

Desire and Eroticism on the Stage of Pál Frenák

Nóra Horváth

*“The human spirit is prey to the most astounding impulses. Man goes constantly in fear of himself. His erotic urges terrify him.”
(Georges Bataille)¹*

*“Had he noticed I was ready not just to yield but to mold into his body?”
(André Aciman)²*

Abstract: Since 2018, I have been a philosophical consultant for the Compagnie Pál Frenák, and, more recently a dramaturg (*Cage*³, *Spid_er*⁴, *Fig_Ht*⁵, *Secret_Off Man*, *Crazy Runners – Parad_IS_e*⁶). Simultaneously with my research on somaesthetics, I became familiar with Frenák's unique organic movement system, which developed from the sign system of the deaf and hard of hearing and, over decades, evolved into a completely individual means of expression. Because Frenák, the best-known choreographer of Hungarian contemporary dance, considers Deleuze's philosophy a point of alignment, Deleuze's *Abécédaire* and Shusterman's aesthetics both played a role in my 2022 book about him (Horváth 2022). However, Frenák is an autonomous creator who never uses the books he reads as a concrete reference, rather, he extracts the essence of what he reads and takes inspiration from them by placing them in a totally different context.

Anyone familiar with Frenák's works knows that his central theme is the libidinal energy that controls people. He researches how to express erotic radiance, repressed desire or the resonance that exists or never develops between people. Frenák opens something up to audiences, who are either drawn in or pushed away. Frenák's native language is sign language, due to his deaf mother. In the world of the deaf

1 Bataille, 1962, p. 7

2 Aciman, 2017, p. 24

3 Trailer: <https://hu.frenak.hu/cage>

4 Trailer: <https://hu.frenak.hu/spider>

5 Trailer: <https://hu.frenak.hu/fight>

6 Trailer: <https://hu.frenak.hu/crazyrunners>

and hard of hearing, only continuous and intense attention is natural. His perfect knowledge of this medium and communication system adds a unique dimension to Frenák's somatic style. Frenák's work is special because since childhood, he has been experimenting with a unique language of movement, with which generations of dancers have been able to identify in joint productions over the decades. But his art is much more than that. He has been able to do what very few people do: he constantly builds and enriches the unique world in which certain themes, motifs, and emotions regularly appear.

Only the harmony between the body and the soul is capable of representing the homogeneous artistic style that has characterized Frenák's style for decades. Perhaps this is partly why we perceive that his pieces are the various manifestations of a homogeneous whole and rather than isolated choreographies, despite their fragmented nature.

*In my study, I examine how Frenák delves into the depths of human nature. How does his work address the myth of marriage or love triangles? How can such a feeling be realized on stage when two figures are not even touching, yet we know, we feel in our guts, that they belong together. Frenák is not satisfied with portraying superficial relationships, and he disregards patterns and norms. He is a diver delving into the depths of the soul frightened of itself, a soul that must grapple with itself to overcome its fears and its own shadows. During this investigation, the question arises: is it possible to put into words the erotic experience that art can only partially convey? "The philosopher can speak of everything he feels. Erotic experience will commit us to silence" says Bataille in *Eroticism* (Bataille, 1962, p. 252.). That is the advantage that art possesses and that is why the feeling that the protracted utterance of the word "Silence" in Frenák's pieces (e.g., in *The Hidden Men*) may convey. Philosophy is unable to free itself of language and, what Bataille considers the most important, "it uses language in such a way that silence never follows", the silence of that last moment where consciousness forsakes you (Ibid, p. 274.). The atmosphere of Frenák's plays can reproduce exactly those states of mind in which awareness fails, where nothing remains but silence or madness. The question, therefore, is: how to grasp passion rendered with artistic corporality from the perspective of somaesthetics.*

Keywords: organic movement language, sign-language, contemporary dance.

1. Style and More – Study of Existence

*"My pieces have neither a beginning
nor an end. It is not as if I create
a piece that is about something and then
another piece that is about something else:
rather, the entire thing is a process, and I, we,
generally always talk about the same thing."
(Pál Frenák)⁷*

⁷ Varga, 2008, p. 206

*“I live a ‘foraging’ lifestyle: I store information
and inspirations in my soul in the form of fragments,
and then I make use of them: words, ideas,
snippets of sound, portraits, or the profile of a face:
sometimes it takes 30 years for them to come together.
Divine sparks and breaths that touch people.
That requires me to have a peripheral way of
seeing things, assisted by my mother’s sing
language and even confinement as one starts
paying attention to the outside world. Looking
back, the manner in which I try to chew my
way through the bars spiritually, mentally,
and intellectually is also important.”
(Pál Frenák)⁸*

Dance can be realized only through the dancers' bodies, meaning they must feel the choreographer's unique style and goals. Frenák believes the true content of the developing performance and the essential emotions can be conveyed to the dancers only at the level of corporality; words are insufficient. Without the artists' intuition, it would be impossible grasping the choreographer's driving concept or aspect would be impossible. First, everyone has to work on an emotional level, movement combinations are built from emotions. For Frenák, the most important aspect is credibility, the harmony between the external and the internal, as well as what is experienced during the movement itself, at the rehearsal or the performance—you have to experience something there, in the present moment. What makes the rehearsal process especially difficult for dancers is that it's not simply a series of movements to perfect; during each rehearsal and performance, they must attune themselves with a feeling that gives meaning to the movement. “Emotion is not like a movement. It cannot be continued where you left off,” stated the Portuguese dancer Anibal Dos Santos regarding the challenges of performance preparation (Horváth, 2021). Frenák always motivates his dancers to find the “juste” point within themselves that helps them truly experience the given moment. His own solos are also developed along this logic. As he explained for me in an interview: “Experiment with something! Either regarding the topic, the scenographic feeling, an idea, or using a philosophical thought: it doesn't matter what, just find an emotional point within yourself! This can be a pulsating erotic energy or it can come from the bottom of the hip, the sternum or someone's mind: the point is that I feel the start of a process, that something is driving you, just as Henri Michaux was driven by whoever entered the labyrinth, which led to the creation of something accidental that ended up becoming more important than what he had so strongly desired” (Horváth, 2021). This kind of construction in rehearsal is unfamiliar and intimidating to many dancers – especially those who have performed in classical pieces before. When Frenák brought Bartók's *The Wooden Prince* to the stage, he also involved some of the ballet artists of the Budapest Opera House in the work, for whom it was a serious challenge to break away from the familiar forms of expression. Viktória Rohonci, for example, said after working together that she had never worked with a choreographer who was curious about her as a person and who gave her the confidence to dare to give herself on stage. Rohonci felt that it was very difficult for her to relax and move without rules on stage, but it gave

⁸ Horváth, 2022, p. 150

her a sense of freedom that made her see herself differently, even in her ordinary life. It was as if she had begun to learn self-respect.⁹

Frenák makes the ideas that inspired his choreography visible through the bodies of his dancers' bodies, using them as mediums, but in a way that requires them to embark on a significant personal journey, coupled with self-knowledge and self-creation. As he states: "I project something on them – something I am already immersed in. I drag them in with me, and then there's no escape. For all of us, choreography work is also a study of our existences" (Péter, 2009, p. 27.).

In the case of artists who, through their unique style, are able to authentically convey fragments of the same consistent, characteristic world in each of their works, it can be assumed that they have a homogeneous aesthetic of existence with deeper content. This unique, individual style formulates the oeuvre. In my study, I will refer to the pieces created by the FrenAk Company, but I will place the emphasis on the choreographer's personality and unique style, because he embodies such a strong and distinct world, which makes his works unmistakable. The movement, style, and attention-defining effect of the sign language used by the deaf and the hard of hearing influences the entire body, as it has evidently shaped Frenák's relationship to the body. According to Shusterman's philosophy dictionary, the essence of the central term somatic style is that it provides signals even from those who have never engaged in dance—definitive spiritual impacts are integrated into the individual's bodily language, ultimately forming their style. Furthermore those who dedicate their lives to dance owe the development of their professional movement of culture to their somatic style. Frenák's somatic style, determined by the use of sign language, defines not only his unique dance language, which draws from the organic language of movement, but also all his overall communication.¹⁰ Therefore, it is crucial to examine certain events in Frenák's life more thoroughly, as, according to somaesthetic theory, these experiences (e.g., sign language and his time in the orphanage) significantly shaped his somatic style. Between a deaf or hard of hearing mother and her child, intersomatic attunement is stronger than average. Through intersomatic memories associated to the mother, children develop early, ingrained patterns of how to interact with other bodies. These potential connections are incorporated into the child's muscle memory and become a fundamental part of their personality (Shusterman, 2012, p. 97). Daniel Stern's studies have demonstrated that we develop intersomatic interaction patterns from infancy, learning to navigate the world through these early schemes, even before mastering linguistic expression (Ibid.). For Frenák, who spent his early life in close proximity to his deaf mother, the separation and new environment represented a more drastic change than usual. The trauma of separation and the feeling of being unworthy of love—a natural consequence of abandonment—had long-term psychological effects and also manifested as immediate physical symptoms (Horváth, 2022, 2024, p. 176).

