Amulets

Amulets is the title of a production from my third semester. It is also a term I use to explain how I approach, and make sense of, dance and choreography.

In the online Cambridge dictionary(1), an amulet is defined as an object worn because it is believed to protect against evil, disease or unhappiness. For me an amulet is a thing that is charged with an extraordinary energy and entails in itself a whole history of events, almost a mythology, that makes it what it is. Sometimes an amulet can be found in nature, like a crystal, sometimes it is produced by human labor, like a horseshoe, sometimes it is a symbol, like a pentacle. For my research I don't make distinction between those different kinds, but rely on the fact that no matter the origin, to be able to be "worn" an amulet needs a process of, let say, materialization and/or framing, that makes it available to be kept and passed on.

To make an example: the four-leaf clover is a rare variation of the three-leaf clover that, probably for its exceptionality, began (there is not a general agreement for when and how) to be considered bringing good luck. The nature of this amulet is a mist of history, folklore, superstition and guesswork which spans from the belief that it is used by witches as an ingredient for potions, to the political history of Ireland.(2) The four-leaf clover is heavy with its layered story and with the feelings that people, through time and space, have been charging it with. I believe that all those elements are present in the four-leaf clover, no matter if who meets the plant is aware of them or not, because that is what an amulet is made of. At the same time the way the amulet is perceived by the person encountering it will change depending on how much they know about its mythology. I would like to argue that the amulet's power per se is one thing, but its power to affect varies depending on the accessibility of its story/ies. In addition, as part of the amulet's nature there is also how the clover is experienced: by chance in a garden, left to dry between the pages of a book or immersed in resin to make a medallion. There is a layering of stories making the amulet what it is, and then there are the circumstances in which the amulet is processed, if not created, and finally met.

As I translate this example to my choreographic practice I recognize that I also go through a process of creating layers: finding, remembering, making up stories (not necessarily narratives, they could be just experiences) related to the question or topic I am researching. Then I let the stories condense in a specific form that can be, among others, an object or a performative action or a short dance or a text. Each of those condensations I call for amulets and several amulets can share some of their stories and processes of creation. At the same time each of them is defined by its precise contours that make it stand out and therefore is often brief, precise, concise. I then place them to be experienced, activate them through the performance and let them do their work in their meeting with the audience.

To make what I just wrote more concrete, I would like to pick another plant as an example from my work: the lotus flower that was part of my AMULETS performance. There the lotus was both a papier-maché object (half scenography-half costume) but also a dance practice performed when wearing the flower around the neck. The lotus is a charged symbol.

1 https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/amulet - viewed on April the 8th, 2024.
2 Nannestad Chloë, 2024, "Why Are Four-Leaf Clovers Considered Lucky", Reader's Digest, - viewed on April the 8th, 2024 - https://www.rd.com/article/four-leaf-clover/

I remember that when I was studying to become a yoga teacher I was told that the lotus symbolizes the expansion of the soul: the roots of the lotus are grounded in the mud (earth/materialism), the stem grows up through the water (life experience), and blooms above the water, in the sunlight (awakening). For me the lotus flower is a memory of my grandmother Giorgina, who used to call me that when I was a kid. The two elements melt into each other resulting in an image that is for me an understanding of beauty as rooted in mud, a shared feeling with the lineage of women in my family about embracing the hidden emotions. This is what the lotus is for me and it informs how I treat it, both as a practice and as a choreographic element. Furthermore, the fact that I believe in the lotus's layered power, of which I am partially unaware (all the stories other people know about the flower and that are creating its essence), makes it magical and somehow unfathomable. That gives the dance and the object an ambiguous nature and the way I approach/perform them is tainted by that. The audience will read in the lotus the stories they already know, but I would like to believe that they can also feel the latent potential of all the other stories layered in the amulet by not fully understanding my relationship with it and making their own guesses about it. Of course the circumstances of the performance and how it is positioned in relation to the other elements that are in the piece will affect how the flower is perceived. I believe that the fact that the piece's narrative is not transparent, that the performance is composed of hints more than offering a specific story, leaves space to have a feeling that there is something that remains unknown, and that it is ok.

To summarize: in my work the amulets are contained elements which vary in their forms, but have in common a condensed nature, being shaped by letting layers of narratives, feelings, and practices amalgamate together. By materializing the boiling down of complex processes and by their ability to convert both known and unknown meanings, the amulets assume a magic character. They can be described but they also exceed language.

My conception of the amulets has something in common with the way Federico Campagna talks about symbols in his book *Technic and Magic*. Here he defines symbol as being both "a semiotic sign, which exists in the reality of language, and something that exceeds both the semiotic (because it is impossible to communicate completely the object of its signification) and the productive language (because it resists the pure instrumentalization)."
Campagna's intention in his book is to present the reader with an alternative system of reality than the one that the majority of the western world is embracing today, at the beginning of the XXI century. The way we understand the world varies with each era, Campagna writes, and at the moment the most widespread current system is *Technique* which attempts to capture reality through an absolute language. Campagna describes *Magic* as an alternative system that is built around the notion of the ineffable (which eludes language) at the very heart of its cosmogony. While *Technique* makes our reality crumble by closing the field of the possible into a paralyzing frame, *Magic* is offering the possibility to reconnect with a larger perspective. My amulets relate to Campagna's symbols by being an attempt to approach the ineffable through the practice of dance and choreography. They can be seen as my personal way to connect dance and choreography with magic, hoping for the possibility of a vision of reality that includes what is ungraspable.

3 Campagna, Federico, *Magia e tecnica, La ricostruzione della realtá*, Edizioni TLON, Perugia, Italia, 2021
4 Ibidem, p. 212, translated from Italian to English by myself.

REFERENCES IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE:

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