



LISTAHÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS
Iceland University of the Arts

Behaliens

choreographic behavior

Sóley Ólafsdóttir

BA Project Contemporary Dance Practices – Thesis

Supervisor: Nína Hjálmarsdóttir

Iceland University of the Arts

Department of Performance Art

Spring 2022

This paper is a 24 ECTS final project for a BA-degree in Contemporary Dance Practices at the Iceland Academy of the Arts. It is not allowed to copy this thesis in any way without author's consent.

Abstract

In this paper I will account for and reflect upon my choreographic work “Behaliens” as well as my working process towards it.

The choreography was created as my Individual Project for my final year at the BA program, Contemporary Dance Practices at Iceland University of the Arts. The choreography was created as a trio, for a trio. A trio of three “behaliens”...being, myself; Sóley Ólafsdóttir, Bjartey Elín Hauksdóttir and Marta Ákadóttir.

I will discuss my questions and theories that led me through the creative process, as well as my working methods in the dance studio, dealing with those theories and questions.

I will contextualize my ideas and working methods through Andrew Hewitt’s writings on social choreography and the aesthetic continuum. In theory and practice looking at human’s behavior as conditioned through the experiences of seeing one’s subject self as a moldable object. In that regard reviewing the definition of self-objectification. A process of rediscovering our behavior as being conditioned by the means of one trying to conform, to fit in, thereby, our behavior becoming choreographic... a social choreography.

As a result of having these ideas in mind for the creative and working process, I will reflect on composition. Looking at what principles construct the way we behave, and then seeing if I could apply those principles as a tool for composition, restricting myself with parameters. I reflect on behavior as a social phenomenon, how a community together creates a common understanding of how one should be, behave and be seen.

Through what we discovered physically dealing with these ideas, the product, the performance, at last, the “behaliens” being seen. I will reflect on the “behaliens” in the performance appearing as “uncanny,” and contextualize my ideas through Andrew Benett and Nicholas Royale’s writings on the uncanny.

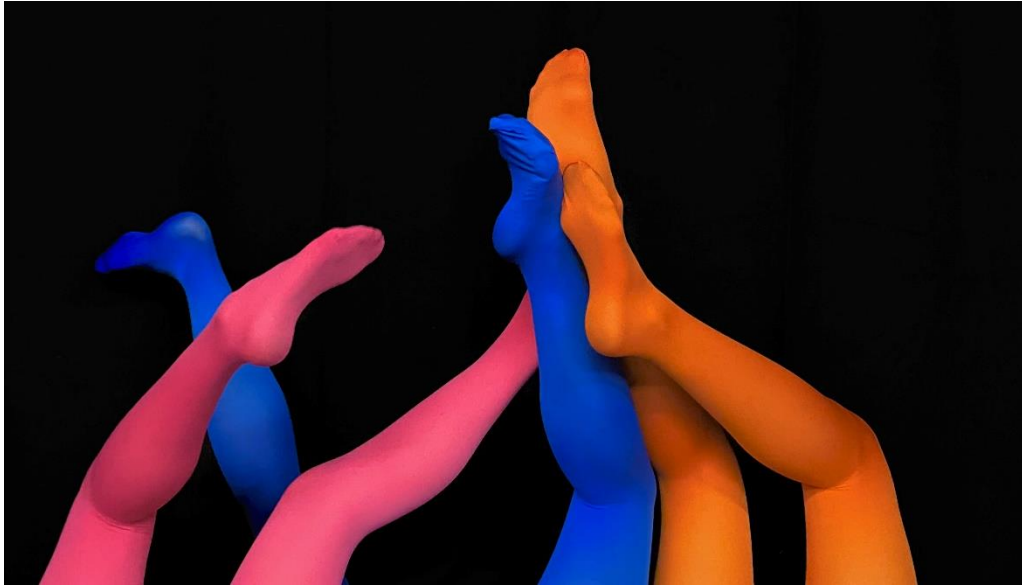


Image nr.1

Description text for the performance:

*“Feeling out of place in an unknown space. Together they are figuring out how to behave. You see them, they see you. They desire being seen whilst wanting to disappear, to blend in, **working abnormally hard on being normal.**”*

*Becoming characters through embodiment. Embodying a psychological state, **creatures of the mind**, representing a mental state of confusion, a confusion of how to be, behave and be seen. These creatures are somehow unable to hide, they will always shine no matter how hard they try.*

*Three “behaliens” representing a condition, a state of mind... a physical state of mind? The voices in our heads? The confident, yet so fragile, physical state of mind, **a confusion of how to be, behave and be seen in this world.**”*

Table of contents

Introduction.....	1
1. Ideas and concepts.....	2
2. First steps.....	3
3. Studio work: Working methods.....	5
4. Composition.....	7
5. The performance: What appeared?.....	9
Conclusion.....	11
Bibliography.....	12

Introduction

“Behaliens” is a dance performance created for a trio, the trio being myself; Sóley Ólafsdóttir, Bjartey Elín Hauksdóttir and Marta Ákadóttir. The duration of the work is around 30 minutes. It premiered in the Black Box at Iceland University of the Arts, March 2022.

The title of the work, “behaliens,” describes the three dancing bodies seen in the performance, a trio of three behaliens. The behaliens’ task in the creative process and performances was to rediscover the way we behave. Working with the notion “working abnormally hard on being normal,” for rediscovering behavior and the reasons for why we behave the way we do. Rediscovering behavior with our bodies, finding ways of embodying principles of behavior known to us in everyday life. We used scenario-based improvisational tasks in order to figure out what it means to rediscover something so familiar as the way we move around and communicate in everyday life.

I will reflect on how society conditions us to experience our bodies and behavior as an objectified presentation of oneself. Questioning and reflecting on the personal conflict of self-objectification becoming a social choreography. Departing from that notion I will review the principles of behavior in society, our social choreographies, and how those choreographies have been formed through creating a common understanding of how we think we should be, behave and be seen. By using those principles the behaliens are able to create their own community, their own understanding of how they should be, behave, and be seen. The behaliens review principles of behavior both as an experience in relation to the audience, and also as a compositional tool. A compositional tool for creating their own behavioral language. The behaliens review behavior through the notion of “being seen,” what happens when we are seen? How does being aware of being seen affect the way we behave? ...Behavior as a presentation of oneself... Our initial question for the research was: How does society want us to move? That question then developed and we asked ourselves: What happens when we embody a state of figuring out how to be, behave and be seen in this world? What appears?

1. Ideas and concepts

The starting point for my research was my interest in behavior, asking myself how and why we behave the way we do; How are we somehow all behaving in similar ways? Is this the way that society wants us to move? Are there written rules on how we should move through life? Or is it solely embedded in our embodiments of the expectations towards the way we want to be/should be seen? ...to be seen...What does it mean to be seen?... or rather, viewing and experiencing yourself as if you were constantly being watched?

For me these questions somehow all intertwine, through the obsession with how one is seen affects one's behavior, more so the way that one experiences their behavior. Namely, a hyper-awareness of one's own behavior; of how one should be, behave and be seen in this world. In this case, emphasizing the "being seen," and the affect that has on our behavior and presentations of ourselves. Looking at an internalization of the way, one is viewed from the outside, becoming an internal state of mind. An embodiment of that state of mind then again, translates to the outside... in the way we behave, the way we contain ourselves to perhaps "fit in?"

In this regard I wanted to look into "self-objectification," a term defined as: "the adoption of a third-person perspective on the body ... , ... occurring when individuals treat themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated. ¹" My interest in this term takes me on a ride, wondering about this issue not being only a personal conflict, but having become a collective experience... this wandering leads me to questioning this personal conflict of self-objectification becoming a social choreography?... Affecting the way we move, behave, and experience the world, as well as in our relations with others, affecting our behavioral constructs, social choreographies.

I will contextualize my ideas through Andrew Hewitt's writings on social choreography and the aesthetic continuum.

