Chapter 2: The Institutions of Ballett Frankfurt & The Forsythe Company

The rectangular building that formerly housed the activities of the Ballett Frankfurt lies within the central district of Frankfurt am Main, a short walk east of the main train station.[1] The location, Willy-Brandt-Platz, lies at the border between the commercial district and the more multicultural neighborhood around the railway station.[2] Within walking distance of the theater are banks, cafes and luxury stores, including Ballett Frankfurt sponsors such as Mercedes-Benz and the Steigenberger Hotels chain. Walking west, the smell of doner kebab wafts through the air and one finds dodgier venues, such as sex clubs in the red-light district. In the decades since William Forsythe assumed artistic directorship of the Ballett Frankfurt in 1984, this central area of the city has gentrified considerably. A sculpture—the large looming symbol of the Euro, glowing blue and yellow—stands opposite the entrance to the public theater, a reminder that Frankfurt am Main is Germany's banking capital, enmeshed in the flow of capital in the European Union.[3] The sculpture is visible to spectators at night drinking champagne in the theater foyer, glowing amidst the trees and city lights of Frankfurt's skyscrapers. The spectators socializing in the foyer are also illuminated to pedestrians outside the building, conveying the public function of the theater to the city, as a place of elegant aesthetic communing. Behind the building is the river Main, with museums and promenades lined with avenues of pollarded London Plane trees (*Platanus sp.*). Each morning, after the early commuter traffic of bankers, the dancers of the Ballett Frankfurt would arrive, entering by the designated artists' entrances tucked away at the sides of the building.

The theater complex at Willy-Brandt-Platz, which re-opened in 1951 after wartime damage had been repaired, is a material manifestation of Germany's commitment

1 In 2020, demolition of this theater was announced, with plans for rebuilding on site or elsewhere in discussion at the time of writing.

2 The plaza, called *Theaterplatz* until 1992, honors Willy Brandt, the former German chancellor and leader of the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

3 The sculpture by artist Ottmar Hörl was erected in 2001. https://www.ottmar-hoerl.de/de/projekte/2001/2001_1_Euro.php

Figure 11. The Opera House of the Städtische Bühnen Frankfurt am Main.

Photo © Barbara Aumüller.

to high culture in the performing arts. Called the *Städtische Bühnen Frankfurt am Main*—which can be translated as the municipal stages or theater of Frankfurt—the building solidly spans an entire block, with a modern glass façade above the ground floor, 120 meters long and nine meters high (see Fig. 11). The modern building gives a central presence and a contemporary inflection to the city's municipal companies creating opera, theater and (until 2004) ballet performances. Doors on the public side of this building open to a sidewalk and public tram line, conveniently linking the location to commuters. A chic restaurant with an international menu is situated on ground level.

The institution of the *Städtische Bühnen Frankfurt am Main*, which comes into focus in this chapter, provided contemporary infrastructure and a dwelling place for the artistic activity that produced Forsythe's choreographic works. The perspective that I weave in this chapter partly reconstructs my own gaze as I joined the Ballett Frankfurt for its final months of operation in 2004. Similar to an ethnographer's perspective—as an outsider coming into contact with a group of people—at that time I was foreign to the German municipal theater system, having trained in American ballet and (post)modern dance contexts.[4] My research of *Duo* offered me a framework to reflect further on

4 As a 24-year-old American dancer arriving in Frankfurt, I had accepted Forsythe's invitation to join Ballett Frankfurt as a guest dancer without having visited the company in Germany. It was my first professional contract. I arrived just as the Ballett Frankfurt was closing and became a founding member of The Forsythe Company. In American dance contexts, dance is funded predominantly by commercial means or through private or corporate philanthropy, as well as supported through academic departments in universities. For a more detailed account of differences in financial frameworks of ballet companies, see Wulff, *Ballet Across Borders*, pp. 48–54.

these institutions in which Forsythe chose to work: to critically examine the infrastructural and organizational aspects. In this chapter I present an institutional portrait, elaborated through my secondary research conducted between 2015 and 2018—incorporating fieldwork on location, literature review pertaining to Forsythe's institutional enmeshment, and interviews with the dancers and other members of the team.[5]

2.1 Shifting Institutions

One thousand and sixty-six people currently work for the *Städtische Bühnen Frankfurt am Main* (hereafter *Städtische Bühnen*), which has a long history of public performances that goes back to 1782.[6] The organization is funded primarily by the city of Frankfurt, while also receiving money from the state of Hesse in addition to scholarships and other sources of revenue.[7] The two primary, historic divisions of this organization are the Opera and the Theater. The Frankfurt Opera Ballet existed as a subsidiary of the Opera until 1989, when Forsythe assumed the role of General Director (*Intendant*) and the Ballet became an equal pillar.[8] After August 1996, Forsythe additionally directed the Theater am Turm (TAT) at the ancillary venue of the Bockenheimer Depot in Frankfurt.[9]

In 2004, due chiefly to the city's financial troubles, the Ballett Frankfurt was closed.[10] After arduous negotiations, Forsythe secured support for a new, smaller ensemble. The Forsythe Company moved operations to the Frankfurt Lab in the Gallus

5 Though I use the word institution in continuity with dance studies scholarship, including Siegmund's writing and more generally the recent volume by Hardt and Stern, I recognize that Forsythe's ensembles are more precisely *organizations* in a sociological sense. Organizations have been described as "special institutions that involve (a) criteria to establish their boundaries and to distinguish their members from nonmembers, (b) principles of sovereignty concerning who is in charge, and (c) chains of command delineating responsibilities within the organization." Hodgson, "What Are Institutions?," p. 18. Ballett Frankfurt and The Forsythe Company meet the criteria of organizations as they have a professional structure defining members and nonmembers, an artist director, and pathways for communication within the team. For further discussion of these distinctions, see Hardt and Stern, *Choreographie und Institution*; also Eldridge and Crombie, *A Sociology of Organizations*.

6 Statistics reflect figures from August 31, 2018, kindly provided by *Städtische Bühnen* employee Bruni Marx by email correspondence with the author, January 28, 2019. On the history of Ballett Frankfurt leading up to Forsythe's arrival, see Heil, *Frankfurter Ballett von 1945 bis 1985*.

