

Article

Inspirations and Traces in the Works of Pál Frenák

Nóra Horváth

Department of Humanities and Human Resources, Apáczai Csere János Faculty, Széchenyi István University, Egyetem tér 1, 9026 Győr, Hungary; honora.muhelyfolyoirat@gmail.com

Abstract: I have known Frenák's choreographies for almost twenty years, and since 2017, I have been regularly presenting discussions at domestic and international conferences regarding studies of the aesthetic and philosophical aspects of Frenák's work. We started to work together some years ago. I assisted in the creation of the productions *Cage* (2019), *Spid_er* (2020), *Fig_Ht* (2021) and *Secret Off_Man* (2022) as a philosophical consultant. When researching and collecting the inspirational material, I experienced impressions that affected my other works as well. My work as a philosopher with dance and the conversations with Frenák opened new pathways to self-knowledge. When it seems that everything points in the same direction and everything is about the same topic, it is time to create a trace. This was my feeling when I wrote and published my book on Frenák in 2022, entitled *L'abécédaire of Pál Frenák—Transverses Between Philosophy and the Organic Movement Language of Frenák* (Published in Hungarian and in English in one book: *Frenák Pál Abécédaire-je—Átjárások a filozófia és Frenák organikus mozgásnyelve között*, Kortárs Táncért és Jelelő Színházért Alapítvány, Budapest, 2022). In this paper, I am going to display some essential inspirations of the fantastically creative art world of Frenák.

Keywords: contemporary dance; organic movement language; Pál Frenák; sign language



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1. Frenák's Somatic Style and the Influence of Sign Language

Pál Frenák (Figure 1) is one of the most exciting contemporary dance choreographers of our time, a dancer/choreographer who defines the very basis of the development of contemporary dance in Hungary. He utilizes the energy found in sign language, used primarily by the deaf and the hard of hearing, and has earned his place in the annals of Hungarian dance history and indeed international recognition by developing a new movement language extremely specific to his work. His calling card with which he entered the world of contemporary dance is his work *Tricks & Tracks* (Figure 2), which premiered in 1999. This was his most recognizable choreography that contained the Frenákian style elements that continue to be used today. The organic language of movement, the dynamism that escalates to the extreme, both in movement and music, the almost cozy feeling of home in a chaotic system, the confrontation with the bare nakedness that symbolizes the self-acceptance of the individual, the use of specialist lighting technology that appears to fragment movement, the destabilizing of the dancers and thus the audiences, the conveying of the attraction to Japanese culture using certain inspirations from Butoh, the use of sign language, and the extraordinary ability to fuse bodies while in movement. These are the features that lend the truly unique style to the intellectual father of the Hungarian company that works with internationally renowned dancers, whose performances have been staged without interruption since 1991 both in Hungary and abroad. The high level of technical preparedness and the singular (peripheral, organic) choreographic language is able to reach audiences around the world.



Figure 1. Pál Frenák—© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography.



Figure 2. *Tricks & Tracks*—© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography.

Frenák's somatic style, determined by the use of sign language, defines not only his unique language of dance, which feeds from the organic language of movement but also all his communication. The key is the level of corporeality. As his parents were deaf, Frenák learned to socialize in a signal-based milieu where certain nonverbal signals determined

his instinctive gestures at a subconscious level, which means that to him, it has always been obvious that unsaid things, too, can be understood perfectly well. 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, but he was also deprived of the system of communication that he considered his mother tongue and that he could previously use to perfectly express himself. 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. The sign language used by the deaf is a complex system of symbols. It is only thanks to the work of William C. Stokoe and David McNeill that linguistics and pedagogy started accepting the fact that sign language is equivalent to verbal languages and is, in fact, more ancient and more stable than its verbal counterparts, as it is more important in communicating emotions (Kékesi and Farkas 2018). The sign language used by the deaf and the hard of hearing requires very intensive attention, as they do not use a tone of voice to indicate whether their statements are true or false, but rather their body language. According to Frenák:

“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.” (Halász 2001)

How can we, and from where is it even possible to begin to approach that special world that is the creature of Pál Frenák, and what is the totality of his style and creations? When talking of Frenák’s world, I think of the artistic world that is far more expansive than an *œuvre*, the totality of a real and imaginary world of a man who uses the same essential characteristics to portray himself in all of his works. The communication system used by the deaf and the hard of hearing plays a cardinal role in his dance arts, as do the exaggerated and deformed gestures that are part of his organic language of movement and that are fundamentally built into the gestures used by sign language (Figure 3). As Frenák said in one of our conversations:

“I continued the use of a tiny movement involving the back of the hand to involve the shoulder, the arm, the upper body, and then the hip, the knee, and the feet, and this gave it an entirely new meaning. For example, when someone indicates tomorrow, they point forward with their fingers, making a sort of spiral movement—I expanded this movement of the hand to include the upper arm, and then the entire arm, which is integrated into the upper body and which draws with it the hip and the feet, finally using the participation of the entire body, and I even rotate it. I rotate it peripherally: the sign language used by the deaf involves frontal communication, so you can’t move your head or move around while talking. So, I basically used various dance techniques to develop this very reduced, minimalistic organic structure into a peripheral communication system that involves the entire body.” (Horváth n.d.)



Figure 3. Pál Frenák—© Zsolt Hamarits.

According to dancer Gábor Halász, “the Frenákian organic world of movement tries to determine a technique that is actually not based on any technique.”¹ Although it seeks natural forms of movement and movement qualities, it is not about the execution of technical elements.

“The ‘essence’ of the organic language of movement is that it uses the entire human body as its basis instead of a technical scale.” (Ibid.). 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 is not simply a series of movements that they have to return to in order to perfect a performance: during every single rehearsal and performance, they have to get in tune 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 about the challenges of preparing for performances (Ibid.). 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 the lines of this logic: “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 somebody’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.” (Ibid.). The dance can be realized only through the bodies of the dancers, which means that the dancers have to feel the unique style and goals of the choreographer. It is Frenák’s opinion that 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 not enough. Without the intuition

of the artists, it would be impossible to grasp the concept or aspect that is driving the choreographer. Frenák visualizes the concept that inspired his choreography by using the bodies of his dancers as mediums: “I project something on them—something I am already immersed in. I drag them in with me, and then there’s no escape,” he told Márta Péter (Péter 2009). For all of them, choreography work is also a study of their existence.

2. Fragments

The Frenákian pieces are the components of a fragmented unit, the projections of an associative web that form a certain background behind works to be born; however, their meaning is too complex to be spoken into simple words and to be communicated to viewers who expect specific explanations. The fragment-like thinking made popular by Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy has become Frenák’s own over the years, and it defined every one of his creations. When Frenák fundamentally thinks in fragments, he overcomes limits and steps outside the box to transcend boundaries—both his own and those of others. Frenák opens something up to audiences, and they are either drawn in or pushed away. The most characteristic aspect of the Frenákian language of movement is sensuality: what we see is the use of the most sophisticated application of effects on sensory perception. Deleuze writes regarding Francis Bacon: “If painting has nothing to narrate and no story to tell, something is happening all the same, something which defines the functioning of the painting.” (Deleuze 2003). The same thought can be adapted to dance: If the dance choreography has nothing to narrate and no story to tell, something is happening all the same, something which defines the functioning of the work of art. As the fragments exclude the possibility of rational organization, they do not form a singular logical unit. The unit is born only as a result of the work, as Deleuze states, on the basis of Proust’s theory, “projecting upon them a retrospective illumination” (Deleuze 2000). Accordingly, unity can be felt only subsequently, as it appears as an effect. The elements of the network composed of the tangled amalgam of somatic memories and thoughts are reflected in the various works. Frenák’s art presents not only a series of steps and combinations of movements but reveals a whole world. The visible is aimed at the invisible, and there is a rich spiritual background behind the physical that has been maturing for decades. As Frenák explains in an interview:

“The structure of the piece is a little like the movement of the galaxies. Everything is there, revolving in the dancer, and I cannot restrain it. I do not consider it necessary to ‘say’ something, but that does not mean that what we do does not have anything to say. Everyone has to phrase the message for themselves. [...] 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.” (Varga 2008)

He said to me when I wrote the book on him that

“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 sign 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.”

Frenákian pieces do not follow the structure of classical dramas. The audience receives an unbelievably strong impulse as soon as the piece starts. The performance remains tense throughout its entire length and is capable of maintaining a heightened emotional state in the audience. Due to this intensity, there is no catharsis. Instead of dramatizing stories, Frenák’s choreographies reveal certain complex content that cannot be directly traced back

to any root cause or event. There is no storyline in Frenák's pieces, and we need to expect no story when watching the performance. It is the impressions and the totality of emotional qualities that can take us closer to the world waiting for an explanation (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Eoin Mac Donncha, Fanni Esterházy and Anibal dos Santos in *Cage*—© Orsolya Véner.