¹ Winn, Lara, and Randolph Cornelius. "Self-Objectification and Cognitive Performance: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *NCBI:Frontiers in Psychology* (January 2020)

“dance as the production and presentation of social order; and dance as the articulation and disposition of bodies at both work and play. To examine choreography thus is necessarily to follow two trajectories: one tracing the ways in which everyday experience might be aestheticized (dance aestheticizes the most fundamental and defining motor attributes of the human animal); and another tracing the ways in which “the aesthetic” is, in fact, sectioned off and delineated as a distinct realm of experience. This is what I mean by the aesthetic continuum of social choreography. ²”

For my research I am more interested in the second trajectory of examining choreography that Hewitt explains. For my research that translates into looking into how society has aesthetically conditioned us to experience our bodies in a certain way, and how that conditioning has shaped our psychological experiences and thereby affected the way we present ourselves.

2. First steps

In order to attain a physical grasp of these concepts, my focus was to view the principles of behavior, rather than the actuality, especially regarding connections with others; being seen and communicating. When it comes to behavior it interests me to see how something that we have learned should make sense to us, tends to be pointless, or even absurd, it makes sense to us through our common understanding of the thing, emphasis on “common.”...Community... seeing behavior as a social phenomenon, a social choreography.

Social choreography as something that a society develops together through experiencing life together, figuring things out, copying each other, wondering what is expected, and what is not... What is acceptable? And together a society somehow builds a common movement language, that we all tend to follow. We all follow certain guidelines, we have a similar understanding of physical gestures, of how to be, behave and be seen in different scenarios.

For my work I wanted to use these principles to create our own world, our own community. A community of three behaliens, creating our own guidelines, our own

² Andrew Hewitt, *Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 19, Z-lib.org.

understanding... our own movement language. We did that through trying to rediscover scenarios known to us and our entry point into those scenarios was viewing ourselves as creatures from outer space, aliens perhaps? Aliens experiencing human scenarios. This way of looking at it was somehow very relatable to our real life experiences, especially where we experience ourselves as being out of place, a feeling of not belonging where we are. These scenario-related sensations we found to produce a sensitivity and hyper-awareness of how one should be, behave and be seen. In a way as if you were perceiving yourself from the outside, objectively reviewing every single move you make. The alien perspective was in a way a thought for us to access those physical experiences in a different space, the dance studio, and how they emerge in our bodies when allowed to be seen through shedding light on them. Simply allowing that experience to be seen, not hiding this physical tension and hesitation, but allowing it to be, and to affect our movements and relations with each other.

My task was to view our physical patterns through the way we experience the world psychologically. Reviewing the way we feel in certain scenarios, how is that psychological state embodied? It is not about acting what that feeling is, rather, shedding light through embodiment. Embodying the physical state already embedded in the psychological experience... what is already there? Reviewing the scenarios where we are hyper-aware of our objective presentation, of our behavior; how does that hyper-awareness affect us? And how does it affect the way we connect with others?

In our experience the psychological state of perceiving ourselves from the outside emerges physically in a hyper-awareness and hesitation. To get a grasp of those qualities together as a trio, we worked with tension in the body, through tensing the whole body it became hyper-aware. We worked with putting the body into different positions, at first we worked with the clichés of power posing and sensing what kind of affect it had on us. Then taking that sensation towards encountering each other and being hesitant towards one another. This physical tension and hesitation created a very interesting state of mind, a state of sensitivity and awareness, and that state became a red thread throughout the working process.

3. Studio work: Working methods

In the studio I worked mostly with improvisation and improvisational tasks. Those improvisational tasks developed through the working process and became more and more clear. Some of them were thrown out as the concept developed, some of them merged together and some became their own scene. As the improvisational tasks became clearer in their essence, and us as a trio started having a clear and common understanding and sensations embodied in the tasks, I was able to create a structured composition using the physicality that emerged from the tasks. By doing that I was able to structure the whole piece quite detailed without sacrificing the essence and the sensations that derived from discovering the tasks together in an improvisation.

