

Jorge Crecis

Life is a Marathon

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Jorge Crecis has distinguished himself as one of the most unique practitioners of his generation. His work is marked by a searching mind that brings to his creations mathematical precision and a unique ensemble energy derived from the risk factors and rule-bound games he designs for his choreographies. For Crecis, group practice is the execution of an ethic: without wide-awake collaboration we simply cannot survive. This requires a certain mental attitude, trained through action. His commitment to presence, and to ensuring a heightened state of focus at each moment of performance, derives from his experience of Dervish Whirling, an ancient Sufi practice in which turning on the spot for extended periods of time induces states of trance. His research into how to reproduce the psycho-physical condition achieved in whirling has become his training methodology *Towards Vivencia* (<https://towardsvivencia.com/>), 'vivencia' being a Spanish word for 'experience', or better translated as 'lived experience'. This was crafted during a decade of studying for a PhD at Goldsmiths in the Department of Theatre and Performance.

That Crecis chose Goldsmiths' interdisciplinary environment for his research is indicative of his idiosyncratic approach to dance-making in today's world. He read enthusiastically into psychology, neuroscience, anthropology, phenomenology, theatre training methodologies and performance studies as he heuristically forged his own system for replicating altered states of consciousness. His entire oeuvre since might be understood as an expression of Merleau-Ponty's assertion that the body, understood in phenomenological terms, is "no longer conceived as an object of the world but as our means of communicating with it" (Merleau-Ponty 2004, p.106), a discourse that, whilst criticised for generalising subjectivity, has proved a meaningful tool with which to upend the deleterious inheritance of Cartesian dualism. Merleau-Ponty's legacy has been to link experience to consciousness as corporeally constituted: perception is embodied (Grosz, Lakoff and Johnson). It is such ideas on how consciousness operates within and from proprioceptive awareness that drives Crecis' creative impetus.

The pragmatic quest is to create a space of safe danger in which the individual submits to an organised group dynamic, reaching beyond their safety zone to enter one in which reflexes are excited and concentration is at its maximum. Crecis' project is both an adventure into what the body can do with others in space and time, and a socially committed endeavour to raise the bar in terms of collectivising

‘peak performance’ as a human resource. He passionately believes that such practice has the potential to generate real change in people’s lived experience.

In 2014, Crecis co-founded, with the Palestinian Samar Haddad King, *min tala*, a Pan-Arab dance company that uses contemporary dance as a peacekeeping, personal and professional development tool in areas of conflict in the Middle East. This is just one example of the way he connects his politics directly with his practice. A consistent theme emerges: commitment to exploring how dance can speak about human society as a collaborative organism. A socialist spirit is vividly practised in his work, posited thematically as task-based group movement scores, and amplified in the revealed labour of the dancer. Ensemble actions within his choreographic purpose equal social necessity: cooperation. There is no message as such, yet his entire scenographic oeuvre - in the total sense of the word that embraces everything on stage including performers - connotes meaning. His signature material elements provide compositional functionality: jeopardy against which the dancers must collaborate to ensure the safety of all.

Inspired by his involvement in the Madrid Occupy Movement protests in May 2011, *Kingdom*, created for Scottish Dance Theatre in 2014, challenged ten performers to construct a six-metre human shelter using eighty bamboo poles and one hundred and twenty pieces of red rope, an endeavour completed in a challenging time frame before the spectators’ eyes. Crecis here explored teamwork as compositional substance. A three-dimensional structure evolves during the performance, the company creating this support for fluid movement that echoes the quality of bamboo itself, whilst alluding to the fact that many of the world’s dwellings are constructed of precisely such poor material, vulnerable to flood and earthquake. This pragmatic yet poetic dramaturgy aims to replicate the experience of cooperative struggle, translating the Occupy movement into a carefully designed concerted effort at building and moving together. *Trans La Valo*, created in Beijing for Nine Dance Theatre in 2013, addresses urban motifs, exploring unpredictability and the imperative of social cohesion for group survival for “A crowd will always be stronger than an individual” (<https://jorgecrecis.com/trans-la-valo-en/>). Here, obstacles to clear free space demand that the dancers negotiate a constantly mobile scenography: swinging perspex boxes, inside which are sculptural forms connoting cityscapes. Performers dodge this potentially threatening installation as if teaching the pedestrian the necessary art of crowd flow in densely populated conditions. The choreography reminds us, typically, of a sport event.

Born in Spain, Crecis graduated with a degree in Sports Science in 2003, studied contemporary dance at the Royal Conservatory of Madrid, worked as a professional dancer (performing with Candoco 2007 - 2008) and taught at London School of Contemporary Dance at The Place (2008 - 2019). A competitive Karate practitioner, trained from the age of six, there is more than a trace of martial arts in his vocabulary, blended with dancerly somatic plasticity. His choreographies deploy patterns, systems, real actions and high-octane riffs. Despite his love of virtuostic movement, derived from synthesising sport, martial arts and dance principles, Crecis does not promote his performers as its hero(in)es. His works are not about showing off but showing how. It is as if he were the love child of Trisha Brown and Bruce Lee, with an influential elder relative, Bertolt Brecht, contributing advice. There is certainly, if unconsciously, *verfremdungsteffekt* (alienation effect) (Brecht, 2014) at work, given his impulse to dislodge the spectators' and dancers' comfort or habituation, provoking awareness of the live situation that each are engaged with. And, just as Brecht established the ensemble as an expression of Marxist egalitarianism, there are no star turns, only imagination given form in a range of inventive strategies.