Frenák's unique movement language naturally draws inspiration from various sources, including the philosophies of transversality and destabilization. These philosophies influence the concept, the dancers' physical and mental work, and the viewer's interpretative process.

When Frenák arrived in Hungary from France with his troupe in the early 1990s, he completely revolutionized the dance scene. His performances shocked audiences, and he introduced unprecedented scenographic elements, sound and lighting effects to the stage. His

⁹ see the interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhiWO5VhDQc>

¹⁰ The key is the level of corporality: "[...] but if somatic style, through our body schemata, extends into the deepest habits of feelings, perceptions, and actions that constitute the self, then it should be seen as an integral dimension of the individual, the expression of his particular spirit. Spirit indeed seems fundamental to the notion of style. If style is the man himself, then it includes his spirit," ready Thinking Through the Body (Shusterman, 2012, pp. 333-334.)

iconic style quickly became evident: the organic language of movement, the dynamism escalates to extremes in both movement and music, the sense of a familiar, almost cozy home within a chaotic system, the confrontation with stark nakedness symbolizing individual self-acceptance, the use of specialized lighting technology that appears to fragment movement, the destabilization of dancers and, consequently, audiences, the conveyance of an affinity for Japanese culture through Butoh-inspired elements, the incorporation of sign language, and the extraordinary ability to fuse bodies in motion. These features define the truly unique style of the intellectual founder of the Hungarian company, which collaborates with internationally renowned dancers and has presented performances continuously since 1991, both in Hungary and abroad.

Twenty years ago, I saw my first Frenák performance live, and it left such a profound impression on me that years later, when my philosophical research shifted to somaesthetics, it was clear I wanted to study Frenák's oeuvre. In 2017, during the Hungarian Dance Festival, I organized a meeting at Széchenyi University with the participation of Frenák and Richard Shusterman, after which I began to examine his entire oeuvre from a philosophical perspective. For Frenák, the philosophical foundations of somaesthetics and "thinking through the body" are self-evident, as demonstrated by both his work and his commentary on the subject. His entire oeuvre is an exemplifies our capacity to convey our essence—our emotions and thoughts—without relying on verbal communication.

As his parents were deaf, Frenák learned to socialize in a signal-based environment where certain nonverbal signals determined his instinctive gestures at a subconscious level. Therefore, he always understood that unspoken communication was perfectly clear. In interviews, he stated: "Even as a child, I understood the language of the body, because otherwise I would have been unable to communicate with my mother and her environment, who used their entire bodies in a very refined and sensitive manner" (Halász, 2001). "The sign language used by the deaf and the hard of hearing will accompany me throughout my entire life, as a type of mother tongue paired to the language I use to express myself verbally" (Szentgyörgyi, 2021). After the death of his father, he was separated from his siblings and he spent seven years in a community home. This forceful and unexpected separation left him with indelibly deep wounds. Not only was he torn apart from his family, he was also deprived of the system of communication that he considered his mother tongue and previously used for perfect self-expression. Realizing that his new environment did not understand him and sensing that what happened to him was unacceptable and irreversible, the young Frenák chose to become mute for a time. In his case, listening to the silence can call to mind the feeling at home, with the deepest harmonies and the clearest system of interpretation both revealed in the silence.

Movement freed him from this terrible state of mind. He discovered a huge mirror in the orphanage. At night, he escaped to the mirror to signal and dance with his reflection. He had a secret little life in which he could use his mother tongue again, and at the same time, he began to recognize the potential of his body—sometimes through dancing, sometimes through self-torture. According to Frenák: "In the communal loneliness there, the significance of everything grows out of proportion. Things have much more weight. Even your reflection in the mirror means something else; it's like meeting a stranger. Ideas develop differently, normalcy means something else" (Péter, 2009, p. 19.); "The mirror made it possible for me to go deeper and deeper in myself, and the pity for the blond, skinny little boy was slowly replaced by virility and the will to live! Combat survive—the struggle for survival has already begun in front of the orphanage mirror."¹¹ He was allowed to leave the orphanage at the age of 14 and only started to

¹¹ personal conversation

learn dance at the age of 17. Jazz ballet, disco dance, folk dance—he stood his ground everywhere, he even won competitions and his talents were so excellent that within a few years he appeared in high-quality productions, for example in the legendary Rock Theater in Budapest. In the early eighties, he left Hungary illegally to try his luck in Paris. He first danced at the Moulin Rouge for a living, then turned more and more to contemporary dance. Frenák obtained his degree from the Institut de formation des enseignants de la danse et de la musique (IFEDÉM) Paris in 1992, in teaching classical ballet and contemporary dance. He had, however, studied in Paris from the early 1980s with masters such as Gilbert Mayer, Germain Silva, François Dupuy, Karine Wener, J. C. Ramseyer, Borisz Bregvadze, Peter Goss, or Janine Charrat, who tailored the role of Domino for Frenák in her legendary performance titled *'adame Miroir*, revived in 1988, based on Jean Genet's libretto and Darius Milhaud's music. His calling card with which Frenák entered the world of contemporary dance as a choreographer is his work *Tricks & Tracks*, which premiered in 1999. He founded a dance company first in France, then in Hungary, and sometimes even today, at the age of 67, he is on stage.

2. The Spiral of Passion

“Nothing but trouble in desire,” whispers a voice in Frenák's *Frisson* performance. Perhaps it is precisely this experience, this conclusion, that in Frenák's wordless theater everything is about longing and the consequences of longing: dissatisfaction, suppression, struggles, hiding, madness, murderous instincts, a destabilized state, animality—and almost never happy fulfillment or harmonious living together. Frenák dissects the human soul through the struggles of the individual's erotic being, elevates eroticism to a pedestal, but never vulgarly. Frenák regularly centers on “neither with you nor without you” relationships that are passionate enough to seemingly burn the ground; at the same time, he forces audiences to face relationships based on hypocrisy and lies, which exploit their participants. He pushes the types of relationships in our faces that, although they are clearly present in society, most people think it is unimaginable that they find themselves in one. In *Blue Spring*, the cruel mistress lover strings the yearning partner along, who, succumbing to desire, is willing to undergo any form of humiliation. The same piece shows us a person tired of a loveless, oppressive relationship who, in despair, murders his partner, even if it ends up driving him crazy; and an awkward, indecisive person, who suffers as he clings to a memory and is even scared that the photo of his beloved will become damaged. Driven to despair, he ends up taking his own life. The fog of momentary disturbance strikes unpredictably—Frenák leaves no doubt as to this fact.

The most important motif that inspired Frenák was the spiral, which appears in his work in every imaginable manner and form: in rope networks, at the level of associated emotions, as a labyrinth of passionate love (and as a form of all emotions into which we drive and let ourselves be sucked), and as the costumes for the iconic *MenNonNo*. The spiral motif is also present in all the scenes where dancers rotate with the help of a swing-like rope until they become crazed spirals or when a dancer, suspended by his or her feet, is moved around and twisted by the others until the very limits of tolerance. In *Tricks & Tracks*, the naked bodies of a man and woman rotate, collide, sometimes touching, sometimes drifting apart in the spiral system created using a fly system. This spiral force drives Frenák both in his life and his creative work: according to him, he can see out of it for only moments at a time, but then the chaotic avalanche that wipes it all away returns.



Figure 1 *Tricks & Tracks* (Péter Holoda and Erika Vasas) —© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography

Frenák almost always conveys the mind-absorbing vortex of eroticism, the chaos of the libido's spiral system on stage. His characters are driven and destroyed by passion. He shows such strong emotions, feelings and pains on stage that it wears on the souls of both the dancers and the spectators. Once, during an aesthetic analysis of *InTime*, a university student told me that she couldn't watch the play because it was too much about her. She fully felt what she saw and was unable to face the unresolved moments of her current life. However, this reaction is much stronger and more interesting than when someone cannot imagine that he or she could be in a similar, emotionally unstable state as the character portrayed by the dancer. We cannot know what we are capable of until we get to know someone for whom we would be able to do anything and who arouses desires in us that we never knew we had. Some recognize their true feelings and are sickened; some want to get to the very root of the differences they discover. We can run naked, shouting, with arms outstretched in a bleak land, or we can shout silently, losing our sanity, becoming artists or saints—even Pasolini showed us a few examples in his film *Theorem* [*Teorema*] (1968), which is one of the films that provided a defining experience for Frenák early on. "I believe that sexuality is a fundamental element of life; the phallus, as a symbol of abstract power, is definitely present in my work. Beyond its obvious function, sexuality interests me as an

energy source” (Péter, 2009, p. 35).