3. Traces

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. It is no accident that his 2005 production was entitled *Trace*. The trace has an intrinsic irrefutability to be deleted, the effects of all the emotions that created it. The scene in the 1996 work *Sainte Rita* where three people use brooms to try to sweep away the traces that they had previously left behind when they were crawling on the ground is a perfect embodiment of this thought—during their exertion, the pattern of bars is projected on them as if they were locked up, most of all, locked up in the jail of their own souls where they struggle with an impossible task, that of forced cleaning. When, thanks to Thomas Erdos², Frenák met Pina Bausch at the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris, he received advice that allowed him to rely only on himself, his own ideas, and his deepest convictions. “I felt that she felt that I have something inside of me to reveal,” remembers Frenák: all Bausch told him was that he first had to collect traces and then lay down his own. In the course of his career, this was one of the moments when, thanks to his marked, unique style, he was recommended or foretold a unique path that accepted the loneliness of instinct. The solution was a burden on Frenák's shoulders until he found the combination of language, form, and content that became a symbol of his artistic world and a shared typical characteristic of every single “trace”.

One of the most important traces in Frenák's career was his piece entitled *Les Palets* (*Gördeszkák, Skateboards* 1993). One of *Les Palets'* basic motives is being locked up together. The performance raising biographical elements to the general level brought Frenák inter-

national fame and reputation. This performance invokes the cruelty of militant discipline, the breaking of childlike openness, the surveilled prison of dormitories—we almost feel the forced silence—by examining the limited opportunities of being locked up together and capturing the traumatic experience of communal loneliness, and it is able to embody constraint merely by imitating a water tap dripping and the rhythm of children’s moans. Leaving aside specific sensations, we might even feel that all of us are sitting on our own skateboards, and playing on a big, common playground, struggling, trying to push the vehicle forward, standing, straining, but often not going anywhere. Confinement always has a counterpoint! Longing, looking up, the adoration of blue, flying, climbing up high and gazing into the distance. *Les Palets* is not the narrative transformation of an autobiographical motif—it raises to a general level feeling that the dancer and spectator can relate to. Opens people’s eyes and makes them think:

“my own experiences have affected me profoundly and made me much more sensitive. [...] The choreographies help me live through the tough times and rise above myself, expand the emotions. Perhaps they even help me see the universal weight of things. I have been through deep pain and have learned to cope with it. As an artist, I make my living from it. When looking at a piece from a certain distance, I feel like it wasn’t me who created it; it’s not my work. I can tell there is some kind of pain coming from it, but it doesn’t feel like mine anymore. I have disappeared.” (Péter 2009, p. 13)

After the performance (presented with the original cast), the author of the review published in *Le Monde* recognized that the piece inspired by childhood sensations is not the choreographer’s self-confession but an exceeding of subjective impressions, personal feelings, and wishes to place certain observations, fears and the questions of confinement and vulnerability in a much broader context (Frétard 1994). “He transforms his most personal private affairs into captivating public affairs”, writes about him simply and clearly Péter Molnár Gál (Gál 2004). One of the most heartbreaking scenes of flying symbolizing the liberation from confinement is at the end of *Les Palets* with the huge, opening wings—this motif also appears in *Twins*, *Birdie* and *W_ALL*, even if not explicitly, not the same way, but with the same idea, thus that it is not possible to permanently identify with painful, we must rise above, “fighting against fall”³ (Figure 5).

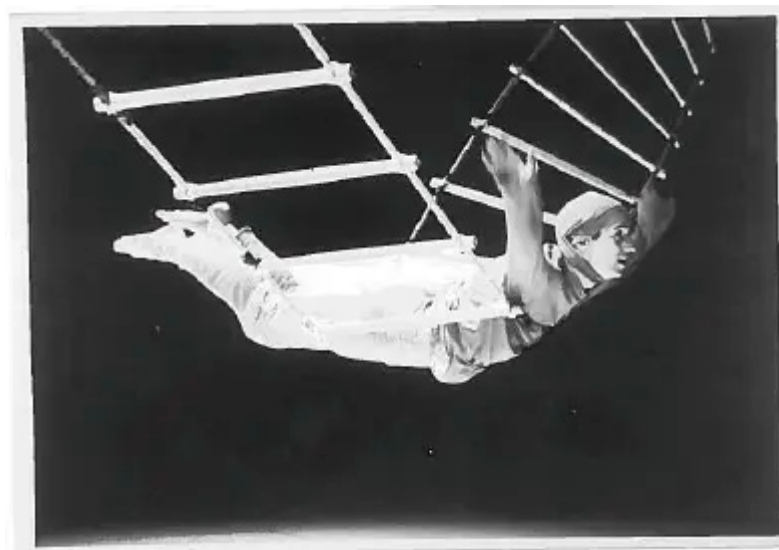


Figure 5. *Les Palets*—photo from the Frenak Archive.