7 In 2004, the *Städtische Bühnen* shifted from a public institution to a GmbH (*Gesellschaft mit beschränkter Haftung*) or company with limited liability, in which individual members are not held responsible for the company's debts.

8 Forsythe began his contract as *Intendant* in March 1989. In the literature, this date has been given as either 1989 or 1990. My source is email correspondence with Forsythe's administrative assistant, Alexandra Scott on March 23, 2019.

9 See Spier, "Choreographic Thinking and Amateur Bodies," p. 146.

10 Foreshadowing these troubles, see Midgette, "Forsythe in Frankfurt." The complex political, economic and aesthetic reasons underpinning these changes were a point of inquiry in my ethnographic investigation that I could not resolve from my more limited contact, predominantly with *Duo* dancers. The transition was a difficult moment of institutional conflict and change. My request for phone interviews with Forsythe's former business director, press director and legal advisor were politely declined. The dancers were also reluctant to discuss their memories. For these reasons, I

neighborhood of Frankfurt am Main in 2009—a building at the eastern side of the city, outside of the central hub and its luxury. The production structure of The Forsythe Company was a private-public partnership between the cities of Frankfurt/Dresden and the states of Hesse/Saxony.[11] Forsythe stepped down as Artistic Director a decade later, in 2015.

The changeover from Ballett Frankfurt to The Forsythe Company was a transformation in name, structure and funding, and, as I shall show further, in aesthetic. By adding his name to the ensemble's title and omitting the term "ballet," Forsythe helped frame his pursuits beyond ballet, according to his interest in new artistic directions—in the field of art, dance, research and dance education. This is consistent with his public declaration, made in an open letter in 2004. Forsythe stated:

> In the course of a process that has developed over several years, there has been a change in the perception of my field of work, which made me aware that my professional intentions do not match my current position as general director of a large municipal institution.[12]

The Forsythe Company enabled Forsythe to work more independently than before, and consequently to have stability to continue with his experimental processes. Works like *Duo*, which were performed by both Ballett Frankfurt and dancers of The Forsythe Company, provided continuity.

When Forsythe first arrived in Frankfurt to work as a guest choreographer in 1981, The Frankfurt Opera Ballet was a company with mixed repertoire, including classics such as *Giselle*, and new works such as *Sinfonie in D* by Jiří Kylián. Under the direction of Egon Mason from 1981 until 1984, the company performed increasingly diverse pieces: such as Glenn Tetley's *Pierot Lunaire*, Cranko's *Romeo and Juliet*, Mason's own choreography and two works by Forsythe: *Time Cycle* (1981) and *Love Songs* (1981). In 1983, Forsythe took the group on a radical turn, engaging in a nine-month process in which the dancers' own reflections upon the occupational cultures of ballet and other contemporary dance companies were made central and incorporated into the piece *Gänge*—a work commenced in the preceding year with the company Nederlands Dans Theater. Siegmund observes: "Forsythe emphasizes the dancers' competence to describe their own actions, to use verbal language to become aware of how and why they do what do." This is an initial step, Siegmund finds, toward "emancipation" of the dancers—to be more than simply tools manipulated by the choreographer.[13]

With his appointment, Forsythe changed the name of the Frankfurt Opera Ballet to the Ballett Frankfurt, asserting his independence from the Opera and announc-

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leave this thread open in recognition of an important aspect of this history that remains a gap for further study.

11 Though new to dance, in the field of music orchestra mergers have been chronic in Germany. According to one source between 1992 and 2014 over 20 percent of Germany's orchestras disappeared, i.e., 37 ensembles dissolved or merged, predominantly due to budget cuts. See Mertens, "A United Front Against Orchestral Mergers."

12 Translation by the author. See "William Forsythe gibt das Frankfurter Ballett auf."

13 Translation by the author. See Siegmund, "William Forsythe: Räume eröffnen, in denen das Denken sich ereignen kann," p. 15. On *Gänge*, see in particular ibid., pp. 13–16.

ing a change of aesthetic vision. Rather than a subsidiary role providing choreography for opera productions, as has often been the case in ballet history, over the course of Forsythe's two-decade tenure with the Ballett Frankfurt, the ensemble had an independent function and served Forsythe's exclusive artistic vision. In an interview with *Duo* dancer Francesca Harper, I enquired about the relation she felt to the structure of the *Städtische Bühnen*. She remarked: "We were original. We felt we were supported in being original, not being part of the opera and theater. […] When you came to see the Ballett Frankfurt, you did not know what to expect. That was our microcosm."[14]

Forsythe and the dancers understood themselves to be rebels—"mavericks" to borrow Howard Becker's terminology, who challenged the limits of conventional ballet performances. Yet the institutional apparatus that supported the production and distribution of their work was fundamental to their choices and success. Forsythe was not working from the margins of his field but, rather like an "integrated professional," he honed the "technical abilities, social skills, and conceptual apparatus necessary to make it easy to make art." Becker finds that mavericks reflect critically on their genre: They "have been part of the conventional art world of their time, place, and medium but found it unacceptably constraining. They propose innovations the art world refuses to accept as within the limits of what it ordinarily produces."[15] To rectify this, Forsythe gave copious interviews and invited guests to produce discourse about his ballets. This enabled his pieces to be recognized more as he saw them: namely, as attempts to evolve the "potential" of ballet.[16]

The shift from being an "appendage" of the Opera to an independently recognized division took time.[17] The adjustment was shaped by Forsythe's success coupled with the pressure he exerted to acquire security, status and power—plus an unexpected alignment of factors. On the night of November 11–12, 1987, the opera stage suffered an arson attack. This necessitated extensive renovation to the building, requiring years to complete. In response to the fire, Forsythe was offered a prestigious second theater in which to take residence: the Paris Théâtre du Châtelet. That same year, the contracts of the Opera director ended; direction shifted from Michael Gielen to Gary Bertini. The city councilor responsible for culture (*Kulturdezernent*), Hilmar Hoffmann, sprang into action, giving Forsythe and his ensemble a higher status at the *Städtische Bühnen* by granting him the title of *Intendant*, while also undertaking important architectural revisions to the building to provide proper rehearsal rooms. Strikingly, Forsythe was the first independent ballet director in Germany.[18]

The progressive history of the Frankfurt Opera was a critical precedent for Forsythe's avant-garde ballets. Yet its internal dynamics as a municipal organization were highly complex entwinements with city politics. Though the city of Frankfurt's economy had

14 Francesca Harper, phone interview with the author, September 22, 2018.

15 On the distinction between mavericks and integrated professionals and how they situate themselves in "art worlds" see Becker, *Art Worlds*, pp. 226–46; herein, citations on p. 229 and p. 233, respectively.