The success of Crecis' early works has led to a global career today. His creations have been performed on main stages including Scottish Dance Theatre, Sadler's Wells, the Royal Opera House and the prestigious New York City Centre (USA). *Twelve*, originally created as *36* in 2011 and commissioned in various adaptations for companies internationally, including ŻfinMalta Dance Ensemble (2019), was awarded the Best Dance Prize in Cuba, 2017, and proved to be Carlos Acosta Danza's most successful and frequently performed work. Conceived to articulate his PhD, *Twelve* is surely the *pièce de résistance* of *Towards Vivencia*. Demanding from the dancers maximum physical and mental disposition, this work characteristically plays with sport and mathematical elements. Illuminated one-and-a-half litre bottles of water are thrown and caught with great speed, flying through the air like fireflies in the night. This complicates enthrallingly as the stage constantly mutates, a shifting interplay of bottles and bodies. The dancers themselves decide the direction of the game, improvising according to a given numerical score. Like footballers realigning themselves in the field, they shift positions to send and receive the constant hail of plastic missiles. This is Crecis' genius at its height. He has created a theatrical event that is highly complex yet stems from a very simple idea: the bottles themselves are non-human bodies - filled with the amount of water proportional to that in the human. *Twelve* sits somewhere between sport, dance, athletics, ritual and circus. Thrilling, because the risk is palpably real, audiences engage enthusiastically with this

intensely beautiful event. Depending on absolute presence of mind, and wide-awake experience, *Twelve* is the creative expression of *Vivencia*.

Towards Vivencia is a training system rooted in uncovering how the nervous system works so that performance presence is taken to a very high level. It involves the ritualisation of actions, from the peeling of an egg to throwing objects at speed between players. The purpose is to encourage the skill of multi-tasking, achieved through playfulness and mindfulness. Participants learn to tie knots, lash bamboos together, and perform movement sequences repetitively, whilst simultaneously obeying rules of rapidly shifting sequencing. Typical of Crecis' approach is to start simple and keep adding more and more layers of intricacy. *Towards Vivencia* is designed to produce healthy peak performance. Safety is priority at all times. There are no accidents, he will insist, only mistakes, and mistakes arise with loss of concentration. Another feature of the training is for the performer to be fully aware of when they are in this zone and when not. Cooling down, reflecting and articulating are as important as learning how to enter the zone itself. This is its proprioceptive gift.

Towards Vivencia has proved highly successful. One thousand five hundred people have participated globally to date. Crecis has trained four tutors and is now launching the methodology online. Professional and layperson can engage alike in its call for presence. Unlike mere exercise, and refusing to claim spiritual reward (he would rather leave that to the individual than claim to cultivate it), Crecis presents an urgently needed antidote to a culture in which social and physical comfort - as well as constant psychological reassurance and increased controls to avoid upset or disturbance - risks producing a generation of risk-averse, defenceless individuals. As the world gets tougher, he seems to be suggesting, so might our need to work together in peak conditions of awareness and empathy, to push ourselves into commitment to movement in every sense, and to "Throwing the Body into the Fight" (Connolly, 2013).

Crecis is more than aware that his mission that began before dance now surpasses it. He knows that it is possible, within a relatively short period of training, to develop human potential. In this respect he is deeply connected to the paratheatrical experiments of the Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski, whose 'paratre' project in the 1970's removed the spectator-performer divide and led selected groups of international individuals into tests of endurance, ritual, reflex and collaboration with natural

environments (Kumiega, 1985). Crecis' version of this search to release atrophied human ability contributes a very specific, guided and repeatable curriculum that enables any participant who chooses to engage and develop themselves. In this sense, he is both a dedicated teacher and an insistently democratic choreographic artist.

Crecis' creative sensibility has also touched human emotion, handled with characteristic philosophical reflection, avoiding sentimentality. *Through & Out* (2016) is a dance-skipping performance that connects with the emotional states a marathon runner endures over twenty-six point two miles. Performing solo with a live musician, Crecis skips as he narrates an autobiographical text. He tells that the mental stages in a runner's experience echo the stages in grief. He anchors this in the story of his own truncated father-son relationship. Intensely personal, this work applies Crecis' own athleticism to comprehend and articulate the (metaphorical as it turns out) death of a parent, who we discover has violently abused his son. In a startling coup-de-théâtre, he announces that the facts of his story have been false. His father never died, never taught him to ride a bicycle, never took him fishing. What died on the night he has described was a relationship, since it had been violated "He died the night he slammed me into the wall and tried to kill me". This is a work about taking responsibility. Neither maudlin nor mawkish, Crecis' self-exposure urges the spectator to consider where we might also draw the line with regard to human behaviour, where our ethics lie. In performing an act of perseverance with his skipping rope, he is asking what the body is capable of, why it moves, how it stores memory and trauma, what pain means as a psycho-physical experience, and, ultimately, what it means alive and dead. Through poetic autobiography juxtaposed with the simplicity of repetitive action, life itself is declared a marathon of survival and endurance.

References

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