3. The “Erotics of Art”

In Susan Sontag’s now world-famous essay “Against Interpretation”, she rose up against “stifling” interpretation that makes it impossible to enjoy the “erotics of art” “in place of hermeneutics” (Sontag, 2001, p. 158). The essence: the desire to place emotional impressions first, which often leads to multiple interpretations: “Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction, the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. All the conditions of modern life—its material plenitude, its sheer crowdedness—conjoin to dull our sensory faculties. [...] What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more,” writes Sontag (Sontag, 2001, p. 158). This is fully in line with the thoughts of Deleuze, according to which man, stemming from his animalistic being, is always instinctively looking outward (or should be engaged in so doing). However, this constant tension that absorbs all vibration and shakes, makes a state of rest impossible, making interpretation unavoidable, reading signs and practically feeling its way through life—all living beings sense their own little worlds and territories. This applies to artists, and Deleuze even described writers and philosophers as being “être aux aguets,” or “always on the lookout,” just as an animal.¹² There is no doubt that Frenák is guided by intuitive instinct, intuition is the guidance in everything, he can tirelessly react to the resonances that strike him, and that in his defining personal encounters he relies on the same deep, instinctual layer as he does in his creative work: “Artists are like animals, ears twitching, listening all the time, always turning, ready for the impulse to go after something. Yes, this deeply instinctive layer is needed, and one needs to let go, when the finest micro vibrations come to life...” (Péter, 2009, p. 16, 18).

Following instincts, or the sight of instinctive existence on stage, can destabilize the viewer. You need to reexamine your values and feelings—which is why many people feel uncomfortable watching the performances. Instinct is therefore not only needed by the creator, but also by the viewer. From the receiver’s point of view, the interpretation of certain movements is not enough to sense the essence behind the surface. Emotional reactions are the best responses—as Kazuo Ohno, Frenák’s idol, once noted, “The best thing someone can say to me is that while watching my performance they began to cry. It is not important to understand what I am doing; perhaps it is better if they don’t understand, but just respond to the dance” (Childs, 2017). Certain images may become ingrained and may appear in our heads as if to touch upon the same chords in the viewer as those with which they were conceived. The question is whether the viewer can resonate with what they are seeing. That is not to say that he or she has to put the received emotional impulses into words, but it is good if he or she can decide whether the production caused a feeling of attraction or repulsion. The creation first and foremost has to induce emotions and cause an aesthetic experience; it has to be unsettling or at least have some sort of effect that an audience will be forced to deal with it in the future. Frenák is not breaking any taboos or crossing any boundaries. By showing individuals, situations, and relations that, in addition to being able to elicit strong emotions, cause one to think a second time around, it calls attention to the meaninglessness of stereotypes and picks up the gauntlet to fight prejudices. After the initial two slaps in the face—being forced to face something—the viewer is given the possibility to think and interpret. Showing the transversality between the various types of worlds, cultures, and relations, chaos and order, dream and reality, real and unreal, stability and instability,

12 See the entry *Animal* on the DVD version of *L’Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze* (Paris: Éditions Montparnasse, 2004) and the English description by Charles STIVALE: <https://deleuze.cla.purdue.edu/seminars/gilles-deleuze-abc-primer/lecture-recording-1-f>.

femininity and masculinity, and human and animal is a recurring element in Frenák's works. The feeling of boundlessness associated with transversality make it impossible to think within the confines of our terms for transgression. The question is whether we are able to make it possible to transition between as many things, locations, and dimensions as possible for ourselves, as that is the only way we can remain open to interpreting the situations of those around us in different ways. All forms of hatred are self-revealing, just as all forms of interpretation are a form of self-interpretation. Frenák is able to make viewers feel uncomfortable because they search only to identify the emotions the performance elicits in them instead of merely thinking "what was he trying to say?" Regarding contemporary performances, Erika Fischer-Lichte, the author of *The Transformative Power of Performance*, remarked on a number of occasions that "a fantastic piece of contemporary work cannot be understood just by comprehension. We have to be open to the entirety of the emotions it generates, after which we can try to understand it and interpret it for ourselves" (Peric 2016). The essence of the idea of what she calls transformative aesthetics is that the power of a work of art is measureable in the slow process that triggers a change in the receiver's way of thinking, which allows them to better understand certain things later on.

Based on all of this, we can say that not only the choreographer and the dancers, but—certainly in Frenák's theater—the audience also have to work on a study of existence. Perhaps the choreographer is confronting them with a side of themselves that they wanted to hide, suppress, bury forever. The silhouette that took on a life of its own, another, an inner self that is not possible to escape from was a recurring motif in *Frisson*, *Twins* and *MILAN*, and even in *InTimE*. In the promotion of *Frisson* we read that "the shadow is stronger than the body, because passing doesn't touch it, and since it is impossible to bridle it, perhaps we should rather accept it, and dissolve in it".¹³ According to Jung's psychological theory making the shadow conscious is a lifelong task for everyone, and not just a part of the analytical psychotherapy work. The shadow is composed of unconscious repressions: "If we do not take note of these dark sides of our personality, or we even radically block them, they might split away from our personality and become autonomous complexes that cause neurosis," writes Jung (Jung, 1997, p. 79). Recognizing our shadow-side and accepting that it is a part of us is at the same time saying yes to the instinct and "undertaking the huge dynamics that threaten from the background" (Jung, 1997, p. 80). However, this dangerous and unpredictable act is essential for self-knowledge. Fighting against the shadow is an integral part of the individuation process. While in *Twins* two real-life figures display the duality, *MILAN*'s protagonist directs his emotions towards a life-size puppet. As if the puppet would be a shadow of the past that is not possible to escape from—a memory of a boy who was kind, yet he was doomed to be pushed away, because "shameful" memories are attached to him. For example, an innocent kiss that is tried to be removed from the lips immediately by compulsive wiping. In the flesh and blood duet of *Twins* somehow the two sides of soul can be felt better – due to the fact that one person would do something, but whispering it into the other's ear gets rejected all the time. Finally, the restrained struggling materializes in a loud yell into the rejecting party's ear, and this suffocating fight caused by duality seems only to dissolve when one of the figures skates around the space naked, wearing wings, while the other stays at the wall motionless. Could it be the soul liberated by the shadow-side rendered conscious?

13 Synopsis of *Frisson*: <https://trafo.hu/programok/frisson> [12.01.2021]

4. Rezonances – on the Verge of Eroticism – Instincts Above All Else

*"all art surely is instinct, and then you can't talk about instinct, because you don't know what it is."
"if you could explain your painting, you would be explaining your instincts."
(Francis Bacon)¹⁴*

Frenák strains the rigid hierarchy and bipolar framework of sexuality (male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, masculine/feminine), breaks down social norms, expectations, and prejudices pertaining to the binary organization of sexuality that define the very essence of our institutions and structures of power. He fights against generalization with every piece: there is no absolute man or woman; rather, there are types, and their presentation emphasizes the senselessness of stereotypes. Both sexes can be strong, unbreakable, fallen, vulnerable, comically confident, or pathetic. The emphasis is rather on the forces (external or internal) that the individual is subjected to, regardless of their sex. This is shown by the fact that when Frenák re-stages a play, he often not only does not keep the original cast, but also the gender of the characters becomes irrelevant. In the aforementioned work *Twins*, for example, two male dancers originally played, while in the latest version, one man and one woman.



Personality is first and foremost with Frenák; although sex is secondary to it, the relations between the sexes are quite exciting. The battle between man/man, man/woman, and woman/woman is a constantly recurring topic of the pieces. Transversality has become an aesthetic (and ethical) criterion in Frenák's work, the necessity of which he mentions often. In 2008, he stated the following in connection with his work entitled *Instinct*, "if we continuously maintain transversality, we will uphold a ceaseless feeling of 'mystère'."¹⁵ On another occasion, during a 2021 interview, when answering the question of what transversality means to him, he stated that when everything touches a little, it has a type of "transparence". Transversality indicates a form of free room to maneuver both in space and time as well as on the plane of ideas and emotions. We can be traversed by what we see, the combination of music and sight, and everything we see

¹⁴ Sylvester, 2016, p. 112., 114

¹⁵ See Nóra TESZÁRI's interview with Pál Frenák, in Kikötő [Harbor], Duna TV, 26.02.2008

on the stage. We should notice that in our everyday lives, and even through our interpersonal relationships, we become filters as we allow the impulses that we receive from others and convey to others to pass through us. But not only those with whom we become closer, lovers or friends, can exert a strong influence on us, but also those whom we only see by chance or only talk to for a short time. It may happen that a look can accompany us for a lifetime, and most of the time we cannot say why we are attached to someone immediately, and why we are never able to like others: “There is a broader communication system in the world than I see you and hear you. This is what we call perception, resonance, palpation” (Szabó G. 2021); “A resonance can be a lifelong source of energy” says Frenák (Horváth, 2022, p. 203).

