

***Radio and Juliet* by Edward Clug**

Ana Germ¹

¹Alma Mater Europaea University, Slovenia

ana.germ25@gmail.com

Abstract

A Romanian choreographer who is said to be “one of the ten best choreographers in Europe” today (Teržan, 2020) started his career as a soloist dancer in Maribor Ballet ensemble and succeeded worldwide through his contemporary ballet *Radio and Juliet*, that he created for six male dancers and one female to the music of the British alternative-rock band, Radiohead. My analysis considered the traditional analysis according to Adshead (1988) and Banes (1994) with contextual, descriptive, interpretive and evaluative aspects as well as intertextual analysis after Adshead-Lansdale (1999), which considers the dance text as an open construction.

Keywords: Edward Clug, *Radio and Juliet*, contextual, traditional, intertextual analysis.

How to cite: Germ A. (2023). *Radio and Juliet* by Edward Clug. *Doctoral Horizons*, 4(1), 28-37.

1. Introduction

This article is a presentation of a dance analysis within the subject *Ballet and Contemporary Dance – Tradition and Contemporaneity* hold by dr. Svebor Sečak, Associate Professor and Dean of the AMEU Dance Academy. I have decided to choose *Radio and Juliet* by Edward Clug for the analysis due to my personal admiration and interweaving connection with the work of Edward Clug and because of the general consideration that *Radio and Juliet* brought him as a

choreographer and the ballet ensemble of Slovenian National Theatre (SNT¹) Maribor international success and recognition. My analysis and research considered following questions: what enabled Edward Clug, a ballet dancer from Transylvania, a breakthrough to international festivals and stages? does the merit of *Radio and Juliet* lie in his unique movement style, his great ability as a choreographer? and how far does he integrate classical technique, modern expression and postmodern processes to create the dance of the present?

The structure of my research followed mainly the traditional analysis after Janet Adshead (1988) and Sally Banes (1994) with the contextual, descriptive, interpretive and evaluative aspects of *Radio and Juliet*. I considered further the intertextual analysis after Adshead-Lansdale (1999) to provide potential intertexts from which the reader can choose, in a range of ways, to form multiple interpretations: authorial intention, performance analysis and reader-response processes. The context of the author, his socio-political and cultural background reveal how his life experience influenced his choreographic style and approach. Finally, I examined potential influences of revivals of the original ballet *Romeo and Juliet* with special emphasis on contemporary versions of Angelin Preljocaj and Jean-Christophe Maillot.

2. Contextual analysis

2.1. Background of the author

Clug grew up in the mining town of Stei (Romania) during the repressive dictatorship of Ceausescu. His father, a geologist, wanted to enable his son to flee the system through the arts. By the age of ten, Clug was sent to the National Ballet School in Cluj-Napoca and passed the audition successfully. He stated for *Mladina* magazine in 2020 that he quickly understood that neither the system nor the country he lived in was “upright” (Clug in Teržan, 2020). The communist regime collapsed during his harsh schooling in 1989, when he realized that he had become a prisoner of an even greater prison – the global world. After graduating in 1991, he auditioned for a few European ballet companies and was offered a soloist place at the SNT Maribor Ballet. Although he created a few distinctive roles (Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*, Drosselmeyer in *Nutcracker*, Gamache in *Don Quixote*, Court Jester

¹ SNT or originally SNG – Slovensko Narodno Gledališče. I will further refer to it in the text as SNT Maribor Ballet or Maribor Ballet (ensemble).

in *Swan Lake*), his ambitions reached higher – he wanted great success, if not as a dancer of classical ballet, then as a choreographer.

The opportunity for his first choreographic engagement derived from the collaboration with the famous Slovene theatre director Tomaž Pandur, who noticed his creative potential and asked him to create the choreography for the performance *Babylon*, which premiered in 1996. With new artistic ambitions, his first independent project *Tango* emerged in 1998 together with costume designer Leo Kulaš and set designer Marko Japelj, who remained his creative team ever since. Clug's first works, *Tango* (1998) and *Lacrimas* (2002), were very sincere, personal and confessional. With the works' high emotional energy and strong associations, he captivated the public and the critics. He became Slovenia's most known, most rewarded and most recognizable choreographer. He stated at that time that he wanted to keep this sincere, expressional chorographical approach as his "trademark" and he did not want to lose himself in pure research (Podboj, 2005, p. 9).

