

Dusan Tynek talks about his BAM Fisher debut

Dusan Tynek talks about his new dances, which weave science and mythology at the BAM Fisher

By Gia Kourlas Thu Aug 29 2013



Dusan Tynek Dance Theatre performs at the BAM Fisher

Photograph: Whitney Browne

Dusan Tynek talks about his journey from the Czech Republic to the BAM Fisher stage, including his "revelatory" first experience of watching modern dance (Paul Taylor Dance Company), becoming a member of the Merce Cunningham Repertory Understudy Group, dancing for Lucinda Childs, working in Europe and, finally, his return to New York where he formed his own company.

As contemporary choreographers go, Dusan Tynek is a rare breed: He likes music. He has a dance company. For his season at the BAM Fisher, he celebrates his troupe's tenth anniversary. But this year, he is scrapping music to explore the potential of rhythms found in the body. He spoke about his new works—*Stereopsis*, which is related to the ability to perceive depth, and *Romanesco Suite*, a work inspired by fractals. For Tynek, it doesn't hurt to pepper his dances with a little science. As you'll see, he loves both.

Time Out New York: Your program is described as a confluence of science and mythology. What does that mean?

Dusan Tynek: [*Laughs*] It comes from my background, because originally I studied to be a scientist. I was a biology major in college. I was born in the Czech Republic—well, originally Czechoslovakia—and I came here when I was 19. It was already after the Velvet Revolution. One of my teachers was from California, and she invited me to stay with her and take English lessons. Her name is Cynthia Costell. Both of her sons were already in college, and she had spent some time in the Czech Republic in '68, which was also an important time historically. She fell in love with the region and its people and when she read what happened after the Velvet Revolution—everything got much freer and everyone was pro-Democracy and the Communist government was banished. She decided she wanted to do something for the new democracy and thought that the best way would be to go and teach English. I became one of her students. We became very good friends, and in the end she offered me and another student to come to California. We went to an intensive, intense English school. Originally, my English was almost nonexistent.

Time Out New York: Where were you?

Dusan Tynek: Palo Alto. You can imagine it was a complete culture shock. I had never really traveled outside the country before. I'd gone to Denmark the year before that, but that was about it. That was the first time I was on a plane. I really grew up under Communism. We did not have a lot of things.

Time Out New York: How old were you when the political situation started changing?

Dusan Tynek: I was 15 or 16. But my parents were progressive and very much against the system. Everyone I knew was against it; in a way, it felt a little bit like theater, because everyone was pretending like everything was okay, and we were all rooting for this horrible power—we had to do parades and to cheer for the Communist Party, while we were chuckling under our breath. It was a very interesting time. I tried to go to university in the Czech Republic; I wanted to go into biology, but it was so limited how many students they would take and I didn't have any connections; at that time, you still had to be connected to people in power, so I skipped a year and went to work at an IT company and that's when I met Cindy. I remember the headaches of trying to speak English. The guy I was there with—we decided from the beginning that we would not speak Czech at all, because it would be so easy to slip. I think that's why we progressed so fast. Within three months, we actually enrolled in a community college. [Laughs] I went there for a semester and during that time I was thinking I would love to go to a university, and so Cindy encouraged me to apply to universities and colleges in the States. The best offer was from Bard College.

Time Out New York: What did you study?

Dusan Tynek: Science. Hard-core. At the same time, I did dance as well because already when I was 14...it's kind of my own little secret: I did competitive ballroom dancing for about five years.

Time Out New York: You can't gloss over something like that!

Dusan Tynek: [Laughs] I was 14 when I started. I had a steady dance partner, and we went to all these championships, but before we made it to the international level, I left. We were very good. We were winning all the time; there is a structure you go through—you start at D and graduate to A, and you get to the international level and all that. We were stepping up the ladder, but before we made it to the international level, I left.

Time Out New York: What was your specialty?

Dusan Tynek: Latin.

Time Out New York: How did you even get involved in ballroom dance?

Dusan Tynek: Well, my father is a jazz musician, so there is that kind of head. I definitely had a musical upbringing, and I went to music school for a long time and played the flute for about 12 years. I played drums. I always wanted to play piano, but my parents couldn't afford to buy a piano, nor did we have a place for one in our apartment. [Laughs] They said, "Here's a flute." I was always artistically inclined, but just never thought it could be a real profession. Especially growing up in a system and the mentality there—it was a hobby.