Emotions can only be elicited, but not forced. The act of accidentally encountering someone creates a form of motion, and resonance becomes palpable—if one is lucky. The beauty of losing one’s self in another and the ascesis of moments stolen from glances that remain memorable decades later can both act as munition for continuing life. Whether someone is sympathetic or antipathic depends not only on the type of relationship we want to develop but what we instinctively feel regarding the other person—and that is something suggested by animality. It was undoubtedly Péter Nádas who gave the best explanation for transversality in Hungarian literature as regards the relationship between love and friendship: “I am not saying that there is no difference between a relationship of love and a relationship of friendship. One is one kind; the other is a different kind of relationship. All I am saying is that these are two floors in a building that are not separated by a ceiling. The two floors have no floors. [...] our senses are extremely exact, sometimes making decisions contrary to conventions, and we have no separate senses for one or the other. [...] There is no floor and no ceiling” (Mihancsik, 2006, p. 355). But there is always a chance that someone will come along who will melt away all of our inhibitions.

5. Encounter – Possession – Confinement – the Temptation of Paradise

Frenák’s pieces are regularly built from the moments and energy of inexplicable encounters that are thought to be coincidences, but are in fact fatal, leaving a mark forever. The figures of *Tricks & Tracks* working with dynamic, pulsating energies come and go, dreadfully crossing each other’s way, but sometimes a stunning encounter appears for a second, if not otherwise, at least for a flash glance. The viewer must realize these defining moments, just like in real life we (should) realize the moments that can have an impact on our lives due to their rich emotional resonance. Because what is life all about? We bump into each other, we cross each other’s way, we influence each other consciously and unconsciously. From time to time, a stolen moment, a gift, a sudden exchange of glances occurs that leaves a trace for a lifetime. According to Frenák, our bodies and selves are treasure troves of the traces of our memories, which are born from interactions with materials, spaces, bodies, and scents.

One of the most decisive (philosophy-related) experiences in Frenák’s life is connected to Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze’s series of interviews with Claire Parnet, called *L’Abécédaire*, contributed to Frenák’s linguistic development to an extraordinary degree. Frenák stated these recordings not only helped develop his knowledge of French as a language, but he also encountered an approach that continues to affect his activities as a choreographer to this day. As Frenák says: “*L’Abécédaire*, literally became my schooling. I know many parts of it by heart; it became my path to speech, [...] to verbalize things more freely. I feel very at home in his passages, as if he describes my own thoughts” (Péter, 2009, p. 23). In the DVD version of the video material *L’Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*, Deleuze’s famous example of the tick, which is Frenák’s favorite, is presented

under the title *Animal*. Light perception, smell, touch—these three factors determine a tick's life; its reduced world is organized along these three stimuli: it tends toward the extremity of a tree branch attracted by the light, where it can live even for years. It waits and waits until it smells the scent of a living creature passing under its tree branch. Not any creature, but a certain one, on whom it suddenly falls in order to burrow itself under the unlucky chosen's skin (Deleuze, 2004). Frenák often mentions Deleuze's favorite tick example. This feature of the tick's nature can easily be projected onto human situations, when we wait for something in total repression (or with unrecognized properties)—a redeeming thought, person, or moment—to jump, and go blindly into the unknown, even if we perish. Not necessarily for pleasure, but because we absolutely need to do it, because we feel something in it without which we cannot exist. As in the case of the tick, the instinctive reaction is the essence of the personalities depicted by Frenák. The important moment is when we suddenly act. Frenák can show such moments. For example, in the choreography of *MenNonNo*, which is his best-known solo. For more than half an hour, with barely perceptible slowness, he spirals into a huge, round, blue dress. But first, there are a few minutes when he starts naked in the direction of the dress in a strip of light from the back of the stage, and we feel that the moment of getting into the dress is about more than just putting on the costume.



Figure 3 *MenNonNo* (Pál Frenák)—© FrenákArchive

In *MenNonNo*, the essential moment is entering the clothing, when the performer decides to undertake the impossible, i.e., enters the subconscious instead of escaping from himself and from the temptation of the simplicity of routine. In the glowing of ambiguity, emotions take over the controlling role, which force one to take risks and experiment. Either-or: the essence is the act of change, regardless of the consequences of the decision.¹⁶ *MenNonNo* is transformation in itself. While the audience tensely watches the recording of the huge skirt, which is almost as if the dancer is entering a vortex, in the background of the music, a sentence is repeated, repeatedly: “Don’t ask me. Ask yourself.” So this moment also calls for introspection—would you do it? Ask yourself what you are capable of! For passion, for your life. The essence of the person is what he surrounds himself with over the course of his life, and if he is lucky, he will one day come across himself, maybe when coming across someone else or an experience that cuts deep. We are actually circling continuously around a kind of indefinable internal core that has an elemental force to it. In *MenNoNo*, the dancer in the six-meter diameter blue costume is the very center of the spiral system. In Frenák’s pieces, the body that wraps the cylindrical spiral around itself creates its own confinement. There may be a way out of the spiral of eroticism, the chaos of the spiral system of the libido, that sucks in the mind, though we are all capable of truly experiencing only our own spiral paths—however, even we are unable to comprehend and rationally follow our own rings. We will never be the same after we delve deeper and deeper into the discovery of our own feelings by way of the beloved other.



Figure 4 *MenNonNo* (Pál Frenák)—© FrenákArchive

For spiritual development, to create harmony between our visible and hidden (material and spiritual) selves, we have to step into a revolving door (a spiral energy system) which we can use to enter into the kingdom of our preordained goal.

It would take an almost otherworldly miracle to achieve “l’amour totale,” to lose oneself

¹⁶ watch the video here: <https://hu.frenak.hu/ebook-videos/mennonno>

in another, and the other person wanting the same as we do; however, the convulsive will to possess breeds only more convulsion. Emotions can only be elicited, but not forced. Frenák showed the intense meeting of body and soul, its total resonance, in many pieces. First, and most powerfully, in *Tricks&Tracks*, where the floating body of the dancer coming from above, suspended, collided with her male partner with force, and merged inseparably with him, and the audience could watch for minutes how they were unable to let go of each other or lose sight of each other, despite the fact that, amidst the killer sparking between them, they were also able to convey a sense of struggle.



Figure 5 *Tricks&Tracks* (Péter Holoda, Erika Vasas)—©Tamas Boczko

The atmosphere of Frenák's plays can reproduce exactly those states of mind where awareness fails, where there is nothing left but silence or madness. I cannot rid myself of the thought that the performances, seen by many as brutal and harsh, are home to the manifestations of deep human relations that are seldom experienced in real life. Frenák shows strong mental and physical connections that can last a lifetime, that can connect two people in any situation. Such relationships are honest, revealing and often consume the energy of the participants, while often drawing strength from each other. Frenák once put it this way in an interview: "I believe everyone desires to blend into the being with whom they share themselves. To fuse together. When two people are able to come together in body, mind, and spirit that they 'can no longer be separated'. These are divine gifts, sparks. These are not everyday things, but if you experience these emotions, you will be able to live your whole life alongside the same person. To me, l'amour éternel [eternal love] is when two people experience a true resonance and they both retain their free, creative lives in parallel. Of course, you cannot receive a divine spark every day, you have to work hard for it—with faith and a kind of honesty towards each other and yourself" (Szabó

G., 2021). These emotions emerge in *InTime* and *Spider* as well. When preparing *InTime*, the *Postman Always Rings Twice* was one of the basics. According to Frenák,

“Jessica Lange and Jack Nicholson go at it on the floury kitchen table with such passion that the two bodies seemingly fuse into one. I want to see the same thing from my dancers. You can see when two people end up in total harmony and when it explodes—when they show the other person what they have not shown anyone else. [...] The real charm rises to the surface in these subconscious moments—the mask comes off and control is lost. That’s why I always expect my dancers to add something elementally personal to each piece and yet still make it to the level of universality” (Hegedűs, 2013).

“We use the word eroticism every time a human being behaves in a way strongly contrasted with everyday standards and behaviors. Eroticism shows the other side of a façade of unimpeachable propriety. Behind the façade are revealed the feelings, parts of the body and habits we are normally ashamed of” (Bataille, 1962, p. 109), writes Bataille. This is exactly what can be seen in *InTime*, where in the first part of the piece we see into the souls of the characters tormented by their passions and desires. They show us every possible relationship type, but the last scene, like a slap in the face, restores the impeccable appearance: an image that most people expect in real life, or at least what they desire for, and they desperately insist even when it can only be brought back as a flickering memory or daydream, because they think that except for them everybody lives a perfect life. All the social media world is based on this feeling, to show something perfect which doesn’t exist and never existed. This scene is in a sharp contrast with the pictures showing real harmony, which makes some of the spectators uncomfortable due to their instinctive, animalistic nature and urge them to look away: rhythmic co-movements in *Les Palets* and *Twins* imitating joint masturbation, the erotic scenes torn apart by conflicts, still expressing inseparable togetherness in *InTime* or *Cage*, show more harmony than any perfectly arranged, glittering romantic scene.