4. Confinement

The childhood trauma of confinement—due to the years spent in the community home—is an indelible sensation for Frenák. However, the motif of confinement appears

in extremely varied ways in his pieces—it is not only about actually being cordoned off, but also about closing, isolation in order to survive, about the real rejection of the real world around us, or about the isolation caused by exclusion, the prison of solitude, and the invisible struggling of a person's suffering from emotional and/or physical pain. Among the most important features of the confinement theme are struggle and conflict: between the soul torn apart by passions and the me forced within norms and limits, between the me tormented by spiritual pain and the external frames that must be adhered to in a way that seems balanced, between the struggling of a person tortured by physical pain or with some type of disability and the manifestations of the society's intolerance, due to the torments of independence—when the man tries to get rid of the leash, between the expected roles and the real me, the instinct and rationality. Frenák displayed the cage in a specific shape as the stage of human comedies for the first time in *Cage* (2019)⁴ (Figure 4), but the suffocating aura of a narrow, enclosed space already appeared in the aquarium-like glass stocks of *Blue Spring*, the boxing ring of *Chaos* and the transparent pool of *Hymen*. “They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone,” (Foucault 1995) writes Michel Foucault referring to the Panopticon, and this is the case here, too. Everyone is alone in their own cages, or at least is left alone with their fears and doubts that can not or will not be put into words. 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 roles of seducing and surrendering parties keep changing, but not even these roles can clearly define who feels really trapped. The chastity of the ascetic, who intentionally remains outside the cage in his full nudity, hides a burning passion, his vibes nourish anyone coming into contact with him, but it does not take him a long time to throw himself wildly at the person inside the cage, whose extreme gestures are boosted by his own uncertainty. 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 into the safety of his/her own imagination. The seeming transparency of space, the certainty of outside and inside is always illusory. We never really know who is actually closed, 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. The spectator may live out their voyeuristic fantasies while looking at the Other struggling in the cage, relativizing their own situation. We might play with the idea that in Foucault's philosophy, the soul is the prison of the body, while according to Plato, the body is the soul's prison. In Plato's *Phaedo*, “the soul is compelled to regard realities through the body as through prison bars, and when the bond is finally released, becomes true and free. There the body binds the soul, corrupts it through its needs, sets it apart from knowledge, bribes it with its pleasures, strikes it with its pains, mesmerizes it with its senses. The body is an external force weighting on the soul, strangling it, burdening it, making it »earthy« (81c) thus pulls it down, suppresses its ethericity.” (Sutyák 2003). To Foucault, the soul is the prison of the body: this is what *Discipline and Punish* is all about, in which prison is an implicit sample of all institutions framing our existence. In the opening scene of *Cage*, the motif of the cage descending on the individual presents the hidden, network-like expansion of power; the transparency (between the bars) is a cover, a trap that hides the real danger. We should realize that the virtual clouds created by us are also cages that entail total vulnerability. However, the main point of power is that instead of direct manifestations, it spreads like a creeper, pervades all, and after a while, it feels like an indestructible cage. In case of its total expansion, power may mark, control

and punish the body. The soul kept under supervision is the real prison of the body, and, by extension of that logic, a temporary release from the body's prison is also the soul's release from supervision. This is why body and desire will be a toy of power and various interests without the majority of people noticing it. No matter how confined, limited, and infiltrated with net-like systems and painful our lives are, in the artworks of Pál Frenák, not even the cage is completely closed. All systems are rather traversable. All borders are rather crossable in order to survive. The path is torturous, and it seems like we have to work a hundred times for everything, but a door closing, a cage descending may not be definitive, even if it seems irrevocable at the given moment. The door may open, the cage may collapse, and a miracle is not impossible. We just have to believe deeply in it, or at least find the possible in the impossible and fight against fall. This positive message is carried by the choreography *Spid_er* from 2020, just like *Fig_Ht* conceived and presented in 2021 during the raging coronavirus pandemic. With its rope system forming an enormous spiderweb, *Spid_er* (Figure 6) communicates that the man must cope with even the most difficult situations without getting caught by the web woven by his own emotions or by the virtually webbed systems. Even if the message is positive, struggles are painful.