After creating *Radio and Juliet* in 2005, not only invitations to the largest theatre festivals followed (like Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in USA, The Stars of White Nights in Mariinski theatre St. Petersburg, Arts Festival in Singapore, ect.), but also many renowned companies in Europe commissioned him to stage his creations. In context of the Glazer Charter in 2008, it was explained: "[...] Dance-technical flawlessness, a natural and purely direct approach to the realization of choreographic ideas and personal commitment form a solid framework for Clug's impressive and imaginative choreographic creations that keep impressing the audience" (Zemljič, 2008, p. 12).

2.2. Inspirations for *Radio and Juliet*

The primary inspiration for *Radio and Juliet* was the music of the British alternative-rock band, Radiohead: "I've lived with their music for more than ten years; I experience it as a kind of sound or emotional expression of our 'wounded' time. [...]" (Clug in Podboj, 2005, p. 9). A further strong influence derives from cinema and video dance. Clug collaborated on *Radio and Juliet* with the filmmaker Gregor Mendaš who created a black and white video-projection which introduces us to the Juliet's perspective on the timeless Shakespeare love story. Further, the cinematic influences are not evident only through the projected video, but cinematic

techniques seem to inspire the whole work as we deal with a reverted story line in the structure, fragmentation, freezes, backward spins, slow-motion actions in choreography and cinematic illuminations within the light design (spotlights, flashing lights, fade-outs).

3. Traditional analysis

In my complete analysis, I provided a complete description of the fourteen scenes which follow eleven tracks of the British alternative rock band Radiohead from albums *OK Computer* and *Kid A*. I divided the scenes according to music and named them in relation to the form and subject matter. Since the scope of this article is limited, I will leave out the description and skip to the interpretative and evaluative aspects.

3.1. Subject matter

Always looking for a distinctive version and bringing the subject matter up to date, Clug departed from Shakespeare's literary original and interpreted the play from a slightly different angle: „as a retrospective of some unfulfilled love". Clug fragmented and reversed the storyline, but not literally: although Juliet first recalls certain memories and her first duet with Romeo foresees their condemned faith, the rest of the structure follows the original sequence of events: the masked ball, the wedding, Mercutio's death, Romeo's banishment, lovers' tragical end. References to the original story are made through associations and symbolism: the surgical masks remind us of the masked ball, the ceremonial walking towards the priest clearly indicates the wedding, the fights remind us of the general conflict between the two families (Montagues and Capulets), etc. Nevertheless, Clug does not use these symbols literally or representationally. He uses them in a slightly different, in his words, rather "twisted" ways: the surgical masks, the white gloves and finally the mysterious lemon, suggesting either potion, poison, or simply "the bitterness of unfulfilled love" (Podboj, 2005, p. 13 in Maleš, 2016, p. 85). Another puzzling example are the male dancers who in principle do not represent particular characters from the play: "Characters in the performance are intentionally unnamed. All the men can be potential Romeos, Mercutios and Tybalts" (Clug out of personal communication, in Maleš, 2016, p. 83). However, the switching of men became a hot topic among spectators and critics as it indicates ambiguities or

vagueness concerning Juliet's and Romeo's character. Further, there are several interpretations of the beginning-ending with the general interpretation that the piece depicts on what would happen if Juliet did not decide to die: "The ballet begins at the story's end, with a grief-stricken Juliet [...] choosing not to take her own life" (Monisse, 2016). However, there is still the lemon and Juliet's last twitch at the end of the performance which suggests her death: "And then there is the dying — Romeo is sprawled on the floor, and Juliet ends her life and the night with one swipe across the throat" (Liberatore, 2011). Therefore, I concluded in my analysis that Clug does not give us final answers – he leaves the interpretative position open which accords with the intertextual analysis which considers the dance text as an open construction.

3.2. Genre and style

In 2003, Clug created a solo *Kolednica* for the 3rd Gala Evening of New Choreographies to Slovenian Music. This solo served as a foundation of his evolving movement style which was further achieved through *Radio and Juliet*. He created an original movement connection between pure ballet technique and particular contemporary elements, accelerated through rhythmical, sharp dynamics, all virtuously executed: "Classical ballet taken at a fast-forwarded speed without losing any precision or foot placement", using "capoeira fights, martial arts, disco and a hint of breakdancing, popping and locking" (Liber, 2019). Therefore, his personal unique style within *Radio and Juliet* can be categorized as contemporary ballet.