Figure 6 *InTime*—© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography

The man and woman smelling each other with animal passion often appear on Frenák's stage. Most recently in *Crazy_Runners – Parad_IS_e*¹⁷, where a man and a woman are inseparably attuned to each other after the initial cautious acquaintance. Their beautiful dance performed to the song *Sag Mir Wo Die Blumen Sind* by Marlene Dietrich is not only a hymn of sensual love shaped on bodies, but also a painful monument to the suffering due to the loss of love.¹⁸ While we see the love of two young people, because of the war history of Dietrich's song, it is impossible not to think of those lovers who were separated by violence. And in today's times of war, when the stories of the suffering of so many people reach us through the media, such a scene is heart-wrenching, the eroticism and beauty of which tries to exclude the outside world and convince the viewers that there is nothing more important than loving and embracing each other.



Figure 7 *Crazy Runners_Parad_IS_e* (Zoe Lenzi and David Leonidas Thiel)—© Tamas Boczko

According to Frenák humanity weaves its web and creates virtual systems in a manner where there is a chance, they will be unable to maintain control, and they will sooner or later end up drowning themselves. This thought was one of the inspirations for the creation of the piece called *Spid_Er*, where the dancers take on the form of spiders. Frenák was interested in metaphorically and in practice, physically, how to hold on to a huge net system. That is why he created perhaps the largest spider web in the history of dance, which resulted in an infinitely destabilized set for the dancers.

¹⁷ the date of the premiere: April 9, 2024

¹⁸ watch the trailer here: <https://hu.frenak.hu/crazyrunners>

Spider thematics are inexhaustible—nothing proves this better than the philosophies of Swedenborg and Nietzsche, which were also an inspiration for Frenák.¹⁹ But we cannot ignore the association system inherent in the love life of spiders, which Frenák also brilliantly elaborated in this presentation. The courtship of the male spider is quite a dangerous game: the large female spider often considers the smaller male spiders to simply be its prey. That is why there are species where the male individuals rhythmically vibrate the female's web at the start of the courtship ritual to indicate that a suitor, and not a prey, has arrived. Certain species carry gifts to the female to divert her attention, so copulation can take place while she is preoccupied with consuming the gift. However, if two male spiders end up fighting over a female, the weaker individual who suffered the other's bite and the attacker continue to circle round and round for a long time on a secure thread until the victim is weakened.

The production *Spid_er* contains the passionate battle between the sexes, the various points of connection, and even the systems of various spirals that draw in or throw out. And the background is provided by an exceptional set where the possibilities of relating to the other individual are also toppled, and it is no longer possible to touch each other in the usual manner, standing on one's feet. In the key scene of *Spid_er*, the dominant spider woman spectacularly embraces her lover, with whom, despite all this, she floats on the life-giving thread in amazing harmony. Their rhythmic unison is elevated to a sacral act by the gradual rising with the rope.



Figure 8 *Spid_er* (Bettina Jurák and Anibal Dos Santos) —© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography

19 In my book I also examined the philosophy of Uexküll on spiders: “Philosophers identified centuries ago the analogy between people’s systems of relations and struggles and the spider’s genius web-building activities. Jakob Von Uexküll published his famous book in 1937, which has been widely cited ever since. One of the chapters of *A Foray Into the Worlds of Animals and Humans—With a Theory of Meaning* is entitled “The Interpretation of the Spider’s Web”. The author explains the connection between the world of people and the spider’s web-spinning technique. Just as the spider weaves its web, all living organisms weave their relationships with the environment that surrounds them. Deleuze then adds, continuing Uexküll’s theory, that the spider even creates its web, tailored to the fly, even without any knowledge of its prey. The spider metaphor of Swedish philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) is even older than Uexküll’s” (Horváth, 2022, 2024, pp. 198–199).

Frenák is able to show that as incredible and rare as passionate encounters and vibrations are together, separations are so desperate and unacceptable. In the perhaps most moving duet of *InTime*, the two male dancers are capable of rendering the same unity formed by two souls. The manipulation of the seemingly lifeless body by the other is not aggressive, but rather carefully protective, and at the same time desperate and incredulous, since we see the struggle of a man who doesn't want to believe and cannot accept that something is over, someone died or is just gone, as a result of which he must leave once and for all the fixed point, a source of happiness. The most painful of human emotions materializes in the suffering of the powerful man struggling with a motionless body. In the version revised in 2021, the unsurpassed harmony between the dancers can express all our losses and irresolvable hopelessness, which stems from some kind of incurable and inevitable grief connected to an irretrievable person or memory.²⁰



Figure 9 *InTime*, (Milán Maurer and Attila Emődi) —© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography

Frenák often shows struggles and conflicts when someone cannot escape from a relationship, a situation, or from the bars he has built himself. Confinement into desire, passion, love, family bonds, illness, sorrow, illusion or obsession may also take a good direction, and may result in renewal, rebirth, such as in *Chaos*, in Frenák's solo, by the rejection of madness. One must go to hell in order to get into heaven, says Frenák, and sometimes spectators follow this path, too, if due to their memories, associations or current states of mind they are able to resonate with the spectacle and other sensations evoked by the piece. Philosophers have been professing for

²⁰ watch the video here: <https://hu.frenak.hu/ebook-videos/intime>

thousands of years that philosophy starts with understanding our weakness and incorrigibility (e.g., Epictetus), and that the feeling of loneliness and fear turn man's investigation towards himself. When you come to think of it, disturbing questions of freedom and confinement appear in a person's life much more often than one could specifically express them. We might feel confined for a number of reasons, strangled by external or internal, spiritual, mental or physical shackles.

In his/her own cage, everyone is alone, at least he/she remains alone with his/her fears and doubts, which he/she cannot or does not want to put into words. In the 2019 *Cage*, Frenák presented the cage in concrete form for the first time as a stage for human comedies. In *Cage*, being locked up together is an important motif driving the characters' acts. The Other bursting into the uncertain fright of solitude or into an established system of relations from time to time redraws perceived and real systems of relations. The love triangle formed by a trio of two men and one woman turns into a real drama to the tunes of "Hiába menekülsz, hiába futsz, a sorsod elől futni úgyse tudsz" (Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, you can't escape your fate) sang by Katalin Karády. The running dancers (a man and a woman) around the cage evoke some kind of real harmony, and last but not least letting go for love that reinforces the impossibility of separation. Because at a certain moment, the woman pushes the man into the cage, where another man is eagerly waiting for him. We see a love triangle where a woman, out of love, pushes the man she loves into the arms of another man after the attraction between the two men becomes clear to her. Only the greatest attachment and love can do this, the idea of "go, enjoy yourself, but you can always come back to me." And the story continues with another twist, when we see that the man pushed into the cage, after all, needs guardianship, and also gives a serious task to the one who waited for him in the cage, because the uncertainty after the initial passion of the pushed man destroys everything.

The seeming transparency of space, the certainty of outside and inside is always illusory. We never really know who is actually closed in, the person who is running around outside, or the one who, having recognized his own feelings, keeps suffering inside? Taking various roles, we obediently (and sometimes cheerfully) become prisoners, or believe that by shaking off certain bonds we might be liberated. The brutal reality of the metal cage on the stage embodies those invisible, ghostly spiritual cages that might hold people captive and make them vulnerable. We can never predict who will have the fortitude to protect, comfort and lift the other, who will be willing to accept any role and situation for his/her love, and who will be the person immediately exhibiting the signs of madness, hiding in the safety of his/her own imagination.



Figure 10 *Cage* (Eoin Mac Donncha, Fanni Esterházy, Anibal Dos Santos)—© Orsolya Véner

In *InTime* we can also experience the impossible torment of a love triangle. The dynamic of the erotic trio taking place on the stage's only setting, the red sofa, is almost impossible to follow. Perfectly contrived lighting never allows us to see everything. Arms, legs, twisted trunks fight each other until suffocation. Someone else is always in a leadership position, someone is always lifted up and adored, but then they start tearing each other apart again. The joint movement of the three characters is so fast, wild, and passionate that the fact of the conscious, precisely developed choreography is almost unbelievable. Frenák can wrap the horror caused by the madness of passion in beauty. Such a raging struggle cannot be followed by happiness—Frenák is the master of showing destructive love and shameless savagery. When someone experiences relationships like the ones we see in *InTime*, sooner or later they reach their limits. We saw the explosive physical manifestation of something that we could no longer process on our own, for example in the scene where, at the end of one of the dancers' gagging, blood suddenly spewed out of her mouth. It is impossible for unbearable things not to surface in some physical symptom.



Figure 11 *InTime*—© Katalin Bobál, *bobal photography*



Figure 12 *InTime*—© Katalin Bobál, *bobal photography*

Frenák's representation of violence is never arbitrary—it draws attention to the cries for help of women pulled by their hair, of people dragged by their partners and the characters trying again and again and pushed back all the time. So that silent screams do not stay unnoticed. The impossibility of escape is felt in one of the most powerful scenes of *Cage*, where Fanni Esterházy rages to Janis Joplin's epic song, captured by a piece of bar trapped between her back and her faux

fur bolero jacket, initially neglecting the tight fetter that becomes truly torturous when a man from the cage starts to twist around her like an octopus. The soundless scream, the silent mouth shaping an O is a regularly recurring element in Frenák's pieces. The soundless scream is the liberation from the suffocating oppression of any limits and forms—even if only for a moment. An attempt to escape the feeling of confinement, but silent, since the person screaming has no strength to scream, or maybe because often nobody hears the screams of desperate people or at least a great part of people pretends not to see what led someone to the endpoint.