Figure 6. The gigantesque spider-web of *Spid_er* © Rudolf Herbst.

5. Struggling

Struggling and fighting are very important features in Frenák's movement language. He digs down to the very depths of human nature, where everything is possible, and nothing can be resolved simply. He is not satisfied with portraying superficial relationships, and he does not care about patterns and norms. He is a diver delving into the depths of the soul frightened of itself, a soul that has to grapple with itself to overcome its fears and its own shadows. However, when the time comes, the soul is also fully devoted to experiencing the happiness and suffering of love with total honesty. Although Frenák's characters are always turned up to an eleven, fulfillment (or completion?) is never guaranteed for anyone. For example, in *Cage*, the mystery of unfulfillment, hand in hand with an eternal desire that creates inviolable ties, is contrasted with the demanding violence of raw animalism. The roles of the enchanter and the submitter vary in human relationships formulated by the effects of being locked up together. Characters new to the scene change the former

relation systems, and attractions multiply and become increasingly ambiguous. The male and female parts of three men and a woman are intertwined in front of our eyes. What they all share is that they are the prisoners of the emotions trapped inside their bodies, with their suppressed energies searching for breakout points, making the characters' lives a constant struggle. Frenák strains the rigid hierarchy and bipolar framework of sexuality (male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, masculine/feminine) and 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 finds generality in every single one of his pieces: 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 (e.g., vulnerability, confinement, being chased into the spiral of passion, recognizing the destabilizing power of eroticism, freedom from the shadows or letting oneself be dissolved by them, the beauty of melting into each other, the suffering of independence, the overpowering strength of instinctive existence, the battles of a spirit struggling to break free of the body, tantric lessons (the use of male/female energies), the supreme nature of the laws of resonance, etc.). "His foundation is not the duality of the sexes, but the plurality of persons," writes Péter Nádas about Pina Bausch (Nádas 1999). Personality is first and foremost with Frenák as well; 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. In his work *The Hidden Men*⁵, "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."⁶ By showing us body relations and body images that are unusual for the audience, Frenák indicates that a person is not just what the habits bound by the rules of decency want to show. Whether viewers are able to recognize themselves or their environment in a mirror that often seems harsh but is, in fact, very real depends only on the viewers themselves.

An inherent aspect of Frenák's choreographies is lability/instability, which can manifest in the interchangeability of dancers, the multiplication of roles, the interoperability of stage-set elements, the changeability of certain elements, or the revaluation of scenes and sensations motivating them. In his works, the stage or, in a broader sense, space and radical space filling have a prominent role. With the maximum utilization of the stage's space, they expand the classical frames of ballet. Destabilization of dancers using various stage-set elements (building a tilted plane/steep stage, using a metal maze, rope systems, organic suspension variations, moving in an extended mesh, using moving walls, etc.) is one of Frenák's trademarks. His dancers often move suspended or balance on the tilted stage with an outstanding acrobatic technique. This kind of usage of spaces, freeing the dancers from the constraints of gravity, breaks the traditional movement conventions and construction methods. The steep, ramp-like sets (such as in *Festen*, *The Wooden Prince*, and *Instinct*) demand that the dancers on the stage fight with the elements and try to climb back the slope. Like when reaching the end of the slide, instead of taking the stairs, we try to climb back to the starting point on the slide. But while on the toy (the slide), there is another way. In real life, there is no other way. There is only ONE hard way. This is the same for the sets of the aforementioned pieces. "What I'm looking for is the body's maximum possibility to manifest in impossible situations."⁷—says Frenák. Frenák already made dance history with the suspension technique applied in *Tricks & Tracks*, which debuted in 1999. He was thinking in a new spatial system; he was one of the first in Hungary and Europe to suspend a dancer. Earlier, these solutions could only be seen in acrobatics, mostly in the circus world. In his performance *Fig_Ht*, which debuted in 2021 in the National Dance Theatre of Budapest, the public could witness a unique suspension scene, where three dancers rose into the air simultaneously several times, hanging by their ankles, upside down. After weeks of practicing, they gradually got used to the uncomfortable and dangerous posture,

and by the première, they floated in the stage's airspace with refined and sophisticated movements. Even with a new method of crossing spatial limits, a choreographer is able to frame something essential that recalls his own system. He creates the space intrinsically linked to the choreography using architecture, but as Frenák puts it while thinking about a form of movement, he already knows how he would dissolve and destroy it with the lighting system. Hence, the spectator does not see specific movement processes but only parts of movements, so they are distracted and need creativity for interpretation.