16 Driver et al., "A Conversation with William Forsythe," p. 86.

17 Translation by the author. Michael Gielen cited in Heil, *Frankfurter Ballett von 1945 bis 1985*, p. 7.

18 See Seigmund, "William Forsythe: Räume eröffnen, in denen das Denken sich ereignen kann," p. 21, p. 24.

boomed in the 1980s, the 90s brought difficulties triggered by German reunification. In the 1980s, Frankfurt had been quite competitive in making its artistic scene comparable to other major centers in Germany and abroad. However, Frankfurt was not the state capital of Hesse, and the budget trouble in the 90s rendered the arts precarious. Budgets for the arts were "frozen" in 1993 and then cuts began, bringing arts funding down from 12 percent to 8.5 percent of municipal spending.[19] *Duo*, created in 1996, thus emerged after the stability of twelve years of institutional support (rocky as this period was due to politics and the arson attack). By that time, Forsythe's choreographic methods and philosophy were well known to his close personnel. Still, institutional tensions continued and the financial stress only increased.

In public interviews, Forsythe was extremely frank about the hierarchy among divisions of the *Städtische Bühnen* and the mixed benefits he found in working within a city institution.[20] Of all the resources that the institution provided, Forsythe stressed his real dependency and gratitude for the support given to his dancers—in terms of full-time contracts and benefits. Forsythe commented: "At some point, you have got to go to the real resource, which is the dancer and the availability of the dancer. And [with Ballett Frankfurt] that's great."[21] Historically, the Opera was the largest and most prestigious division of the *Städtische Bühnen*, receiving the most funds and holding the most performances.[22] Yet the distribution of resources (money, stage-space, personnel, and so on) among subgroups could cause resentment. Noting these challenges, in 1990, Forsythe remarked:

> In Frankfurt the opera was directed by Adorno disciples, adherents of German Cultural Critique. It was a kind of radical opera, known as "director's theater," doing unusual productions as opposed to being a star-vehicle kind of opera house. Now, we have a new *Intendant* who is, let's say, more conservative, putting millions into the guest fees. A star walked in for one *Otello*, for several hundred thousand marks, and it was really mediocre. Meanwhile, I'm thinking I could have employed six dancers for two years![23]

Such comments are revealing, not only of the very different markets for opera and ballet but also of the institutional tensions inherent in sharing a building and budget together.

2.2 The "Givens"

As a goal- and interest-oriented company whose main public function was the production of ballet performances, the conditions of these performances—what Forsythe

19 See Midgette, "Forsythe in Frankfurt," p. 15.

20 Mike Figgis' documentary film captures these tensions poignantly. See Figgis, *Just Dancing Around*.

21 Forsythe in Driver et al., "A Conversation with William Forsythe," p. 88.

22 For example, in 1990 the Opera staged approximately 300 performances a year, compared to the Ballet's 60 performances. See ibid., pp. 88–89.

23 Forsythe in Driver et al., "A Conversation with William Forsythe," p. 89.

called the "limits" or "givens"—are important factors for understanding the organizational structure of Ballett Frankfurt and The Forsythe Company.[24] These infrastructural resources defined the production and distribution of Forsythe's choreographic works.[25]

In an interview in 1990 with Senta Driver and the editors of *Ballet Review*, Forsythe commented upon these factors. I quote at length:

> Frankfurt is like any theater—a matter of logistics. A German opera house is basically a huge administration supposedly at the service of an artistic body, whether it be an opera ensemble or a ballet company. And these great big organizations known as German opera houses have limits, like any other organization. They set up a certain number of givens, and you have to work within those. […] In Germany, once things are established, they stay that way. […] I've worked in Germany since '81. […] When I signed the contract, it was perfectly clear to me what I was getting into. It's not endless money. I have a budget of maybe $150,000 a year to do everything outside of paying my dancers' salaries. That is actually not a lot of money for a large ballet company. All my dancers' salaries are paid, and they have two kinds of pensions. […] There are three theaters in the Frankfurt opera house complex. Twelve hundred full-time employees. Stagehands, two orchestras, an acting ensemble, a ballet ensemble, an opera ensemble, electricians, metal workers, lighting people—everything. Given all that, people think, "Oh, Forsythe can just do anything, get anything he wants, because he's subsidized and it doesn't matter." But most of the money we receive comes from taxes. It's not someone's private money. We're indebted to the community. And what we're producing is what the community supports. We're not doing only what we'd like to. We can't do that. It's not just a matter of fulfilled desires.[26]

In this statement, Forsythe reveals that he feels bound by shared obligations. There are commitments and responsibility to his dancers and team, to the taxpayers funding his ensemble, and to the audience. In return for resources—money, space and personnel—the ensemble must create, perform and tour ballet productions. While the daily operation of the Ballett Frankfurt is closed to the public and thus flexible, their performative 'outcomes' are tallied and evaluated.

Perhaps in recognition of the financial support that the ensemble was given, in this interview Forsythe justifies the fact that he and the team ("we") are not free as artists. In this and other public statements, Forsythe stresses the extreme pressure of this labor—which at times brought him and the artists to the edge of existential breakdown. Anne Midgette elaborates on this in her review of the conditions of Ballett Frankfurt's working process, emphasizing the role of time:

> In the Municipal Theaters of Frankfurt, Bureau number 46 of the city government, the ballet only has a certain amount of rehearsal time. The ballet company is expected to produce a certain number of pieces; it has a certain number of dancers (all, technically

24 Ibid., p. 87.

25 Similarly, on the role of resources in shaping collective creativity, see Ugo Corte's fascinating study of BMX bike riders in North Caroline. See Corte, "A Refinement of Collaborative Circles Theory."