Time Out New York: Was ballroom dancing a way out of the system, or a way to move up?

Dusan Tynek: I was very passionate, but never saw it like that. We were on the road competing all the time. A couple of years ago my brother, who is a little bit younger, said, "You were actually never home. I felt like I was an only child." I was so sad! I didn't realize that at the time; it was just part of my life. In the Czech Republic, we had school for nine hours and right after, I would go for training. When I left, I left the ballroom there as well. Of course, I couldn't resist dance so when I went to Bard, I saw that they were offering flamenco classes. I *always* wanted to do flamenco. In ballroom, it's not the real dances. You don't do a real tango. It's adjusted and completely different from the Argentine tango. Or the rumba or paso doble.

Time Out New York: How so?

Dusan Tynek: It's a standardized, competitive thing: You're only allowed certain steps. I enrolled with an incredible woman, Aileen Passloff—it's her fault that I'm doing what I'm doing now. She saw that I had a sense of rhythm and from day one, she encouraged me: "Why don't you take ballet class?" I was 20, a late bloomer, but obviously I had danced and had the ability to move—the rhythm, the coordination.

Time Out New York: Did you stay close to her during that time?

Dusan Tynek: Absolutely. She was really my mentor. She encouraged me to try acting, to look at different sensibilities. You need to have a presence and know how to project and how to be onstage. Throughout the four years, I was doing science and dance and toward the end, the dance started to take over a little bit. I had a semester where I decided I was going to escape dance, so I went to Queensland, James Cook University, in Australia. The appeal was that they had no dance at the university; I wanted to just concentrate on science. I went to the zoology department, and we did a lot of field studies, so we would be catching possums or lizards in the wild and tagging them and testing them. I loved that part, but I had a realization in the end: I really missed dance, and I missed the social part of it. In science, you are in a lab or an office, and you do research. You are by yourself most of the time, and you write a paper that a few people will read about some frog on a mountaintop. I wasn't ready to commit to this one little thing. I wanted to be more of a generalist. Art was just calling to me. I thought, I could do science any time but I can't dance when I get too old. That was my line to myself a little bit. [Laughs] Another wonderful teacher at Bard encouraged me to take Cunningham classes while I was still there, and I found out there was an audition at the Cunningham studio for a scholarship. It was when I was graduating, and I really had no plans. I auditioned and they contacted me and said that I got the scholarship.

Time Out New York: How did that go?

Dusan Tynek: It was fantastic and eye-opening. I had never really seen modern-contemporary dance before I came to the States. We had folk dance, ballet, ballroom, but the first big company I saw was Paul Taylor, and it was so revelatory: You don't have to be on pointe and in tutus, you don't have to be a sylph or a fairy. I was just blown away. At Bard, the dance department was very progressive and quite avant-garde. I was so sheltered and shocked by everything. I had taken Cunningham classes at Bard, but experiencing strict Cunningham and meeting Merce and those incredible dancers was phenomenal. I became an understudy.

Time Out New York: Right. You were a member of the Repertory Understudy Group.

Dusan Tynek: Yes. It was a very formative time for me. Merce's philosophy and understanding of time and space was so key, and the clarity of movement was very important for me—to understand that you can create new movement that is not necessarily natural to you. You can break it down and challenge yourself: If I do this with my hip, how is it going to affect my torso? Or what if I fight with the torso and do something completely opposite? It was a means of seeing movement from a different point of view and with different eyes.

Time Out New York: What did you work on as a RUG?

Dusan Tynek: The last piece we were working on was *Biped*. Merce was using RUGs to make some of the movement. We were understudying along with the company, so we were learning all the phrases. It's so abstract and extremely difficult in a way. Everyone is going across the floor, and Merce is watching and giving comments, very quietly and very calmly. Just seeing how we dealt with the impossibilities—he was using LifeForms to choreograph. Computers are amazing; technology can do anything, but then you translate it to a human body, and there are limitations. He was watching how far we could take it or how closely we could replicate the computer version of the dance.