6. The Japanese Culture and Aesthetics as Inspiration

It would be easy to mention more inspirational elements from the art of Frenák, but now I am only mentioning one indispensable inspirational source: the Japanese Butoh, because the meeting with Kazuo Ohno had a huge impact on Frenák's life.

Japanese Butoh, hallmarked by the famous Kazuo Ohno and Hijikata Tatsumi, is the professional genre of depicting the suffering beneath the surface and the pain and wounds that cannot be expressed with words. This genre had a profound impact on greatly inspired Frenák's art. He consciously uses the philosophy of this twentieth-century dance genre that helps shed light on the stark contrast between the eastern and western way of thinking, even though Frenák's works do not qualify as being in the Butoh genre. In 1998, Frenák was awarded the Villa Kujoyama Choreography Award in Kyoto. The depth and richness of the experiences gained during the time spent in Japan cannot be measured in months or years. Numbers and intervals are not able to reflect the variety of the learning process that Frenák went through during his stay in Japan. According to Frenák:

"Before *Tricks & Tracks*, I spent almost a year and a half in Japan as a form of retreat. During this time, I did not create anything until after I met the world-famous Japanese dancer Kazuo Ohno. I frequented various traditional theatrical performances, visited isolated little villages in the mountains to observe the people, and all the meanwhile I learned to pay attention to what is inside myself. This helped me in many ways, and I needed it spiritually too. [...] Even the volcano bubbles for a long time before it erupts." (Szabó n.d.)

"*Tricks & Tracks* [...] did not directly feed from Butoh, though it did open a door for me, maybe precisely by way of Kazuo Ohno. For example, somebody said that the solo at the end of the piece was reminiscent of Kazuo's state, death. And this solo is about continuous change, about transformation." (Péter 2009)

The meeting with Kazuo Ohno gave Frenák signs that he had to decipher. He wanted to learn from the master the direction in which he should continue his path: although he was looking for self-realization, it was as if he was visiting the Oracle of Delphi and he never received any specific replies or messages:

"He was very old,⁸ he sat motionless, lost within himself, rarely moving. Many hours later, during which he looked over me with his gaze once but never spoke to me, he pushed his bowl of rice toward me. I could not imagine getting a stronger gesture from him: he used this motion to tell me that I should not try to learn, but to go and do what I understand. And so I came." (Gát 2012)

This meeting in Ohno's studio on the outskirts of Yokohama was a milestone in Frenák's career, and it was a confirmation similar to those he experienced when talking to Pina Bausch or working alongside Janine Charrat. All three of these people made Frenák feel that he has to forge his own way and experience everything for himself because it is not allowed, or even possible, to give directions or a framework to anyone who undertakes the type of journey that he did. However, while Charrat and Bausch made their messages clear, Kazuo Ohno, who was already in his early nineties at the time, did not even have to say anything—his metacommunication and his entire existence moved Frenák deeply: "This was one of the greatest lessons I had in my life. The fact that he was unable to do anything for me. It is a fantastic state when you simply allow yourself to sense something. That is alchemy."—says Frenák. According to Kazuo Ohno, "dance