26 Driver et al., "A Conversation with William Forsythe," pp. 87–88.

> speaking, government officials). And this "whole situation," Forsythe says, "has determined how we've worked. Everything we've done there has been a survival tactic." The biggest issue it was necessary to "survive" was the lack of adequate rehearsal time.[27]

Collaboration with his dancers and developing strategies of constraining and performing improvisation were tactics to "survive" the demands of these production conditions—enabling Forsythe to construct complex works in startlingly brief periods of creation. The entire process had to add up: the right number of days creating the work, the correct number of shows and tours, and the appropriate number of audience members.

In his notion of an "art world" Becker considers the impact of the state and infrastructure, outlining how these establish conventions and constraints in which artists operate—prescribing artistic processes.[28] The numbers constituting the "givens" of Forsythe's ensembles are thus telling indicators of these organizational models: these are the budget figures, the number of full-time dancers and employees, the number of performances offered, the amount of new works produced, tickets sold and seats available per performance, and the degree to which the budget was used. While these numbers did fluctuate from year to year, Table 1 outlines these figures for the 2001–2002 season of Ballett Frankfurt and the 2006–2007 season of The Forsythe Company to enable comparison. These show that while The Forsythe Company had fewer laborers in the team, their output of performances was approximately the same—yet distributed across two cities (Frankfurt and Dresden). I view this development critically: as symptomatic of the pressure exerted upon artists to fulfill cultural policy, in ways requiring additional mobility—despite fewer financial resources.

27 Midgette, "Forsythe in Frankfurt," p. 17.

28 Becker, *Art Worlds*, pp. 165–91.

Table 1. The 'Givens' of Ballett Frankfurt versus The Forsythe Company

	Ballett Frankfurt	**The Forsythe Company**
	2001–2002 Season	**2006–2007 Season**
Budget[*1]	∼7.5 million €	∼4 million €
Dancers (full-time)[*2]	37	17
Team (full-time)[*3]	31	16
Performances		
Frankfurt am Main[*4]	50–60	25–30
Dresden[*5]	0	25–30
Additional residency[*6]	0 (Paris 1990–1998)	10 (Zurich 2005–2007)
Touring[*7]	32	21
Guest performances[*8]	5	0
Number of new works per year[*9]		
Full-length	1	2
One-act	2	2
Number of tickets sold[*10]	96 % attendance	unknown

*1: Ben-Itzak, "The Buzz, 4–2." The figures on the Ballett Frankfurt budget reported by the press around this time vary: $6.6 Million (2002), see Riding, "Leader of Frankfurt Ballet Losing His Post," p. 5; $9 Million (2001), see Lawson, "The Man Who Stood Ballet on Its Head." £4 Million for the Ballet and £3 Million for the TAT (2002), see Brown, "Forsythe Makes a Surprising Exit." | *2: Ballett Frankfurt data: unpublished document listing dancers of Ballett Frankfurt, provided by William Forsythe. The Forsythe Company data: program, *Human Writes*, September 8–15, 2006, Festspielhaus Hellerau. | *3: Ballett Frankfurt data: program, *The Vile Parody of Address, Duo, N.N.N.N., Quintet*, November 21–29, 2002, Frankfurt Opera House. The Forsythe Company data: program, *Human Writes*, September 8–15, 2006, Festspielhaus Hellerau. | *4: Ballett Frankfurt data: Forsythe in Driver et al., "A Conversation with William Forsythe," p. 88. The Forsythe Company data: See "Forsythe bleibt in Frankfurt." | *5: The Forsythe Company data: See "Forsythe bleibt in Frankfurt." | *6: The Forsythe Company data: Flyer from Schauspielhaus Zürich advertising the 2006 season of The Forsythe Company. | *7: The Ballett Frankfurt data: calendars (*Spielpläne*) for the 2001–2002 and 2006–2007 seasons. The Forsythe Company data: calendar (*Spielplan*) for the 2006–2007 season. | *8: Ibid. | *9: Ibid. | *10: Brown, "Forsythe Makes a Surprise Exit."

2.3 Architecture and Stages

The *architecture* of the theater is a fundamental factor impacting the design of choreography—affecting the product of a performance, as well as the process of making it.[29] Externally, the building of the *Städtische Bühnen* appears as one solid block, but it is actually a complex ensemble of structures which have grown together for more than

29 What I elaborate adds a different aspect than organizational typologies based on technology. See Eldridge and Crombie, *A Sociology of Organizations*, in particular pp. 42–45.

100 years. As architectural specialists have noted, the building was shaped through construction, destruction (bombing, fire) and renewal in a piecemeal fashion.[30] It also shifted dynamically, sculpted by the artists' activities within. In this way, the institutional structures become apparent within the fabric of the building, formed by context and materials.

Within the theater complex of the *Städtische Bühnen* at Willy-Brandt-Platz there are three stages: two large spaces primarily used by the Opera (see Fig. 12) and Theater divisions, respectively, and a 'small house' (*Kammerspiel*).[31] Each theater is shaped with a classical proscenium view—with capacity for an audience of 1369 in the Opera House, 712 in the Theater House, and 192 in the *Kammerspiel*.[32] During the time of the Ballett Frankfurt, Forsythe made use of all three spaces.

Figure 12. The view from the stage. Opera House of the Städtische Bühnen Frankfurt am Main.

