be surprised. There's a lot of alternative dance movement.

I had a performance in Bethnal Green Working Mens Club. It was a semi-pub, semi hell knows what – a wonderful place! The piece looked amazing in that space, when the dancers have to move through the people to shift from one part to another, when oranges scatter under the feet of the audience. All this is very close to me and pleases me.

RB: Maybe your piece is designed for non-traditional space and is perceived better than in professional theatre stage?

IK: I think that the audience has a completely different experience when watching in a non-traditional space, but I wouldn't refuse a theatre altogether.

RB: Tell me about your routine. How does a dancer, choreographer and a working person manage the workload? What inspires you? How do you manage to find time and energy for all the activities?

IK: My daily life is a complete chaos: one day here and elsewhere on another. Sometimes I work until 2am finishing the proposals, editing a video or preparing for a rehearsal. The next day I wake up at 7am and go to a photo-shoot, running to a rehearsal afterwards. My friends are used to me cancelling the meet-ups at the last minute because somebody got a cheap studio that I simply must use. When I get really tired, I think about getting a normal job with order and routine but then I panic at the thought of it and realise that everything is exactly the way it has to be.