only takes form if it has spiritual content, if the body's flowing expression provides the form while expressing the 'internal voice'." (Ohno 2004) The body can be freed from the constraints and uniformities of external power/systems. The unpredictability of the form of movement also helps in the fight against homogeneity and putting a label on things. In Butoh, eastern and western elements of dance fuse to create something new: it typically approaches emotions not from the direction of form but rather develops its own language of movement by grasping emotions. That is exactly what provides the basis for the Frenákian organic movement. Butoh is in itself a philosophy and not just a progressive art form. It reflects and takes inventory, building from the depths, extending all the way to the extremes of the possibilities of the human body in the more general sense. One of the most important features of Butoh is that it creates the intermediate space called MA in Japanese. The possibility of moving between the conscious and the unconscious is revealed to dancers. Moving to MA, Butoh dancers can create self-reflective moments both within themselves and in the audience (see Fraleigh 2010). An intellect freed from under the burden of thought is not afraid to face either quiet or chaos in the intermediate realm: here, the main role is played by the sensual detection of self-reflection. Only the body freed from thought is able to float freely in MA, where spiritually plays an important part: it is not possible to pay attention to technique only. According to Kazuo Ohno, anyone who wants to work with dance has to devote at least five years to analyzing and creating their own movements while mentally focusing on learning as much about their own lives as possible (Maehata 1986). Butoh builds from the inside and is meant for the inside, though the audience may identify with the beauty of turning inwards. The essence of Butoh is metamorphosis. The aesthetic potential lies in the ability of the dancer to embody otherness, the process of becoming something else, transformation, and the transforming body itself. The soma (body) that embodies the philosophy is a frontier, the kernel of in-betweenness. Dancers extend the boundaries of the self to include others and to experience having someone else within themselves. And so, dancers not only express themselves but display integrated personalities, forms, animals, rocks, transformations, etc. They do not act out roles but rather become one with whatever they act. The figure that Frenák dances the role of in *Tricks & Tracks* is the symbol of in-betweenness and transversality, the being that expresses the meaning and essence of life, that connects worlds, that moves along the boundary between existence and nothingness, that is both real and unreal, that has invisible cosmic energies within that and yet still seems fragile and vulnerable. Frenák uses this motif often, with figures that inherently contain unity, life, and death within themselves and that exist in the boundlessness of time and existence, sometimes making appearances at the end of his works, such as covered in mud in *InTimE* or as a stag in *Lutte*. The slowed movement and barely discernible progress of these figures contrast sharply with the antecedents. Upon seeing them, even our breathing may slow, observing their unique appearance, another dimension seemingly appears in front of us on stage. The mystical golden stag in *Lutte* could even be the fylgja from Scandinavian mythology, which is, in fact, an apparition that can accompany the person both as a form of fate or luck. Based on Icelandic literature, an animal name or Fylgjur used during rituals embodies the possibilities of the transition between human and animal. This is a unique perspective, as viewers have come up with a wide range of interpretations regarding the closing scene. The mystical figures in Frenák's performance use micro-movements to express continuity, the energy of continuous change, and everything that appears as a positive force to humans entangled in their earthly struggles. They do not disappear even when the performance comes to an end, and the audience does not see them break their roles: the important thing is not who dances each role but what they symbolize. They represent an eternal and unbreakable continuity, the type of which Henri Michaux strove to illustrate his entire life in the course of his experiments with endless lines.

Frenák returned to Japan to do choreographic work on a number of occasions, and in 2009, as part of the Hungarian-Japanese anniversary, audiences in Kobe, Tokyo, and Kyoto were all given the opportunity to enjoy his pieces *Trace* and *MenNonNo*. (Kawabata

n.d.). *HIR-O*, which premiered in 2017, is not only a commemoration of the nuclear attacks on Japan but is also a boundlessly beautiful salute to Japanese culture. With its slow pace, bamboo forest labyrinths, and the seemingly monotonous revolution of horizontally suspended rods of bamboo, Frenák's production is able to recall certain aspects of the Japanese aesthetic: motifs that had led him to lock Japan's atmosphere and art into his heart. Although one of the bases for the inspiration of the piece was Alain Resnais's 1959 film *Hiroshima mon amour*, the performance provides a much wider spectrum of the duality of the miracle that is Japan and the sufferings of the populace during World War 2. The performance actually starts before the curtain is raised. In order to set the mood, the sound of nature can be heard in the background. Hurrying to the theatre from the hustle and bustle and the noise of their everyday lives, few people in the audience notice these surprising sounds, the quiet, gentle, relaxing birdsong. Frenák's performances are masterful experiments with the threshold necessary to catch the audience's attention: while other pieces of his works glue people to their chairs like endlessly tensed bows, *HIR_O* as a piece rather requires one to slow down, dematerialize, and identify with the rotating bamboos. An important aspect of Butoh's practice is that instead of controlling the body, it cares for the body of the "listener", which is open to messages arriving from the subconscious. (Fraleigh 2010) One of Frenák's most moving solos, *Un*, which, similarly to *MenNonNo*, can also be interpreted as a spiritual journey, depicts the thought of the unity of the path of life and of oneness with relatives. The long, white bridal dress recalls his sisters, mother, and through them, the world of all women; however, also in relation to the mother, the solo uses the communication system used by the deaf and the hard of hearing and integrates it with the essence of Butoh dancing. It is both respectful and also emphasizes the feminine side within men. The man loses his contours and depicts various female figures. The dancing body becomes the body and face of all humans, giving an anti-individualist effect, further emphasized by the face and upper body painted white. When creating this choreography, Frenák was occupied by thoughts of passing and acceptance. Just as in all other works, the transversality between man and woman and the possibility of embodying ambiguity comes up here as well.