Time Out New York: Did you want to be in the company?

Dusan Tynek: I did. At the beginning, I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do. I really wanted the training and thought it was a wonderful way for me to explore new ways [of moving]. I was dancing with other companies at that time. But then you get pulled into it, because it becomes your world and then suddenly everyone is so passionate about it; I became very passionate about getting into the company, and then there was a point where there was a bit of turnover in the company and so there was this moment where they were considering me and the dancer they were trying to replace was taller than I was.

Time Out New York: Who was it?

Dusan Tynek: I think it was Glen [Rumsey]. I had to measure myself next to the female dancer, and I was shorter even than she was. It was like, Okay, I would have to wait for someone else to leave. I didn't know if I wanted to be around, and there were some people who had been around for three, four years. But then they may never have gotten into the company, so I didn't know if I wanted to do it. I was really an understudy for a year. It was great, but...

Time Out New York: Your sense of confidence can just diminish, right?

Dusan Tynek: Yes. If it's your height or *whatever*. I think it was the right thing. I'm kind of glad that it didn't work out, because then I had an amazing opportunity to work with Lucinda Childs.

Time Out New York: How did that happen?

Dusan Tynek: Some people encouraged me to audition. She hadn't done anything with her company for several years, and she was suddenly getting it together, so I was asked to audition and I got the job. That was the end of my Cunningham years. I thanked Robert Swinston and Merce for what they had done for me, but I had to move on. They were very understanding. It was great, a completely different jump. Even in a more abstract way—Merce's work is abstract. It's about the movement and the execution, but with Lucinda, it goes even deeper into abstraction because it's so much about the structure. You have phrases within a piece that slowly change; her musicality and her spatial arrangement are incredible. The repetition is extremely difficult, and you're working with difficult music: You can't count "1, 2, 3, 4; 1, 2, 3, 4." In a Philip Glass score, you can't really hear the counts in the music—the arpeggios, after a while, all sound pretty much the same, and where your exits and entrances are is so specific. I like that brainy part of it; it appealed to my science brain. I danced with Lucinda for a year. We toured Europe and then had our last performances at BAM. She dissolved the company after that.

Time Out New York: Did you look for another dancing job?

Dusan Tynek: Ton Simons in the Netherlands also had a Cunningham connection. He had studied there for a long time and also had a company in New York, but then he became the artistic director of Dance Works Rotterdam. He offered me a job. Everyone says it's so much better in Europe, so I thought, Why don't I try? It was Cunningham-inflected movement. I felt at home, and I think that's why he picked me: I had that background. But it was a completely different structure. Suddenly, I had a 13-month salary, paid vacations. I never had so much money in my life! We had a building in Rotterdam with offices and studios and Pilates. It was a dream come true. And we had more than 50 performances a year.

Time Out New York: But the choreography is kind of, eh, right?

Dusan Tynek: There were some great things—the dancers are amazing. Everyone has conservatory training; I wasn't completely excited about the work, but the biggest thing for me was that I was missing New York—the scene and the liveliness. And a little bit of the fight, because everything felt handed to you. After a year, I decided to come back to New York. I had danced with so many people by then; I was already making work. I thought, I would love to start my own company. It would be up to me. It's my fault if it

doesn't succeed, it's my success if it does.

Time Out New York: Had you been choreographing a lot?

Dusan Tynek: Yes. At Bard, that was the emphasis. From day one, we were encouraged to choreograph, and after that I put on a show with some friends at Cunningham, and I choreographed in the Netherlands on the company.

Time Out New York: I'm curious about why you started a company. Most choreographers today don't have traditional companies.

Dusan Tynek: Because no one can afford it! I came from the background where there was that model of having a steady group of people, and at the beginning I didn't know what it was going to be or how much employment I could offer them. I started with a season at the Kitchen, which we rented. It was completely packed. It was so exciting and encouraging, so I wanted to continue. I took some people from Lucinda's company and some people that I saw in studios, so it was kind of a pickup company, but then it started to slowly congeal into a more steady group of people, and I have two dancers who have danced with me since day one: Elisa Osborne and Alexandra Berger. One of the main reasons I started a company was that I was predominately interested in creating ensemble work, and it was always my vision to have a year-round repertory company and a structure to support that. To accomplish both successfully you really need a dedicated group of dancers. This can only be done by offering the dancers something in return—some kind of stability. We all benefit and grow from the time spent working together. They understand better what I want, and I know what I can get out of them. I have been working very hard over the past ten years to build my company to a level where I can provide my dancers with regular employment, competitive salaries and benefits, and thanks in large part to BAM's Professional Development Program, we've managed to increase our board and staff and are implementing a plan for long-term sustainability.