Regarding the classification of the genre, even though ballet constitutes the basis of Clug's creations, he rejects ballet as an imitative art form and avoids the traditional narrative structure, rejects pantomime, acting, and illustrative scenery. Modern concepts are evident in his work through self-expression, spontaneity, individuality and liberation from classical conventions: "I'm exploring a new logic of movement that suits me at the moment and provokes me at the same time" (Clug in Podboj, 2005, p. 9). Clug further departs from William Shakespeare's literary original in accordance with Jean-François Lyotard's (1984, xxiv in Sečak, 2018, p. 9) postmodern "incredulity towards grand narratives" and reverses and fragments the story line. He implements cinematic approaches on the level of choreography, directly through the video-projection and through light design. His postmodern approach is additionally present through fragmentation, and minimalistic,

functional design; the costumes are replaced with casual clothing, the music is contemporary and of personal choice. Nevertheless, Clug's intention within *Radio and Juliet* was not to decompose, reconstruct or reinvent (Szporer, 2009), but to offer the audience an experience from a different perspective. Through the interweaving connection of tradition, modern expressiveness and postmodern tendencies, I concluded that Clug's *Radio and Juliet* could be classified as "transmodern" after Ken Wilber and James Robey (2011). As they both explain, in "post-postmodernism", or "transmodernism", the skill of execution becomes important anew and this is certainly evident in *Radio and Juliet*: "Clug's staging should be viewed as an auratic dance art that favours the body of a virtuoso dancer, musicality in movement, a compositional and choreographic masterwork, as well as the emotional effect on the viewer. [...]" (Vear, 2008, p. 12).

3.3. Music and musicality

Radiohead's eleven songs are carefully curated – they provide the structure as they match Clug's scenes throughout. They create a fundamentally melancholic atmosphere: a sobering, haunting and despairing tone of a mechanized world (Monisse, 2016). The song lyrics sometimes match or reinforce the subject matter of specific scenes, e. g., in the beginning the track ends with "I will see you in next life", Romeo and Juliet encounter to "Here I'm alive, everything all of the time" and further Mercutio's solo is set to "Bullet Proof ... I Wish I Was". As Clug explains: "There are moments when the story meets the lyrics, but that was not really the point. It's the overall emotion they [Radiohead] create in their music" (Clug in Wikipedia, 2022). However, Clug does not use the music solely to create an atmosphere or emotional charge as a backdrop, he embodies the music – his musicality is extraordinary, following each beat, punctuation, and acceleration in the music. His choreography matches the dynamic and atmosphere of the music perfectly (Seibert, 2011).

3.4. Set, costume and light design

The set design by Marko Japelj is minimalistic and functional – it consists of nine huge dark blocks which provide the screens for the video-projection and allow simple transformations. The costume designer Leo Kulaš dressed Juliet in short pants and a corset which changes once in color from nude to red (before Romeo and

Juliet encounter), while the six men appear in black suits with bare chests. The light design by Primož Premzl is not gratuitous, its mere darkness reinforces the melancholic atmosphere. The spotlights support the one dancing, the flashing-lights reinforce the tension before violence takes place, and the several blackouts guide our attention to the two lovers' encounter. Altogether, the set, costumes, and light design with their minimalistic aesthetics and a cold and industrial impression perfectly match the melancholic atmosphere of the music, just like the mechanic choreography, and therefore effectively support the notion of the whole work.

4. Comparisons

There are many revisions of the original *Romeo and Juliet* ballet by Leonid Lavrovsky and Sergei Prokofiev, which connected and complemented the narrative and abstract ballets of the East and West. The generation of Frederick Ashton, Kenneth Macmillan, and John Cranko minimized pantomime and developed neoclassical movement (Sečak, 2010, p. 174). Nevertheless, the first contemporary interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet* which radically modified the means of expression and brought the subject matter up to date, was Angelin Preljocaj's version in 1990 (Sečak, 2018, pp. 32-33). Preljocaj chose to set this everlasting love story in the totalitarian regime of an eastern European country which pulls a parallel to Clug's origins. Jean-Christophe Maillot premiered his version of *Roméo et Juliette* in 1996 in a cinematic manner, highlighting the dualities and ambiguities of adolescence (Sečak, 2010, p. 138). Even though both productions can be compared in few segments with Clug's *Radio and Juliet*, they divide in other characteristics significantly. While Preljocaj confronts 'the militia' and 'the homeless', Clug spotlights the fragile teenage love in the present, mechanized world. And while Maillot structured the narrative in a cinematic manner, his production returns to the original characters and his choreography stays in the neoclassical boundaries. Clug on the other hand continued the non-narrative postmodern transformation that Preljocaj had started and further abandoned the narrative structure, Prokofiev's music, and the representative characters.