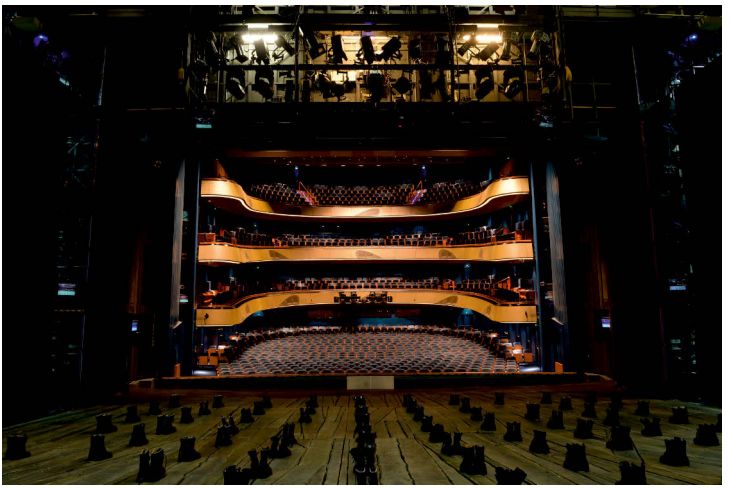

Photo © Barbara Aumüller.

Transformation of the theatrical space is part of the magic and craft of the performing arts. In creating his ballets, Forsythe used this potential of the stages at the *Städtische Bühnen* to full effect. For example, he directed the technicians to transform

30 First came the original work by renowned theater architect Heinrich Seeling in 1902. Renovation in 1949–51 after air raid damage kept the original entry façade while improving the auditorium and surrounding workspace. To allow for both the municipal opera and theater to play in the same location, a second adjoining theater was built in 1959–63. Renovations in 1987 and 1991–2 improved acoustics, technology and, in 2007–10, the working spaces. See Schmal et al., *Grosse Oper – Viel Theater?*, pp. 9–10.

31 The *Kammerspiel* is currently used only by the Theater division.

32 These figures are listed in documentation by Mechthild Rühl, Press Director of Ballett Frankfurt and The Forsythe Company from 1995–2015. These documents were kindly made available to me by William Forsythe.

the stage space by making the backstage area visible—opening up the curtain at the back and sides to reveal an expansive void and exposed walls. He could also instruct the dancers to perform as closely as possible to the audience by extending the dance floor over the orchestra pit and placing a curtain behind them (as was done in *Duo*). Forsythe adapted lighting instruments to show the space in a radiant or dim quality of light; he worked with the composer or choose music accordingly to fill the space with more or less sound. But Forsythe could not re-engineer the placement of the spectators, the number of seats in which they might sit and their distance to the event. He could not change the classical perspective from which spectators saw the ballet: as having a focal center that receded into the distance.[33] He could not shift their division into different balconies or tiers, each priced according to position. Nor could Forsythe remove the economic pressure to sell these tickets and fill these seats with paying spectators. Forsythe worked within these conditions as enabling constraints.

Given that the principle of organization of the body in space is "paradigmatic" in most Forsythe's works, changes of these spaces and production conditions are strongly linked to changes in his choreographic aesthetic.[34] Pivotal in this narrative is Forsythe's direction after August 1996 of the fourth division of the Städtische Bühnen, the Theater Am Turm (TAT) at the Bockenheimer Depot (see Fig. 13).[35] This former tram station, a brick building with an exquisitely high wooden ceiling, had been previously converted into configurable theater space without a fixed stage and with adaptable seating arrangements in the auditorium. The multipurpose space was large and open—flexible in its 'choreography.' Stadium seating could be installed, setting up risers with seats for up to 400 audience members; different configurations for the stage and audience could also be built at Forsythe's request. The venue became an experimental ground for Forsythe, in which he created new performance pieces that broke away from the fixed perspective of the proscenium.[36] The Bockenheimer Depot (hereafter Depot) was the primary Frankfurt venue of The Forsythe Company from 2005–15, and it was in this location that *Duo* was reconstructed for performance in 2012.

In contrast to the Ballett Frankfurt, The Forsythe Company did not create new performances for the venues of the Opera and Theater stages of the *Städtische Bühnen*, but rather in two primary theaters: the Depot in Frankfurt and the Festspielhaus Hellerau in Dresden (see Fig. 14). For the first three seasons, the company also created new works for the Schiffbau in Zürich, a renovated ship-making factory with multiple performance

33 Siegmund, "Körper, Heterotopie und der begehrende Blick."

34 Spier, "Choreographic Thinking and Amateur Bodies," p. 139. On the spatial aspects of Forsythe's choreographies and their relationship to architecture see also Vass-Rhee, *Audio-Visual Stress*, pp. 46–47; Maar, *Entwürfe und Gefüge*.

35 The TAT was an important part of Frankfurt's performing arts scene and an internationally known location for experimental theater. It existed in various forms and locations from 1953. The TAT moved to the Bockenheimer Depot in 1995 and was closed in 2004, allegedly due to budgetary problems. Its projects were frequently socio-politically engaged and critical. See Spier, "Choreographic Thinking and Amateur Bodies," p. 146; See also "Tod des TAT."

36 Works including *Endless House* (1999) in which spectators were bussed from the Frankfurt Opera after the first act to the Bockenheimer Depot, also the premieres of *One Flat Thing, reproduced* (2000) and *Kammer/Kammer* (2000).

Figure 13. Configurable Space of the Bockenheimer Depot, Frankfurt.

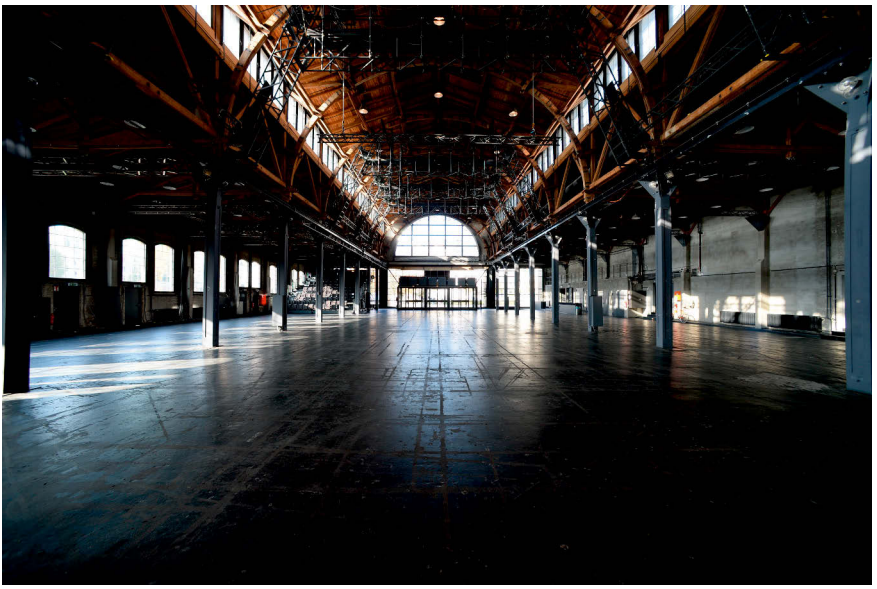

Photo © Barbara Aumüller.

venues inside. All three of these venues were spacious, configurable halls, different to the large, proscenium theaters to which the company frequently toured.