Time Out New York: What is that program?

Dusan Tynek: I'm so excited to be a part of this professional development program that was the brainchild of the DeVos Institute [of Arts Management at the Kennedy Center] and BAM. And Joe Melillo and Karen Brooks Hopkins were incredibly generous in the way that they thought of the community of Brooklyn. They wanted to help out artists that are pushed to the side because everything's happening in Manhattan. [BAM's] opera house and the Harvey are kind of it in Brooklyn. Bringing this new venue [BAM Fisher] for smaller groups like us is just groundbreaking. They picked six dance companies from Brooklyn as part of this inaugural year of PDP. We called it the BAM school, and we had amazing sessions about how to run an organization and how to develop a board and how to do fund-raising. Obviously, the organizations involved have been around for a number of years and we have experience doing that, but having someone tell you, "No, you're doing it right," or "This is a different way of doing it." The most important thing for us was that we were paired with these fellows. The DeVos Institute has a program where they help retiring artists to transition into management; our fellows were Richard Chen See from Paul Taylor, Danielle McFall from Momix, and then we started working with Sara Procopio from Shen Wei. It's been more than a year and our PDP program is over—our performance is the culminating event.

Time Out New York: What are you working on this season? What are your unifying ideas for your dance program?

Dusan Tynek: I work a lot with music. That's my upbringing, and I love it. But this year, we did a huge premiere, *Trilogy*, and I've been collaborating with a Serbian artist-composer Aleksandra Vrebalov. We have worked on and off for the past ten years. We come from Eastern Europe and we're immigrants here in New York, both artists; three years ago I heard this piece, *Transparent Walls*, and I thought it was incredible. It was all this brass and wind instruments, and it was very harsh and urban. But it was still a mini-orchestral piece. I decided to choreograph to it; we premiered it at then-DTW and people were saying, "This is so new and so different from what you've done so far." I wanted to add another part to it. Aleksandra had an amazing piece she did for Kronos Quartet called *...hold me, neighbor, in this storm...*; it had a folk feel to it. She wrote it as an antiwar piece. What I found amazing was that she could take folk elements and turn them on their head and make them extremely contemporary, but there was still an underlying folksiness and old-world feel to it, and she used this amazing Serbian, ethnic instrument—the gusle. It's a one-string instrument. It's like a drone. You can't really play scales on it. They would usually recite long poems from the past so it's a little bit like harking back to *The Odyssey*. It's a national instrument; in Serbia, it doesn't have a good name because it's associated with the National Party and what happened in the '90s, so it was an interesting way of using it. That was the second installation of [the trilogy]. I felt the two pieces were connected even though they spanned centuries, in a way. One is very much grounded in the new world. I thought we needed something that would bridge those two, so we decided to make another piece. I commissioned Aleksandra to write a piece for Ethyl to record and play it. We performed the trilogy in Serbia, and it was unbelievable. We're looking to premiere it in New York in 2014.

Time Out New York: How does that relate to this season?

Dusan Tynek: *Trilogy* was so infused with music that I wanted to do something where there was no music, where I didn't have to read the score, where I didn't have to be communicating with the composer and where it was really just about the dance. All of these pieces are very abstract; they're conceptual in a way. There is one piece I'm bringing back from 2010: *Base Pairs*. At the time, they were talking about banning evolution from teaching in the schools. For a European, it sounds like complete insanity.

Time Out New York: For an American, too.