Figure 12 *Cage* (Fanni Esterhazy and Eoin MacDonncha)—© István Huisz

In Frenák's plays, we can often meet characters who do not jump into the vortex after a sudden, instinctive decision, but who consciously enjoy life and don't even know which pleasure to indulge in. They don't suffer deathly because of a love passion, they don't kill themselves in their grief, they just take their chances and enjoy everything that is superficial and simple. In Frenák's latest piece, *Crazy_Runners – Parad_IS_e*, there is a boy who comes on stage juggling apples. He bites into one, then the other, he doesn't even know which one, and dances across the square with pleasure. He is in stark contrast to the girl dancer, whose movements show that she barely drags herself. It shows that he can no longer exist under the weight of mental burdens. We hear as if a voice (God's or Satan's) tells her not to kill herself, it's not worth it, because she's so beautiful—and then, after the mysterious outside observer is satisfied with all the torture, shouts at her, "Kill yourself!", just let it be over. In this short scene of a few seconds, the insensitivity of the society is also shown, which cannot bear the mental state, the depressive state, even though today's conditions produce the most depressed people in the Western world.



Figure 13 *Crazy_Runners_Parad_Is_e* (Gergely Cserhádi and Eoin Mac Donncha)—© Csaba Mészáros

The apple, which is primarily a symbol of sin for Christians, plays a particularly important role in this play. It evokes the world of Paradise, but it is also a symbol of the greatest sin committed by the first human couple. Humanity's history of thousands of years is overshadowed by an apple tree, with which humanity acquired divine knowledge. But what can you do with knowledge? *Parad_Is_E* refers to the archaic roots of the human form of existence, balanced on the boundary between reality and illusion, past and future, and flashes the ever-changing but never-disappearing bubbles of ignorance, isolation, confinement and exclusion. The basic question of the concept is: "How to proceed?" Millions of Adam and Eve wander the streets alone—they need each other, but it doesn't matter how they connect with each other. What if artificial intelligence takes the place of common sense and spontaneous emotions? That's why we are responsible, because AI is also programmed by people, it learns from us, it builds from our patterns. A big question is whether emotional development can catch up with the technical development that promises us the limitlessness of knowledge? Can we take advantage of the opportunity to access knowledge? Everyone is doing everything they can to ostensibly connect with something or someone while societies are in a heightened, seething, tumultuous state all over the world. In the new communication system resulting from the development of telecommunications, our relationships become impersonal due to the constant rush. On the stage, it is symbolized by a treadmill that is constantly working and always gives others an opportunity, a parade or a rush. Everyone rushes, searches, researches, unsatisfied. Helplessness prevails.



Figure 14 *Crazy_Runners_Parad_IS_e* (Eoin Mac Donncha)—© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography

People are open to all temptations – “Eat too! Although you are happy, you can be happier!” It is as if we only hear the words of the serpent, Satan, in Milton’s work, which awakens longing in the human soul. The dancers hide in the conceited attitude of today’s man who wants to rule the world, and with the pulsating energy of movement dictated by the dynamics of the music and the lights, they create more and more chaos on the stage. They march like they’re on the catwalk of a fashion show. They no longer meet or bump into each other, they just rush forward without paying attention to anyone. A huge transparent ball rolls in front of them, in which a girl is wrestling with a giant lifelike snake. As she rolls with the ball, the snake sometimes falls on her head, sometimes twists around her, sometimes she can even push him away—we can’t be sure if the snake here is a symbol of the sin in Paradise or of a phallus, which often appears in different but never specific forms in the pieces of Frenák, or Kundalini, a fiery, sensual energy, and the Sanskrit symbol of magical creative power.



Figure 15 *Crazy_Runners_Parad_IS_e*—© György Jókuti

At the height of the madness, while the mysterious outside observer is running on the treadmill screaming “Stop!”, darkness suddenly falls upon them. We feel that the Adams and Eves running around the world with different corporealities and spirits can only break out of the emptiness of apparent connections with their deeply experienced sincere feelings. This would perhaps be the recovery of Paradise. That is why Frenák chose the song *Les Paradis Perdus* sung by the French singers Christophe & Arno as the frame of the performance. At the beginning of the play, a man running at a crazy pace on a treadmill says out of breath in different languages: “One fine day I would like to find the lost Paradise with you.” And during the performance, it’s as if we really see the attempts that people are able to try on their own. They yearn for sincere touch, for loving relationships, they escape into marriage, they struggle, they find their place, and for a fleeting moment we can believe that this can be achieved, perhaps with the marriage of two innocent young people, but then Frenák makes it clear that women and the divine punishment that befalls men is a real entanglement. Suffering cannot be avoided. But something happens at the very end of the performance. After the sudden darkness, *Paradis perdue* is played and Frenák arrives on the lighted stage, conveying the lyrics of the song with the gestures and organic movement of deaf sign language. The magnified, exaggerated gestures are soon taken over by the other dancers and eventually they march back to “Paradise” together with the spectators randomly selected from the audience. After the music stops, there is still silence for a few moments—the audience is waiting in surprise: what will happen next? Where did they go? And in this case, usually a sudden burst of applause in the silence starts the storm of applause, and the dancers escort the spectators back to their seats, many of whom are so touched by the whole scene that they stumble back to their seats with tears in their eyes. The spiritual content that the combination of lights, sounds, and coordinated movement combinations evokes in the majority of viewers cannot be expressed in words. “Christophe’s song ‘Les paradis perdus’ is a melancholic reflection on the passage of time. The opening lines, ‘Dans ma veste de soie rose / Je déambule morose / Le crépuscule est grandiose,’ set the tone for the song, with the protagonist wandering aimlessly in a luxurious yet empty world, feeling a deep sense of melancholy as the day turns to dusk. The refrain, ‘Mais peut-être un beau jour voudras-tu / Retrouver avec moi / Les paradis perdus,’ expresses a longing to recapture the lost paradises of the past. This desire

to return to a time of innocence and joy is a central theme of the song. Christophe's evocative lyrics and haunting melody create a powerful emotional experience that resonates with listeners, reminding us all of the fleeting nature of time and the preciousness of our memories."²¹



Figure 16 *Crazy_Runners_Parad_IS_e* (Pál Frenák)—© Katalin Bobál, boba! photography

6. Erotic Radiance - Desired and Desirable Bodies

“Anyone who uses the art of movement to heal or choreograph, or just dances, gains all sorts of information from the resonances and physical experimentations he experiences, which they then have to become aware of. When we use the released energies in a creative manner, we will do so not in a sexual form of manifestation but in a form of creation, which requires a knowledge of the sources of the energies, the libido, the chakras, etc.”
(Pál Frenák)

Everyone should know their own body, their body's reactions, their physical limits, but despite the fact that people living in the 21st century Western world have almost every opportunity to gain experience and learn, we know painfully little. The majority of people are not even aware of the most basic things, and still very few people admit that there may be serious psychological

²¹ <https://www.lyricslayers.com/christophe/1326942/>

factors behind the symptoms of their illnesses. According to Frenák, it is strange that in addition to the cult of physicality, the tendency to reject the body and to separate the body and the spirit is also growing, even though it should be obvious that the body cannot be separated from the soul/spirit: “I nurture my body through my mind, and the intellect gives the body its physical characteristics, its posture” (Péter, 2009, p. 41); “Mental firmness determines one’s posture. The body is the cover of the soul. Everything leaks through, even the things we want to hold inside with concrete walls.” —says Frenák. For an artist of movement the body is a constant presence and a permanent challenge. For someone working with the art of movement, curiosity, the discovery and unearthing of tantric energies, and the handling of energy is essential for creating a balance between body and the soul just as for the deep, functional understanding that promotes self-healing. Understanding this requires a global way of seeing things—Frenák had this in mind even at a young age. When he presented his thesis in Paris, the world-famous movement anatomy professor Hubert Godard said, “Frenák’s novel form of movement, is the ABC of anatomy.” The somatic style therefore tells the discerning eye everything about the individual. A person who does not hear anything observes movement and physical reactions much better—Frenák instinctively learned this from his mother.

Frenák even selected his dancers based on what they radiate. The performances where he can freely decide on the performing artists always come across stronger. Certain roles are defined by their erotic charge, the natural occurrence of which cannot be substituted with anything. If there is no resonance between the audience and the artists and the dancers, the communication will fail. If the artist is unable to continuously maintain the tension, the scene becomes empty. That is why it is important that Frenák wants to work with personalities and not with bodies. He takes to the stage content that can only be built using emotions: technical aptitude is insufficient, and the artists must actively participate in the portrayal of the characters they play. “The relationship between corporality and content is fundamentally important: the form of expression is the projection of internal content, and the two are closely connected and based on each other. For someone to have strength on the stage, to be able to create tension, to give you a knot in your stomach when they run and then suddenly stop, that requires a great deal of internal substance. Artists have to project the energy frothing inside of them: the same energy that feeds the libido. Picasso also believed that the source of energy for art and eroticism is the same. It is important for all artists to find the balance”, says Frenák (Horváth 2022).