I agree with Vass-Rhee's assessment that these "versatile" spaces went hand-in-hand with changes in Forsythe's aesthetic.[37] At the Depot, Forsythe had the choice to refrain from using a proscenium and instead to build his desired configuration for the audience, shifting the number of people, their seating or lack thereof, their position and distance in relation to the spectacle. This changed the texture, acoustics, and even expectation of what a performance entailed, both for the audience and the dancers.[38] The choreography, which could not be separated from the architectural affordances, shaped the dancers' techniques for perceiving one another, the space, the music and the spectators. These "affordances," a concept that Vass-Rhee develops from James J. Gibson, stand for the entwinement of movement, environment and perception. Vass-Rhee shows how across Forsythe's longstanding work as a choreographer, he has persistently explored "visual-sonic affordances of movement and its presentation in performance."[39] This has engendered works with an abundance of experimental sound-making architectures and process, including many experiments—like *Duo*—in the register of *quiet* constellations of dance.

37 Vass-Rhee, *Audio-Visual Stress*, p. 47.

38 Works by Forsythe including: *you made me a monster* (2005), *Clouds After Cranach* (2005), *Heterotopia* (2006), *Angoloscuro/Camerascura* (2007), *Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time* (2007 version), the premiere of *I don't believe in outer space* (2008), and *The Returns* (2009).

39 Vass-Rhee, *Audio-Visual Stress*, p. 77; see also Waterhouse, "Dancing Amidst," pp. 167–71.

Figure 14. Festspielhaus Hellerau in Dresden.

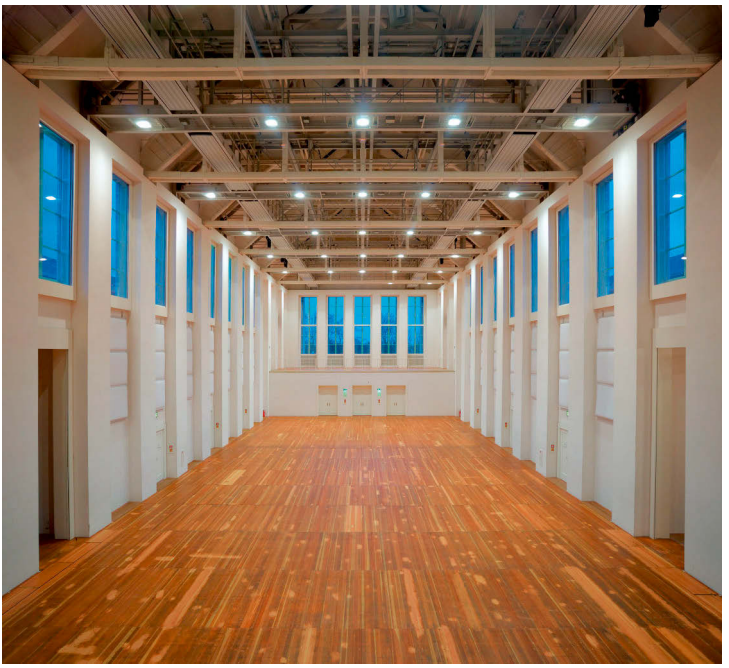

Photo © Lothar Sprenger.

Changing from the Opera House to the Depot thus corresponded in a shift in the performative process of the dancers, which came to emphasize other skills in The Forsythe Company: group improvisation, sensation and different processes of movement research. Looking retrospectively, Forsythe remarks in 2005:

> "I stopped doing ballet because I couldn't afford pointe shoes for my dancers anymore," he says, adding with a laugh: "Is there a better reason? We also had to move out of the Frankfurt Opera House, and I don't think ballet works as well in tight spaces. A ballet is like a hothouse flower: it needs certain conditions."[40]

Here, augmenting Forsythe's statement, I have articulated pragmatic ways that aesthetics and production conditions intertwine, through the spatiality of relations in the dancers' process, tied to the context of the architecture of the theater. We can consider this explicitly now in *Duo*.

40 Cappelle, "William Forsythe Dances to a New Tune."

2.4 *Duo*'s Setting and Music

Duo was created in 1996 for the Opera stage at the *Städtische Bühnen* in Frankfurt—a particular context. These material constraints could not always be replicated when *Duo* went on tour with the Ballett Frankfurt or later when *Duo* was reconstructed in The Forsythe Company.

The music by Thom Willems was a formative feature in this staging. Willems' score for the Ballett Frankfurt version of *Duo* was written for live piano and electronics. The piano was concealed and distant, played backstage. The electronic acoustics were intermittent, swelling with height and volume above the spectators. When combined, these musical layers created dissonance, felt perceptibly by the performers and audience as a spatialized musical environment. The music synchronized occasionally with the dancers' movements, but generally provided an independent musical atmosphere. It was layered with the audible sounds of the dancers' breath as they moved, an aspect they described as part of the choreography as opposed to the musical score.

The appearance of the dancers' movement depended on multiple factors: the lighting, the dancers' costumes, as well as scenic elements such as the backdrop, floor color and the spectators' distance from the stage. Forsythe set the dancers' motion at the front of the stage, placing a black curtain behind them. They usually performed on a black floor. Their movements referenced classical ballet vocabulary, yet the dancers wore contemporary long sleeve leotards and flesh-colored socks without tights (see Figs. 9–10). These black costumes broke with classical conventions as well as common attire in the genre of leotard ballets: *Duo* leotards were different than the dancers' colored practice clothes and were unusually sheer across the dancers' breasts.[41] They were also individually tailored, with slightly different neck and hip lines. The costumes emphasized the bodily registers of the dancers' movement—their legs and torsos differentiated.