Some of the improvisation tasks were, for example:

- hesitant contact
- to be physically contained and hyper-aware of all of your actions.
- powerposes, molding yourself into positions of conforming to the masculine ideas of being empowered. Seeing it as an outside force, forcing oneself into those positions.
- -party improvisation where one is not allowed to dance fully but on the inside is screaming to burst out.
- to be aware of your behavior in relation to the people around you, figuring out how to be through copying one another.

In all of these tasks what physically emerged was somehow a discomfort, a physical tension, but also a sense of awkwardness and silliness. A state of being unsure of how to be, behave and be seen. A sentence emerged from working on these qualities: “Working abnormally hard on being normal.” The part of the sentence “abnormally” gave space for silliness and absurdity without moving away from the essence. This sentence then became an umbrella term for all the actions throughout the rest of the process as well as in the piece itself.

“Feeling out of place in an unknown space. Together they are figuring out how to behave. You see them, they see you. They desire being seen whilst wanting to disappear, to blend in, working abnormally hard on being normal.”

To get a sense of how these concepts were embedded in us, we worked with communication between each other, both working with and against each other, which created this hyper-awareness and hesitation, creating a physical tension... “working abnormally hard on being normal” As the process went on we started developing a movement vocabulary and became a team. A team of three “behaliens.” Working together on figuring out how to be, behave and be seen in this world.

First we found this tension working as a force between each other, when improvising from the notion of hesitant contact, wanting to connect and be in physical touch, but being hesitant towards that touch; what happens if we are hyper-aware and hyper-sensitive, from toes to head, during an encounter? We also looked at the breath in this regard. I created a rule, that whenever we'd face each other, hesitantly we'd find a position, breathe in twice to hold it, to let it go and move on. This created a high tension within the encounter, and an interesting movement quality, rhythm, and pattern. As the process went on, us performers became more of a team, together “working abnormally hard on being normal”, together figuring out how to be, behave, and be seen. The hesitation and tension in our encounters developed into an “us behaliens” against encountering the audience.

We worked with molding ourselves, molding ourselves with tension, closed eyes, into a form, a powerful form? A powerful capsule of what seems to be a human being? before opening the eyes, molding ourselves with intensity before allowing ourselves to be seen by the audience. I once heard that to be a good communicator you should only look each person in the eye for three seconds, so, that is what we did. A rule, find eyes to look into, and count, one, two, three... on to the next eyes, and count, one, two, three... and so it went, producing lovely? meaningful? encounters with the audience members.

The eyes and eye contact are one example of gestures that are known to us that I used as a tool for creating movement situations. I looked into gestures, body language, that we have embodied so well as conditioned humans that we barely notice them in

ourselves. In the studio our physical task was to rediscover them; what are these actions if we do them actively with the intension as if we were learning them, through copying, for the first time? ... again... “working abnormally hard on being normal”... being sensitive towards fitting in, being like the other humans. This approach created moments in the piece for example with the eye contact, becoming an eye-gaze-funky-town-dance, and similarly with shoulder shrugs, developing into a complex movement phrase through copying each-other.

Regarding this notion of rediscovering movements we overlook in everyday life, I want to reflect on Hewitt’s distinction between a gesture and an action in regard to comedy and by doing that relating it to the movements of the behaliens. Hewitt describes a gesture as a movement where a mental state expresses itself outwardly without any aim or gain. Gesture, thus defined, is different from an action, which is intentional and a conscious movement ³.

In Hewitt’s context the comedy lies in the movements as gestures, accidental movements. In the context of my piece the absurdity, perhaps comedy? Lies in the movements being actions. The behaliens’ movements were in total control, abnormal control. The actions may have been ridiculous, but they were actions, for they were in control and done with awareness, a hyper-awareness of how to be, behave and be seen in this world. I will reflect on this in relation to the notion of the uncanny appearing in our performances as the behaliens were being seen.