5. Evaluation and conclusion

In the last chapter of my paper, I evaluated the performance in terms of its merit, goodness or greatness according to Adshead's analytical approach (1998, p. 92) and examined the worth of choreography and the performance.

I found that Clug succeeded in *Radio and Juliet* on the following levels:

- he established his unique movement style,
- he transformed a classical tragedy into a distinct, original perspective on immortal Shakespearian themes, such as adolescent attraction, love, hope, desire, grief and death,
- he integrated successfully popular culture and high art – with the selection of music and the use of cinematic techniques and digital technology,
- he selected great dancers and interpreters of his choreography, and
- he packed it all together with his excellent creative team of the filmmaker and designers.

Therefore, I concluded in my analysis that Clug succeeded with *Radio and Juliet* to make a genuine, complex, modernized interpretation of Shakespeare's play which integrates classical heritage, modern expression, and postmodern choreographic processes and can therefore be classified as a transmodern work with implementation of "digimodernism". The production succeeded internationally because of the program success – combining popular culture and high art; his unique personal movement style, his original choreographic approach, his perfectionism and high ambitions, which originate from his personal background, the political and educational system in which he grew up and nevertheless, because of the overall support of the Maribor ballet ensemble and the executive board of SNT Maribor. Consequently, the Romanian choreographer is nowadays said to be "one of the ten best choreographers in Europe" (Teržan, 2020) and we can enjoy in his productions worldwide.

References

- Adshead-Lansdale, J. (Ed.).(1999). *Dancing Texts: Intertextuality in Interpretation*. Dance Books Ltd.
- Adshead, J. (Ed.).(1988). *Dance Analysis: Theory and Practice*. Dance Books.
- Liber, V. (2019, 7-8 December). *Radio & Juliet / Faun / McGregor + Mugler*. British Theatre Guide. <https://www.britishtheatreinfo.co.uk/reviews/radio-juliet-london-coliseum-18537>
- Liberatore, W. (2011, 21 October). *Dance review: 'Radio and Juliet' culls best of Shakespeare, Radiohead*. The Daily Gazette. https://dailygazette.com/2011/10/21/1021_radio/
- Monisse, N. (2016, 24 September). *Review: Radio and Juliet (WA Ballet)*. Pelican Magazine. <https://pelicanmagazine.com.au/2016/09/24/review-radio-juliet-wa-ballet/>
- Podboj, D. (2005, 14 September). Klasični začetek in sodobno nadaljevanje - Nove tehnologije nezadržno vdirajo na sodobno plesno sceno. *Večer*, p. 12.
- Podboj, D. (2005, 31 January). S klasičnim znanjem do plesa sedanjosti. *Večer*, 9.
- Radio and Juliet. (2022, 5 September). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radio_and_Juliet
- Sečak, S. (2010). *Staging Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet in the Language of Classical Ballet*. [MA thesis, University of New England, Armidale].
- Sečak, S. (2018). *Ballet - Tradition and Contemporaneity*. [online document, Akademija dramske umjetnosti, Zagreb].
- Seibert, B. (2011, 24 October). *Dance review: Romeo Meets Radiohead in a Love Story of Twitches*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/25/arts/dance/radio-and-juliet-at-skirball-center-review.html>
- Szporer, P. (2009, 15 July). *Edward Clug on Radio and Juliet by Philip Szporer*. Bomb Magazine. <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/edward-clug-on-radio-and-juliet/>
- Teržan, V. (2020, 3 January). *Edward Clug: 'Po padcu Ceausescujevega režima smo postali ujetniki še večjega zapora, globalnega sveta*. Mladina 1. <https://www.mladina.si/195103/edward-clug-po-padcu-ceausescujevega-rezima-smo-postali-ujetniki-se-vecjega-zapora-globalnega-sve/>
- Vevar, R. (2008, 10 February). Clugov koreografski triumph. *Večer*, 12.

Zemljič, P. (2008, 14 March). "Želim se izogibati določenim trendom". Pogovor z Edwardom Clugom, plesalcem in koreografom, letošnjim dobitnikom Glazerjeve listine. *Večer*, 12.