Of course, erotic radiance is not about nudity. Someone either has it or they don’t. People are instinctively able to perceive each other’s erotic radiance. There are those in whom this arouses a sense of rivalry and who want to defeat the individual who causes excitement at all costs. It doesn’t matter if the person is male or female. In Frenák’s plays, the scenes in which a group of men begin to treat someone in a vile way as a sexual toy, in an exclusionary manner, are always decisive. The desire-inducing body can be a man’s or a woman’s—they are equally trying to gain power over it and thereby own it. They see another man’s masculinity as a threat to themselves. Frenák mocks the “masculinity” of men prone to committing such violence. The trilogy of productions *The Hidden Men* (*Fiúk*), *Girls* (*Csajok*) and *Frisson* examined the role of gender and their relationship system. In an interview, Frenák analyzed his own play as follows: “In *The Hidden Men*, I was interested in the varieties of masculinity: how we live our manliness in our everyday lives and what social expectations are linked to it. I also wanted to explore how a man can integrate his own feminine side and experience himself as a complete unit. If someone pays close attention to the piece, they will be able to see the female sex even though it is not directly present. The rope, a symbol of the phallus, plays an important role in the performance: it shows

that most men are capable of standing straight only as long as they hang on to the rope. But as soon as they let go, they become fallen because they end up missing spiritual and intellectual stability. That is how an aggressive, macho man can become a helpless, thumb-sucking baby from one moment to the next” (Ménési 2013).



Figure 17 *Fiúk (The Hidden Men)*—© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography

In *The Hidden Men* “we gain an in-depth study of the basic types of the young male’s nature: this is how we see the macho, the Narcissus, and the Hercules types. Frenák alternately portrays hatred, imbecilic demand, and the fragile balance of power between the figures”.²²

²² <https://kultura.hu/frenak-pal-tarsulat-fiuk-130122/>.



Figure 18 *Fiúk (The Hidden Men)*—© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography

The rivalry between men and the torture of their partner, who differs from them in some way, was processed by Frenák in several of his plays. He also often brings up the negative effects of uncontrolled libido in his pieces. It is as if there is always revenge for otherness— especially from that certain feeling of resentment, which became known through Nietzsche’s philosophy. Anyone who excels at something, mostly with something positive—intelligence, talent, beauty, sensitivity, striking erotic appeal—sooner or later becomes a victim. If such a person “falls” into an unknown environment, everyone tries to destroy him, defending his own position: by mocking him, setting him aside, beating him, ostracizing him, and in the worst case, using violence against him, if they can neither possess him nor defeat him in any other way. Certain scenes of the *Lutte* and *Fig_Ht* performances reflect this communal brutality most powerfully.



Figure 18 *Fig_Ht* (Theo Pendle, Patrik Keresztes, Milán Maurer)—© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography



Figure 19 *Lutte* (Patrik Keresztes, Milán Maurer, Kristóf Várnagy)—© Tamas Boczko

But while in *Lutte*, the dancer suspended with straps attached to their back and the abdomen floats almost like an angel above those who want to pull him down, the character in *Fig_Ht* hanged by his ankles has no chance to defend against the raging of the three violent men jolting him and throwing him around, who are able to use their sexual energies only for demolition and insensible destruction. In *Fig_Ht*, the three machos' disorientation is particularly spectacular, when they lose sight of their toy, who still retains his elegance despite his condition. Frenák often portrays unbreakable spirits, people who others try to exploit and torment both spiritually and physically. Despite the suffering they bear, these people still remain vulnerable and steadfast. They rise above those who are morally far beneath them, such as the soaring figures portrayed in *Lutte* or *Fig_Ht*, or the female figures who do not reveal their true selves to their partners even after the brutal struggles they undergo, forever keeping their true emotions, true strength, and values to themselves. The doll-like female figure in *Instinct*, whose face portrays no emotion whatsoever, and the seemingly fragile woman in *Fig_Ht* endure a lot more than their environment would ever expect of them. They are those who never fully reveal themselves, to whom everyone else is an open book; and sometimes they end a destructive relationship with a decisiveness from which there is no turning back.

7. The Eroticism of the Kissless Mouths

The aesthetic of the eroticism of air or cigarette smoke inhaled from the other's mouth since the emblematic examples of cinematography—e.g., *Un chant d'amour* based on Genet's writings—is not unknown in the cultural history of audiovisual art either. In the performance *Festen*, the overwhelming intimacy of the few moments long scene by Pál Frenák and Attila Gergely stands in stark contrast with the violent scenes of the piece's soulless, aggressive characters. It could cause confusion to a stable and accepted personality when the spectator sees this on the stage, because they are forced to review their own personality: does the scene arouse a desire in them to do anything? And if the sight disgusts them, what's the reason for that? Only those can overcome their fears who dare to face them, at first as a spectator, and later on as an insider. Thus, in Bataille's writings, the mouth is the central place of eroticism, the possibility of violence and animality, just as it is on Frenák's stage, without references to Bataille. The same feeling as reading *Erotism* by Bataille. "Nothing is more closed off to us than this animal life that we emerged from," writes Bataille, according to whom the metaphor for animality is the mouth, to which he dedicated a separate essay. According to Bataille, the mouth is the most terrifying, most prominent, and most living part of animals. Among civilized men, the mouth has even lost the relatively prominent character that it still has among primitive men, but Bataille thinks that on important occasions, human life is still concentrated in the mouth: for example, grinning teeth may indicate fury, and in case of suffering and pain the face is distorted by a scream. The terrible scream ending the safety implied by the closed mouth eliminates stable identity (Bataille, 1986, pp. 59-60).



Figure 20 *Lakoma/Festen* (Attila Gergely and Pál Frenák)—© FrenákArchive

We never see a kiss in Frenák's performances. Intimacy manifests itself in other ways. As I mentioned before, in sudden encounters, glances, pauses. And the mouth has a special role. There is something in every opening mouth that causes disruption and anxiety, we could say, referring to Bataille's writings on eroticism, where the impact of animality resulting from instinct on human eroticism is clearly demonstrated: "We are animals anyway. Men and spirits we may be, but we cannot help the animal in us persisting and often overwhelming us. Opposite the spiritual pole stands the pole of sexual exuberance demonstrating how animal life persists in us," he writes (Bataille 1962, p. 150). Bataille presents kiss and eroticism as the opportunities for the mouth to rebel: mouth is the human zone where absurd animality condenses in an ecstatic and heightened emotional state, incomprehensible sounds that are the main features of human animality come out of the mouth. In the moment of a loud or silent scream coming out from the open mouth of the face distorted by pain or pleasure, stable identity that has been controlled disappears and is called into question.²³

²³ For a more detailed analysis of animality see: (Horváth 2022, 2024, pp. 201-209).



Figure 21 *Hymen* (Nelson Reguera, Erika Vasas)—© Csaba Mészáros

8. Symbols of Male and Female Togetherness

8.1 The Wedding Dress Slipped Aside

When Frenák touches upon the myth of marriage, such as in *Hymen* (the title of which is a reference to both Hymenaeus, the patron of marriage, and the name of the virginal membrane [the hymen vaginae], he paints no billowy clouds but rather takes a peek at the reality behind the white bridal dress, a more realistic version of the images of desire, the struggle between the families of the united persons, the tension stemming from social differences, and spiritual and physical pain, which are the natural parts of a shared life of a couple, of raising children, and of loss. The characters are startled by the sight of the projected image of the elderly lady dressed in her wedding dress, as if they were afraid of age and the possibility that the body will undergo transformations. Frenák asked his own mother to play in the video, who, with her life of struggles and eight children, is herself the symbol of strength, of saying yes to life, and of knowledge gained from experience. Rather than calling the audience to account, her appearance in the video is rather an encouragement: she has already accepted what the younger generation may not have yet, that, to quote Kierkegaard, life can only be understood by looking backward; but it must be lived looking forward.

The wedding dress is a symbol of everything a woman goes through in marriage, in a relationship, becoming a mother and giving birth. A symbol of desires, dreams and disappointments. Since Frenák's dancers always wear wedding dresses that have slipped to one side, we sense that something is wrong in the character's life, that something did not work out as planned. The tattered wedding dress is also a symbol of the loss of innocence, and when we look at this interpretation, it becomes clear why it is often seen on male dancers. The wedding dress also appears in the latest performance, *Parad_IS_e*. The girl performing solo in a wedding

dress is also looking for opportunities, but in the end she tries to commit suicide. In the duet he danced with his partner, we feel his thrashing, the suffocating situation, the man's violent expressions, and his masculine energies. This is also a kind of relationship 'neither with you nor without you', which can only end with a drastic breakup.