Dusan Tynek: Yes. For most of us! [Laughs] I was thinking of the Bible and of creationism, in juxtaposition with evolution and Darwin. Why do you deny something that has been proven and is visible? So I decided to make this piece. Again, it's very abstract, but I wanted to do this juxtaposition of the Biblical stories, and I thought of Noah's Ark, where animals are put on this giant ship to survive the flood. The ark would be so enormous—how many millions of species of animals do you have? I was

thinking, Let's have the stage be like a little window on a part of this ship. That's how I view the stage.

Time Out New York: Like a portal?

Dusan Tynek: Yes. The choreography happens for couples, and it's basically just passing this stage, or portal: One phrase might pick up another couple, and then that couple disappears, but the phrase continues. So you have the sense that it's much bigger than what you're seeing. I wanted to have text; the only musical accompaniment is a metronome, so it's a very stark, driven beat that is unrelenting, and it represents the time ticking away. The dancers have to be constantly on the beat; it's very complicated. And just to juxtapose the drone of it and the relentlessness, I wanted a feminine voice that would come in. It almost represents a higher power, but I wanted it to be a female. I had a friend, Cynthia Polutanovich, write a poem that would be the opposite of the scientific mind. Basically, it's about a couple that meets and has sex. Lucinda Childs recorded the text. It's an amazing departure from the metronome: You have this silky, husky, amazing, mature voice saying these lines that are so evocative.

Time Out New York: What about the new works?

Dusan Tynek: I started thinking about *Stereopsis* at a residency in Italy; you're right on the Mediterranean, and I immediately thought of Homer and *The Odyssey*. There is a part when the sailors visit the island of the Cyclops. I had a very small studio, so the movement I could make was limited. I worked in a circle and was thinking about the Cyclops—they had one eye, so there's a circle. I was also thinking about one eye versus two eyes, and how does that affect our perception? There is this thing called binocular disparity. It allows us to see three-dimensionally with two eyes; if you have only one eye, vision would be two-dimensional. Supposedly, you can see an object in three dimensions if the object is moving. So I decided to make the whole dance in a circle. First, I made it all in silence, and I wanted to be very rhythmical. From the beginning I thought the dancers should be creating the rhythm and the score, so there are a lot of footsteps. It's very difficult to stay together, and so they are splitting the circles in quarters so they have points of reference where the direction of the spinning of the circle might change. We had footsteps, but I wanted even more sound coming from them, so we started making vocalizations. They are really creating a musical score. They're part of the action and on top of it, I wanted to reference *The Odyssey*. I picked some lines and asked Cynthia, "How would you feel about rewriting *The Odyssey*?" She laughed, but she started doing it; it's very abstract. It's very gory and graphic, as *The Odyssey* is.

Time Out New York: What about *Romanesco Suite*?

Dusan Tynek: It's inspired by fractals—so repetition of patterns. Romanesca is a song form from the 16th century, very Baroque. But *romanesco* is a green vegetable. It looks like a cauliflower, and it has beautiful florets. It's actually a great representation of fractals in nature; the pieces could go on indefinitely, and that's the idea in the dance. It keeps splicing and splicing. *Suite* is a representation of a musical form again. They have distinct rhythms, and I wanted to make phrases that were very rhythmical and then I did a mash-up, so they're coming in and out. It's not one section, like a minuet—it's all together. So it's very rhythmical, but there's a lot of stop-and-go action. Everybody is onstage pretty much at the same time. There is some intense partnering.

Time Out New York: It's also silent, right?

Dusan Tynek: It's silent, but this is the year of the cicadas, and I was hiking upstate during the time they crawl out of the earth, and they were everywhere. On every leaf, on the bark of all the trees. It was a little spooky. They have red eyes. They're not very loud, but there is a consistent hum, and there are billions of them. I made recordings of these cicadas and am working with a sound designer, Dave Ruder, who is making a collage for this piece that will be on top of the movement. It's very different for me. This is still very musical, but in a very different way.

Time Out New York: What did working on this program show you about your musicality?

Dusan Tynek: That I'm more confident than I thought I would be. I have a solid understanding of music, but when I see it and when we work with a text, I can play with it. It's almost like creating a mini-opera. I have the choir in a way—the dancers—and the footsteps, which are kind of the instruments. And I'm directing it. [*Laughs*] Kind of like a crazy conductor.

Dusan Tynek Dance Theatre is at the BAM Fisher Sept 4–7.