4. Composition

For the piece I wanted to work with composition as a behavioral structure for the behaliens and as a journey through their findings and solutions on how to be, behave and be seen by the audience. In this regard I am intrigued with Hewitt’s notion of the human being essentially social, and how intelligence is experienced as intelligence when it is in touch with other intelligences ⁴. As for us as humans living in a community this, most often, is true. For the behaliens, this is also true. How together, everything can be found intelligent, has no need to be questioned, through encouraging each other

³ Hewitt, *Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement*, 104.

⁴ Hewitt, *Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement*, 98.

and figuring out the movement language as a trio, they became confident in their actions, as if it all made sense, at least for a while...

To give a taste of my compositional translation for the behaliens' behavior in regards with "being seen" by the audience, I will describe the first moments of the piece.

Blackout, "Best of My Love" is playing in the darkness. Three spotlights appear, the behaliens dance freely, for their back is turned against the audience, they are free, for they are not aware of being seen. Blackout. Spotlight appears again and they appear again turning towards the audience as they squeeze their eyes to close them, their body is tense, fists closed, wanting to ignore their knowledge of the audience seeing them. Blackout, they disappear, and appear again, now at the dead front of the stage, awfully close to the audience. As they do they turn incredibly slowly, pivoting in the spot, trembling with tension due to the hesitation towards being seen, they open their eyes, the tension remaining in the body whilst looking into the audience's eyes...

The compositional decisions all derived from the notion of the three behaliens working together and discovering, how they would want to be seen by the audience, having nothing to work with but their love for funky music, work ethic and their confidence in each other. Through those parameters they created their own common movement language, by looking at each other, copying, and creating complex movement patterns. When the movement language had been established, I had the freedom to play around with the composition, referencing different movements that would occur throughout the piece. Allowing the movements to be seen in repetition, constantly changing the behaliens' intentions and sensations towards those same movements. To put it simply, in the piece, the behaliens figured the movements out as a team, then performed those movements with confidence, to then physically and vocally, by laughing, commenting on what they had just done. Though, never leaving that same movement language, just changing their intention towards it, how the movement is physically done and performed through a psychological intention.

As their confident, sure of themselves, selves, they even created a phrase, a phrase being made through accumulation, adding on to each other's movements, ending up with a complex, quite dancy dance phrase. The movements of that phrase had also already been established through an action of canon between the behaliens, one at a time producing a movement and the other ones confusingly copying. Those movements then became the movement structure of the dance phrase. I will describe that phrase as

the behaliens' take on modern dance, no logic behind it, just for fun. The logic lies through what principle it was presented in the piece, establishing the movements themselves through canon and then establishing the complex phrasing of those movements through the accumulation. A canon and an accumulation can somehow be read just like how our movements become structured and organized in the real world in copying each other, through our efforts of fitting in.

5. The performance: What appeared?

My mentor for the creative and working process, Rósa Ómarsdóttir, after seeing the performance mentioned to me the behaliens' performativity being "uncanny." She reflected that our performative states, presenting ourselves as these behaliens, appeared to her as uncanny ⁵. The uncanny "concerns a sense of unfamiliarity which appears at the very heart of the familiar, or else a sense of familiarity which appears at the very heart of the unfamiliar. ⁶" The uncanny can be described as "the thoughts and feelings which may arise when the familiar becomes unfamiliar or the unfamiliar becomes strangely familiar. ⁷" I want to emphasize the uncanny as "the thoughts and feelings which may arise" ... therefore the uncanny is not objectively present, but rather an effect. Therefore, I can reflect on not seeing and including the idea of the uncanny earlier in the process. The uncanny appears as an effect, an experience on how the work, seeing the behaliens is experienced ⁸. Though, when reflecting back on our working process and our practice, our practice on rediscovering our behavior through "working abnormally hard on being normal" ... perhaps the uncanny was exactly what we were practicing, without being aware... working as if the familiar were unfamiliar... "working abnormally hard on being normal."

I want to reflect on the behaliens' performativity; what establishes their performativity? What are these characters? In the working process the characters emerged through actions, through embodying psychological states of scenario-related experiences.

