

Hippie Island

Lying on the floor, every muscle I never knew I had was in pain. My bare feet suffered, covered in blisters. A satisfied, exhausted grin was smeared over my face.

After a month of movement, of dancing and of sweating the experience was coming to an end. It was the last day of my third Impulstanz course, and I had just performed movements and actions I never saw myself capable of doing.

But how did I get here?

Over the past years I've always enjoyed the Impulstanz parties in Vienna. The many people from all over the globe descending onto the viennese bars, clubs and theaters to move in their mesmerizing ways. I had always watched those dancers in awe, often wishing I could be a part of that group that floats over the dancefloor so easily. Being in the moment and in the music, oblivious to their surroundings. And while I watched, my main dance-moves remained very Austrian; a bobbing of the head here, a tapping of the foot there. Mostly found outside of any rhythm or tact.

I was keen to explore. The idea of learning and experiencing new things was always there. A year earlier I had spent some time doing expressive theater workshops and I sought something similar over the summer. A challenge and something new.

And so I dared. Although it wasn't easy. Not only being such a novice when it comes to dancing, but the sheer number of workshops and courses overwhelmed me. Even today when I sign up for courses, I often have no idea which course was what sort of dance, or what the pre-requisitions would be. I stayed focused on the levels, and chose "beginner" courses for the first round.

Arriving at the Arsenal, the old military compound with its massive brick buildings and the Impulstanz headquarters, I entered a parallel universe. A small pool, a DJ, a cafe, bar and a unique amicable atmosphere where people of all ages laugh, mingle and hang out all day, welcomed me with open arms. This didn't feel like Vienna at all – it felt like a hippie island far away from the everyday life. A bubble where smiles, love and movement reigned. And it felt inviting.

I had heard of the japanese dance "Butoh" before, so I decided to make it my first choice. As I entered the huge halls of the arsenal for my first lesson, the wide variety of people surprised me. Yes, there were those beautiful dancers that I had hoped to meet; but there were so many others as well. Men and

women of all shapes, ages and sizes; some with anticipating smiles, others like me; frightened of what would come next and treading new grounds.

Over the next 5 days I would be invited to go on a journey; Butoh is a rather recent form of dance - taught by the late master Ko Murobushi, his techniques and explanations opened a door into the Japanese post-war traumas – learning history through dance. With tension and relaxation of muscles, contortions of body, face and mind, the whole class was smoothly guided to push personal limits. The experience was exhilarating. The intensity of the workshop opened up the mind, and the whole class seemed to float after every session. Embracing one another with smiles.

After the course we would have coffee outside by the little pool, speak to strangers and exchange insights about workshops and which ones to attend next. The Impulstanz dynamic was more than just a workshop – it started seeping into the everyday.

The five days of Japanese intensity were followed by a weekend of just hanging around the headquarters and soaking up the peaceful atmosphere of the festival.

And so my second week started; Contact-Improvisation. Another dance I had heard so much about, the beginners course was a good introduction of what it was, its history and what we were going to do and experience. Sadly, this is the one detriment of not knowing what will happen.

During the next days, there were no limits pushed, there was no satisfying exhaustion after class. It was interesting, an experience – but not more than that. And after the fourth time the gigantic co-dancer called Hans had me in his sweaty chokehold, I decided this wasn't quite my thing.

By the third day, my motivation vanished, and I didn't feel like going to class anymore. I wanted more. I wanted that personal confrontation that Butoh had given me; to explore my physical and mental boundaries.

In the third week I started researching the timetable, I took a time out to sit and watch different workshops and jotted down names of teachers and techniques. I was on a mission. And I found it.

I still don't know how I would describe the last course I attended that year. It was pure, powerful movement, with hints of contact improvisation and using the body as a tool to lift one another. It was also an advanced course.

Over the next few days the dancers and I lifted one another, jumped, crawled on the floor, flew through the air and endure the aches and pains that the hours of movement inflicted on us. We also trained for the big finale. The move in which one of the partners runs towards the other, jumps, spins, and is caught in full flight to be grounded gently.

Seeing our instructor demonstrate it on the first day, I thought I would never be able to pull off something so powerful. And looking at the faces around me, I clearly wasn't the only one.

But we tried. We trained. We worked hard. And in the few hours within the next five days, we trained our bodies to the limits. We had a goal.

On the final day, I looked at the lovely spanish dancer called Martha, racing towards me in full speed. With the last bout of energy in me, I caught her mid air and lowered her down elegantly, not making a sound. We laughed and hugged afterwards, fell to the floor and exhaled the exhaustion from the past weeks. And there I was, staring up into the ceiling so far away, floating in the Impulstanz bubble.

Movements I thought were impossible, energies I had no idea of having were released in those weeks of the festival.

That night of the last workshop we all went to the Impulstanz lounge together. We wanted to celebrate that special, intense bond that we had built up over the course of that final workshop. And we danced. We performed the movements we had learned on the dancefloor. And I was part of it. I was in the moment, in the music, oblivious to my surrounding. That night was ours.

Pictures of the Impulstanz festival can be found here:

<https://klettermayer-art.com/movement>