By contrast to the essential, apparent balance of classical ballet, Butoh, just like Frenák's organic language of movement, builds on the excitement of destabilized condition. Fire, passion and emotion are what matter. In this type of dance, things that cannot be taught are very important. This includes everything that is evoked in a dancer by a topic, concept or feeling (Maehata 1986). All this requires life experience, education, and knowledge, which in many cases is independent of dance. Sondra Fraleigh calls somatic resonance the empathy for the things of the world that makes dissolution and union possible.⁹

Pál Frenák has been promoting the importance of the ability to resonate with the other person and with the outside world for decades. A rehearsal process without music can only be dealt with through elaborate inner attention, which gives maximum self-confidence to the dancers, but at the same time creates extra challenges at the beginning of the rehearsals. Frenák is not choreographing to music but looks for musical moods that match the evolving scenes and strengthen or counterpoint what happens on stage. Everything is about the character, not about the music. Sometimes dancers hear the music for the first time only at the dress rehearsal week when everything has come together, and they find in themselves everything they would like to present. This "mute" practice helps them find their dynamics.

It is only the harmony between the body and the soul that is capable of representing the homogenous artistic style that has characterized Frenák's style for decades. Maybe in part, that is why we feel that his pieces are the various manifestations of a homogeneous whole and are not isolated choreographies despite their fragmented nature. As Frenák formulated his opinion in different interviews:

"I [...] believe in self-identity. A credible creator does not create according to changing trends, but explores what is important to him, immerses himself in what is productive for him and works on his own distinctive way of speaking and his own stage world." (Frenák n.d.)

“They often say that people repeat themselves . . . Well, of course they do! If an artist is interested in something, they spend their entire life studying and trying to solve that one thing.”¹⁰

“Until I feel that I have something to say about a certain topic—and I am able to do so with the greatest level of honesty—[. . .] the whole world can tell me that I am repeating myself. So what?”¹¹

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Notes

- ¹ Dancer Halász Gábor’s comment, in Nóra HORVÁTH: “Érző figyelem és folyamatos újraértékelés. Interjú Frenák Pállal és táncművészeivel a 2020-as Spider bemutatója kapcsán” [“Emotional Attention and Constant Re-evaluation. Interview with Pál Frenák and His Dancers Regarding the 2020 Premiere of Spider”], *Ambroozia* online publication, No. 1 (2021), accessed on 29 March 2021, <https://www.ambroozia.hu/A202101/interj%C3%BA/%C3%A9rz%C5%91-figyelem-%C3%A9s-folyamatos-%C3%BAjra%C3%A9rt%C3%A9kel%C3%A9s>.
- ² Tamás Erdős was Pina Bausch’s manager.
- ³ Frenák’s frequently used words.
- ⁴ Trailer of the performance *Cage*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRDXODBojMA> (accessed on 11 January 2021).
- ⁵ Trailer to *Fiúk*, accessed on 12 March 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vN1lle4DvLk>.
- ⁶ <https://kultura.hu/frenak-pal-tarsulat-fiuk-130122/>, accessed on 13 January 2022.
- ⁷ See: Nóra Teszári’s interview with Pál Frenák, *Kikötő*, 26 February 2008, Duna TV.
- ⁸ Kazuo OHNO passed away in 2010 at the age of 103.
- ⁹ For more details, see FRALEIGH, *Butoh. Metamorphic Dance and Global Alchemy*, 44–49.
- ¹⁰ Dóra JUHÁSZ’s Interview with Pál Frenák, “Juste—Pont annyi, nem több, nem kevesebb” [Juste—Exactly This much, No More, No Less], *criticailapok.hu*, 2015/7–8., accessed: 9 December 2021, <https://www.criticailapok.hu/archivum?id=30197>.
- ¹¹ Nóra TESZÁRI’S interview with Pál Frenák, *Kikötő*, Duna TV, 9 December 2009.

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