⁵ A conversation with my mentor, Rósa Ómarsdóttir.

⁶ Andrew Benett and Nicholas Royale, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 34, Z-lib.org.

⁷ Andrew and Nicholas, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 38.

⁸ Andrew and Nicholas, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 41.

“Becoming characters through embodiment. Embodying a psychological state, creatures of the mind, representing a mental state of confusion, a confusion of how to be, behave and be seen. These creatures are somehow unable to hide, they will always shine no matter how hard they try.

Three “behaliens” representing a condition, a state of mind... a physical state of mind? The voices in our heads? The confident, yet so fragile, physical state of mind, of figuring out how to be, behave and be seen in this world.”

As the composition developed, our main challenge as performers was to not allow ourselves to become too theatrical or too silly, commenting on what we were doing through our performativity as we were doing it. The challenge was to let the movement material and the composition speak for itself by us being truly focused on what we were doing, fully embodying our actions, as if we were rediscovering the compositional material over and over again. By doing that, through our performativity we were also able to stay true to the tasks and ideas which lead us through the working and creative process itself. It was satisfying for me as a creator and performer that the parameters for our research in creating the movement material and composition was as important, even more important, as we performed for the audience. For us the entire process arriving to the piece was very present in our performance and became our tool for delivering what we had to show. This performance aspect of the process I am proud of, because I believe that being true to the essence of the parameters of the process’ findings in the performance itself is challenging in a piece that is in the end quite compositionally complex. I believe that a part of us as a trio being able to stay true to the essence through a composition was in me being a co-performer whilst being the creator. By doing both I was able to develop the process and composition through experiencing the material directly, in my body, along with Bjarney and Marta, developing the material through improvising with them. Therefore, being able to stay true to all our sensations of the physical tasks, instead of me being an outside eye looking aesthetically at the process and Marta’s and Bjarney’s experiences. The composition only came together in the final week. We had already established our understanding of the movement vocabulary and compositional principles together through playing and doing. So compositionally, in the end it was only a matter of putting things together, creating details and refining. This was truly satisfying, and for

me the process tied together perfectly. I was especially happy that our joy in the process and for the tasks also got to shine through the final composition and performances.

Conclusion

In the beginning of my process, I had not imagined that my final result would become funky or absurd. Since my initial interests regarding experiences of behavior being conditioned through the expectations of presenting oneself, were quite habitual, contained, analytical...boring... I was afraid that my piece would not express my physical and choreographic interests, that are more extravagant and expressive, to put it simply, a desire for fun.

I was pleasantly surprised to discover how effortlessly theoretical topics can be dealt with in abstract ways when using the body and the choreographic as a tool. Through experiencing this through my own ideas and concepts in relation to my own practice in the studio it became so clear to me how dance is the perfect medium to shed light on aspects of everyday experiences that otherwise remain hidden. In my own brain theory can become a very analytical and purely academic experience. To deal with my theoretical interests in the studio I was able to create my own world, my own experience, my own understanding of the topics, which then fed my own theoretical and analytical understanding of these concepts and ideas. It was an experience of theory and practice feeding each other, the theory feeding the practice and in the end the practice feeding the theory.

In my piece dance became the medium for shedding light on a state of mind, a state of confusion of how to be, behave and be seen in this world. By physically dealing with the mundane topic of behavior, by allowing it to be seen, being abnormally aware of what we were doing, so in control, “working abnormally hard on being normal,” completely absurd... the behaliens point out the absurdity of being a human being.

Bibliography

E-books:

Benett, Andrew, and Nicholas Royale. *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. London and New York: Routledge, 2014. Z-lib.org.

Hewitt, Andrew. *Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005. Z-lib.org.

Web sources:

Winn, Lara, and Randolph Cornelius. "Self-Objectification and Cognitive Performance: A Systematic Review of the Literature" *NCBI:Frontiers in Psychology* (January 2020)
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6997128/>

List of images

Image nr.1: Photograph shot by Íris Ólafsdóttir during the rehearsal period. The image was used as content to promote the work