The two performers' intimacy and fragility was enhanced by their bareness in these mesh costumes and by Forsythe's decision to bring them as close to the audience as possible. The theater was, however, a vast and formal frame, codifying their bodies as participants in high art. For those educated in ballet conventions, the costumes were a contemporary commentary upon the leotard ballet precedents by choreographer George Balanchine and his philosophy of "ballet is woman."[42] By doubling the dancers, Forsythe made the women's collaboration the subject—highlighting their attention to one another and clothing the beautiful synchrony they had achieved with costumes showing that articulate refinement.

While developed by women, this sensitive cooperation could be interpreted by men as well. One of the first *Duo* dancers, Jill Johnson explained her philosophy:

> There's a rightful sensitivity to what femininity is now, with our transgender siblings having their way and culture, and as we adopt new ways of seeing about that. So, I would say, that *Duo's* not necessarily just for women. I think that there are qualities that we could say are feminine. […] Maybe the best way to describe it is that in my experience

41 On leotard ballets and their sub-genres, see Tomic-Vajagic, *The Dancer's Contribution*, pp. 26–32.

42 Macaulay, "Of Women, Men and Ballet in the 21st Century," p. 14.

> of making it and performing it, *Duo* was a real opportunity to be women. I'm grateful to Bill [Forsythe] for providing that space for that expression—which can be translated in many different ways. So, I don't think it's gender specific, but as a woman who identifies as a woman, for me there's a woman in it. […] You know in a way, I hesitate to define what it is, because I think it continues to have a life so, maybe in a way it's tracking experiences and it's still leaving it open.[43]

Johnson here emphasizes the "open" processual components of the choreography, which allow for the gendered aspects she experienced to evolve—with new performers and changing perception of gender at-large. From his perspective, in an interview, Forsythe also commented upon the potential of the gendered performance to change, providing precedents that could also enable new projects of thinking masculinity. He said:

> I was a man showing motions. And then the women took responsibility and incorporated those motions. And it became assigned by … what do I call it … the social visibility of a performance into a feminine domain. And then it went back to men, but with this feminine imperative. Do you know what I mean? It was very important for me […] I get annoyed when it gets too rough. If it gets, or there's too much what we consider as stereotypically masculine energy. And I think those two characters are actually quite delicate, Brigel [Gjoka] and Riley [Watts], and for them to sustain a masculine delicacy is an interesting project also.[44]

While open to change, the *Duo* project consistently explored *delicate* cooperation. The setting for the piece supported the performers' concentration and the audience's perception and involvement therein.

Performances of *Duo* could thus be disturbed when the dancers came *too* close to an audience (such as when the hall was not large enough) and/or when spectators felt uncomfortable, or aroused by the women. The piece was designed so that the dancers' intimacy would be protected by a *proper* distance—their bodies veiled by their costumes and their technique seen from the gap of space between the performers and the audience. The dancers could also be bothered when the piano was too close to them, not giving them enough independence for their timings to emerge. While performing, the dancers focused upon their co-motion, yet the setting was critical. *Duo* was not simply an abstract ballet transplantable to any theater and public: it was a delicate event.

To provide insight into this ecosystem of musicality, below I analyze the musical layer of the premiere on January 20, 1996.

2.4.1 Dissonant Counterpoint

Members of the audience cough as the dancers stand in silence. The performers begin moving, with one synchronous, quiet gesture. Then their steps strike the floor rhythmically, like Morse code: thumps caught by a microphone that amplifies their sound.[45]

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43 Jill Johnson, videoconference interview with the author, October 21, 2016.

44 William Forsythe, phone interview with the author, January 30, 2019.

45 The performers, composer and choreographer could not remember at which point they began using microphones to amplify the sound of the *Duo* performers. Vass-Rhee cited testimony from

The pianist begins playing after the two women have fallen to the floor. She plays dispersed descending notes in the treble region. These are unresolved and unconventional harmonies: atonal music. The unseen piano sounds live—yet distant. The notes played are sparse: single notes and chords, without syncopation, trills or frills. The phrasing is minimal, making it difficult to grasp a melody or locate a tonal center. The tempo is slower than the tick of a clock, without the somberness or heaviness of adagio.

The women move with lightness, through configurations that seem very deliberate but without any solemnity. They appear separate from the sounds outside of their bell jar.

The performers repeat the movement motifs from the beginning and fall a second time to the floor. Now electronic flageolets enter the composition: atmospheric and louder than the piano. Their slow motif is an ascending progression of three tones. Like the sound of airy strings in a faraway orchestra, or distant radio signals, they suggest a space outside the theater. Their layering lends dissonance to the composition: heard within the piano, and between the piano and the electronics. Coughs persist in the audience.

With the first lengthy phrase of unison, the performers are breathing audibly and more synchronously. Air runs into their noses, and out their open mouths. Sometimes they form the sound—making caverns with their vocal tracts. They lower their tongues for vowels and consonants to pass, breathing-movement. Soon this windy speak turns into breathing tired with the motion. Their footfalls continue to add audible punctuations to the atmosphere. Their bodies are light, but they have real weight that is arduous to move.

The music of *Duo*—of dancers, live piano and atmospheric strings—ebbs and flows like waves. Sometimes the compositional layers merge all together; other times it is just two layers of the composition corresponding. This is a multidimensional counterpoint. When the electronics build, they become louder, faster and twangy. They also drop out, showing the dancers back to their ambient breath. The piano, while intermittently more elaborate, never builds to any discernable rhythms or melodies. For the entire composition, the pianist remains far off and disconnected from the dancers. The dancers' ecosystem of movement logic is never tarnished, only placed in relation—contrasted and juxtaposed—with other sources.

Midway through the piece there is a resounding lull of silence. The dancers pause, lying on their sides like sirens. After the dancers resume moving, the piano starts, and then the electronics. The dissonance increases and a female voice begins to sing—the source sounds like a sample, entering and exiting irregularly. Perhaps a medieval song? Like the twang of a music box, or church bells playing out of sync in two different steeples, there is a separate togetherness, brought into one by the listener. The volume of all layers rises, and the dancers increase their exertion, jumping. A few words are softly whispered between them.