Figure 22 *Crazy Runners_Parad_IS_e* (Vivian Ferencz and Viktor Banga)—© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography

8.2 Blood and Mud

Perhaps Frenák has never consecrated the union of two people as much as in *Parad_IS_e*. In a duet inspired by the wedding scene of Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*, we see the vows of two young, innocent beings. They arrive on stage with a carefully folded white sheet and two small bowls. The two bowls are gently placed next to each other, and then the sheet is spread exactly on the square, which is the only brightly lit small space on the stage. They kneel on the neatly arranged sheet, take the bowls in front of them, and then, listening to the voice of an imaginary priest, they take wedding vows. Although the viewer only sees the two kneeling dancers with strings of lights above their heads, based on the priest's voice, he can fully immerse himself in the ceremony, its sacred power, and its uniqueness. All of a sudden the *Ave Maria* is played, the lovers look at each other cautiously, their innocence is almost palpable. They gently discover each other, but after a few hugs and freer movements, they crouch down to the small bowls that were placed earlier and begin to apply its contents to themselves. It takes a few moments for us to realize that the girl smears blood and the boy dirt, as if they were only taking the punishment of the couple expelled from Paradise. The woman gives birth to her child with blood and pain, and the man cultivates the land with his sweat, which ensures his livelihood. Both of them are doomed to fight, no matter how well their fates started. Although the *Ave Maria* is still playing, they are already pushing each other bloody and muddy. The mixing of blood and mud melts the man and the woman together. They cannot ignore each other, because they bear each other's "signs" and

colors. When they walk across the painted sheet and off the canvas, they leave their traces on the stage. The main director, the mysterious outside observer, who now suddenly jumps off the treadmill, finds his soiled garden unbearable. How can they believe that imagining themselves to be brilliant painters, they leave the colorful canvas there? Suddenly, a figure running onto the stage, wallowing in the couple's prints, takes their memory with him along with the sheet. They didn't disappear without a trace, because someone took their memories.



Figure 23 *Crazy Runners_Parad_IS_e* (Zoe Lenzi and David Leonidas Thiel)—© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography

Blood and mud have appeared in Frenák's plays before, for example in the closing scene of *Cage*, in the love scene of the two dancers, where the two find each other sliding in the muddy mud, and their entanglement knocks down the huge metal cage in which they existed for the entire length of the performance. As if only the power of their fusion could knock down even the external barriers, all the obstacles that used to be their limits. One of the bloodiest scenes can be seen in *Frisson*. Márta Péter writes in her analysis on *Frisson* that Frenák plays on the verge of tragedy and comedy, therefore it's not possible to take the scene seriously where three figures dance samba, while a female figure tries to balance in the middle of the tilted stage covered in blood (Péter, 2009, p. 169-170). This scene is immensely sad to me, although laughter can always be heard from the audience. Instead of relieving the horror of the situation, the three figures dancing samba merely intensify it, because this shows real indifference: while one person is writing his own story with blood, others are carelessly having fun. It is as if this scene also shows two types of people: on the one hand, the one who constantly suffers under the burdens of life, torments himself and others torment him, and cannot escape from the traps of life. On the other hand, those who take obstacles easily and never go so deep into anything that they have to crawl

in blood, concretely or symbolically.

9. Conclusion

Frenák clearly sympathizes with those who instinctively and deeply live their lives and relationships and are never prudish, hypocritical or comfortable. He respects those who face difficulties in life, who have to fight for their well-being and for their families. He respects women who can rise from anything, who don't let life beat them down. "Sometimes the chaotic systems of life create perfection", he states, so no wonder that he not only enters into chaos, but, if necessary, he even creates it in order to break a complacent or untruthful order, from which nothing authentic can be born. The philosophical thought of breaking the order, the statement/acceptance of chaos, facing with chaos—the itemization of contingency is the most inherent essence of the philosophy of Deleuze respected by Frenák and the Japanese Butoh. Frenák's pieces dive into chaos, they "struggle against the clichés of opinion" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 204)²⁴ He transforms perceived chaos—according to the Deleuzian conception—into composed chaos, thus "from the chaos he extracts a chaoid sensation as variety" (Ibid.).

The real dance embodies the inner voice. This is why Kazuo Ohno always said at his workshops: "Listen with your whole body and spirit. In doing so, the core of the body, your soul, will open itself up and embrace the music. Your movements will start coming to life as soon as you listen with your body and soul" (Ohno and Ohno, 2004, p. 28).

References

- Bataille, Georges (1962). *Death and Sensuality: A Study Of Eroticism and the Taboo Erotism*, New York: Walker and Company.
- Bataille, Georges (1986). Mouth, in *Georges Bataille, Visions of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Childs, Martin (2010). Kazuo Ohno: Dancer who co-founded the modern Butoh style and brought it to the world stage, *Independent*, 06.07.2010, accessed: 07.12.2017. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/kazuooohno-dancer-who-co-founded-the-modernbutoh-style-and-brought-it-to-the-world-stage-2019813.html>
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix (1994). *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press.
- L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze avec Claire Parnet. Produit et réalisé par Pierre-André Boutang (DVD), (Paris: Éditions Montparnasse, 2004)
- Hegedűs, Claudia (2013). Minden az energiáról szól - Villáminterjú Frenák Pállal, színhazhu 2013. május 25. szombat, 07:05, https://szinhaz.hu/2013/05/25/_minden_az_energiarol_szol_villaminterju_frenak_pallal
- Horváth, Nóra (2021). Érző figyelem és folyamatos újraértékelés. Interjú Frenák Pállal és táncművészeivel a 2020-as Spid_er bemutatója kapcsán [Emotional Attention and Constant Re-evaluation. Interview with Pál Frenák and His Dancers Regarding the 2020 Première of Spid_

24 Reference to Deleuze's statement that "artists struggle less against chaos (that, in a certain manner, all their wishes summon forth) that against the »clichés« of opinion", see: Deleuze and Guattari, *What is philosophy?*, p. 204.

- er”], In.: *Ambroozia webfolyóirat*, 1. sz. (2021), accessed: 29.03.2021, <https://www.ambroozia.hu/>
- Horváth, Nóra (2022, 2024). *Frenák Pál Abécédairé-je – Átjárások a filozófia és Frenák organikus mozgásnyelve között. L'abécédairé of Pál Frenák – Transverses Between Philosophy and the Organic Movement Language of Frenák*. Budapest: Kortárs Táncért és Jelelő Színházért Alapítvány.
- Jung, Carl Gustav (1997). *Alapfogalmainak lexikona I. kötet* [Lexicon: A Primer of Terms and Concepts, Vol. 1], Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó.
- Ménesi Gábor, A legtöbbet azzal tehetem, ha alkotok – Frenák Pállal beszélget Ménesi Gábor [I Can Do the Most by Working – Gábor Ménesi] Interview with Pál Frenák], *Műút*, 26.10.2013.
- Mihancsik, Zsófia (2006). *Nincs mennyezet, nincs födém – Beszélgetés Nádas Péterrel* [There is No Floor and No Ceiling – Interview with Péter Nádas]. Pécs: Jelenkor Kiadó.
- Ohno, Kazuo and Ohno, Yoshito (2004). *Kazuo Ohno's World from Within and Without*, trans. John Barrett. Wesleyan, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Peric, Tina (2016). Understanding versus Experiencing: An interview with Erika Fischer-Lichte, In.: *Critical Stages/Scènes critiques, The IATC journal/Revue de l'AICT* – Décembre 2016, 14. sz., accessed: 21.06.2021, <https://www.critical-stages.org/14/understanding-versus-experiencing-interview-with-erika-fischer-lichte/>.
- Péter, Márta (2009). *Frenák*. Budapest: Kortárs Táncért és Jelelő Színházért Alapítvány.
- Shusterman, Richard (2012). *Thinking Through the Body*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sontag, Susan (2001). *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. USA: Picador.
- Sylvester, David (2016). *The Brutality of Fact, Interviews with Francis Bacon*. London: Thames&Hudson.
- Szabó G., László (2021). Királyfik, Bartókra komponálva [Princes Composed to Bartók], accessed: 23.10.2021, <https://ujsoz.com/kultura/kiralyfik-bartokra-komponalva>.
- Szentgyörgyi, Rita (2013). Egymásra rezonálva – interjú Frenák Pállal [Resonating with Each Other – Interview with Pál Frenák], In *Vasárnapi Hírek*, 14.04.2013, accessed: [https:// www.vasarnapihirek.hu/izles/egymasra_rezonalva_interju_frenak_pallal](https://www.vasarnapihirek.hu/izles/egymasra_rezonalva_interju_frenak_pallal).
- Varga, Mátyás (2008). Emlékek a tükör túloldaláról – Beszélgetés Frenák Pál táncos-koreográfussal [Memories from the Other Side of the Looking Glass – Interview with the Dancer and Choreographer Pál Frenák], In Varga, Mátyás (2008). *Nyitott rítusok* [Open Rites], pp. 197–213. Budapest: Vigilia Kiadó.