After this climax, they end with rhythmical motions in place; these are academic citations of ballet positions. There are some notes from the piano, which stops a few

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Morrow and sound designer Niels Lanz that this began in 2003; many of my informants thought it was earlier. See Vass-Rhee, *Audio-Visual Stress*, pp. 241–42.

seconds before the women end their motions, directly facing the audience, as the lights blackout.

2.4.2 *Duo*'s Distant Piano

A Consonant Dissonance
Fieldwork note: Meeting in Rüsselsheim with David Morrow, July 25, 2017

> David Morrow performed as the pianist in *Duo* from 1997 to 2002. Our interview takes place at David's house in Rüsselsheim, a mid-size city near Frankfurt am Main. David—almost sixty, with grey hair and blue eyes—speaks extremely quietly, with enthusiasm and dry humor. Having prepared for my visit, on his piano are multiple scores for the piano music of *Duo* with different titles: from "Racing Margot" to "*Duo*," "*Duo* for David" and "URGENT FOR DAVID MORROW." David sits at the piano and plays a later version for me, which is annotated with words and marks made with light pencil.
>
> The music is pretty much based on two chords, he explains. These make a clear situation, without defining too much: meaning the harmony is not a logical progression or one that has a definitive affect, happy or sad. He criticizes that when practiced or played alone the piano itself can acquire a mono harmony that is in itself not interesting enough: "the music has no tension." He stops after two pages, telling me that he is playing a bit too quickly and that it would be better to do it with the acoustic elements because the music does not make sense without that. Though the dancers are independent of the music, the music is not entirely independent of them and the situation. It all hangs together, in an atmospheric way—a consonant dissonance.
>
> On the *Duo* score at the piano there are small notes handwritten in pencil every few measures, with poetic words such as: "stirring," and "sometimes indecision." David explains, "I had to find my approach to things," especially given the challenge of the technical setup. He emphasizes the music has to be "alive" not mechanical. He justifies: "for me it is always a relationship between the abstract and finding a personal relationship." He asks me, is it not the same with the dancers? That everyone finds a way, of adding something of themselves?

Morrow's testimony helps clarify the complex acoustic architecture of *Duo*. The dancers and the audience listen to the piano music of *Duo* from a distance. The piano was hidden from the audience's view by the black curtain serving as the dancers' backdrop. The piano was placed in the wings, as far away from the dancers as possible. Morrow explains: "There is no real connection with the piano and that is ok. [...] Basically, I'm only responding in a couple places to the dancers."[46] Still the actions and the silences had to be aligned.

46 David Morrow, interview with the author, Rüsselsheim, July 25, 2017.

To synchronize timing, a monitor was placed on the piano showing the livestream video of the dancers performing. This allowed the pianist to see the movements he or she needed. Composer Thom Willems confirms:

> What was extremely important was giving accents to the dancers. Because you were watching a video [monitor] at the same time you could look at them. The accents support the dancers. It helps them a lot, you know? Some leg movements and arm movements. That was the main focus actually to support them.[47]

Morrow remembered wearing headphones, allowing him to hear the acoustics on the stage but also serving as the line for technicians to communicate. The chatter of the technicians speaking over the line was frequently distracting. His annotation of Willem's piano score acted as a strategy to stay focused within the music, and also to spend time in the contemplation which accompanied it—remembering the annotated koans of his musical dramaturgy. These were strategies to produce music, without overproducing sound.

As a consequence of the specific positioning of the piano required in performance, rehearsing the piece in the smaller space of a studio was difficult—there, the piano would be too close. Perhaps because of this, the dancers mostly rehearsed in silence, entraining to themselves and not the music.

One thing that can go wrong in *Duo* is placing the piano too close to the dancers. In 2012 when *Duo* was reconstructed, moving from the opera stage to the smaller Depot, Morrow knew "it would not work." In the Depot there was no space backstage or in the wings for the piano to be distant: "There was no way you can make the piano sound like in the distance."[48]Another potential problem that arose around the musicality of *Duo* stemmed from the pianist playing too much, ruining the delicate balance of the situation. Willems describes:

> The issue is that you have to dare to become extremely simple and silent in that piece. We poetically hold back; hold extremely back. That was the main objective actually, and that was not always so successful. To dare to stop, to be silent, you know? To give it space.[49]

Whether too close or too much, the musicality of *Duo* was delicate.

This sensitivity especially influenced the piece's reconstruction in 2012. From my interviews with the dancers, they thought Forsythe had made the decision to cancel *Duo* performances in 2012 because they were not ready to perform. Yet, given Morrow's testimony, it is likely that the reconstruction was also compounded because of difficulty of staging *Duo*'s distant piano in a new space—the Bockenheimer Depot. This illustrates how the choreography of the piece is enmeshed within the architecture of performance, requiring the right proportions of music and dance in the new space. In other words, material and architectural conditions are seminal to the particular constitution of the choreography.

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47 Thom Willems, phone interview with the author, September 20, 2018.

48 David Morrow, interview with the author, Rüsselsheim, July 25, 2017.

49 Thom Willems, phone interview with the author, September 20, 2018.

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This chapter has developed an organizational portrait of Forsythe's ensembles, Ballett Frankfurt and The Forsythe Company. Taking a materialist approach to studying practice, the chapter demonstrated how the artists' activities are both constrained and enabled through dynamic material configurations. After an introduction to the field and the organization of the *Städtische Bühnen Frankfurt am Main* (section 2.1), the structural "givens" of these municipal ensembles are deciphered (section 2.2). Depicting the shifting architecture of the stage spaces in which the ensembles work (section 2.3), I have focused in detail upon how these production conditions impacted the dancers' practice. In particular, I have analyzed the reconstruction of *Duo* in 2012 and the challenge of reconstructing *Duo*'s distant piano (section 2.4). Overall, this chapter highlights the infrastructural, economic and architectural aspects that exert a notable influence upon the dancers' practices—a configuration of materials and resources underlying and enabling the choreographic pieces.