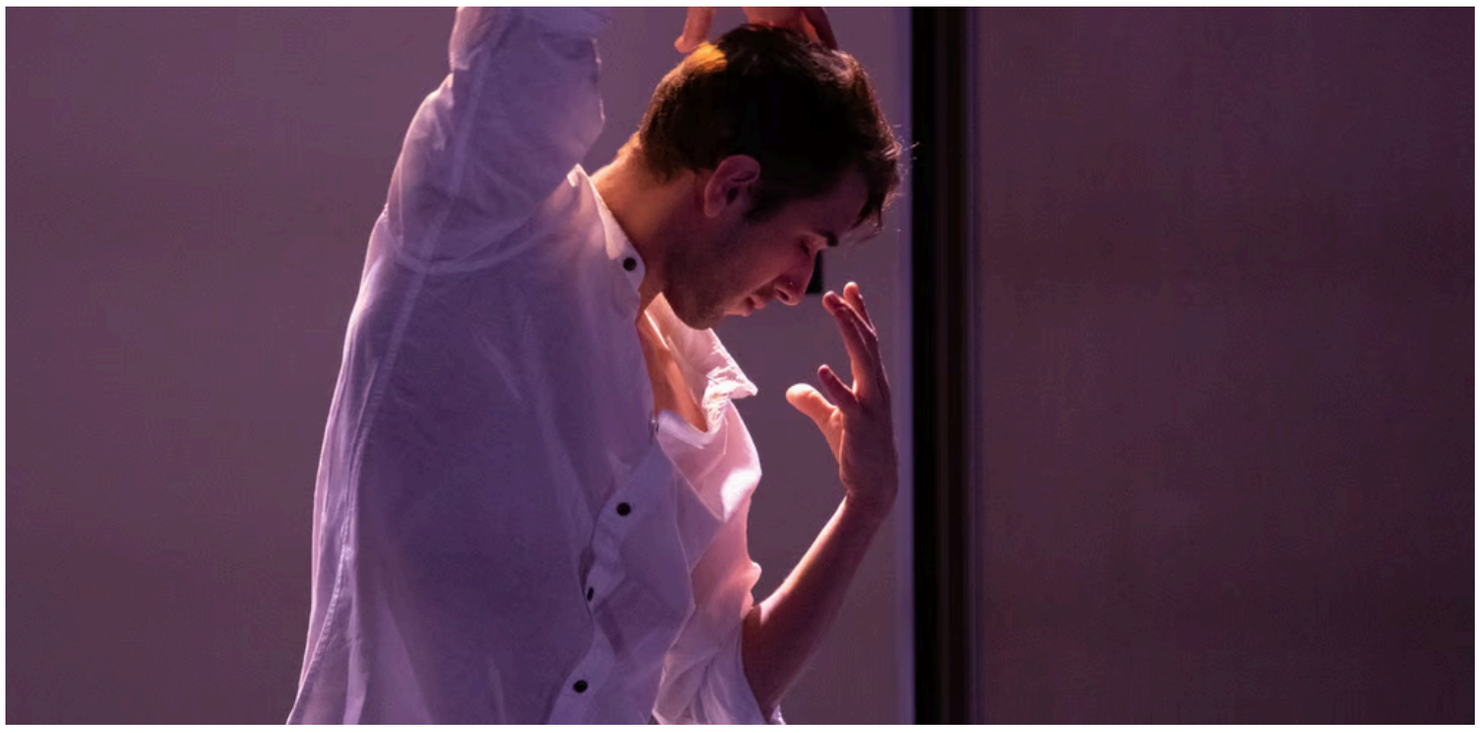
https://www.eeagender.org/the-synergy-network/news/soft-power/

"Soft Power": A dance production in the fight against violence

“I think art has a tremendous power to say something emotionally about domestic violence. You can understand it when you discuss it, but you can feel it through the arts,” says Anne Holck Ekenes, CEO and artistic director of Panta Rei Dance Theatre.

BY VIBEKE HOEM, ADVISER AT KILDEN GENDERRESEARCH.NO | PUBLISHED 25 OCT 2021 | LAST UPDATED 11 APR 2022



“The title ‘Soft Power’ is something we hope can empower women. Soft power is just as strong as the masculine or the hard core power often given more credit than the soft power,” says Anne Holck Ekenes, CEO and artistic director of Panta Rei Dance Theatre. (Photo: Neil Nisbet/Article19.co.uk)

In 2019, Panta Rei Dance Theatre and The Sibiu Ballet Theatre together with the choreographer Sandra Mavhima created a dance production performed by Romanian dancers at a conference on violence against women in Bucharest: *Soft power*.

The chorography presents a story about the promotion of women's position and soft power against domestic violence.

It put spectators in the right frame of mind

The dance performance opened the conference. In this way, it became a backdrop for the rest of the conference.



Anne Holck Ekenes, CEO and artistic director of Panta Rei Dance Theatre

“Dance and arts are important tools for dialogue when the aim is to go right to the heart of pressing social issues evoking emotional reactions in the spectator. *Soft Power* aims to leave the audience emotionally susceptible and ready to dive into the difficult but extremely important subject matters highlighted in the conference,” says Ekenes.

“The reactions from the seminar just proved it. Quite a few delegates said that the performance put them in the right frame of mind to discuss solutions and issues more thoroughly. That is perhaps the evidence of success; when the delegates felt that this was right for them before they started the discussions,” says Ekenes.

See Purna Sen PHD. Executive coordinator of UN Women in the video: Soft Power

Ekenes is engaged in how other cultures for several years have used the arts as a means to highlight discussions, and she thinks we might have something to learn from this.

“I think you might reach a wider group of the population by using more than just academia to discuss issues like this. Domestic violence is an important issue that should be discussed by many different populations globally. We should, therefore, reach out to as many people as possible through various means of communication, offering different angles for understanding and allow for a multitude of resources.”

In what way can dance as an art form be used to disseminate a message like domestic violence?

“Art is a tool; you can channel knowledge and understandings through the arts. The arts have qualities that allow for individual interpretations and emotional reactions for both its creators and

its audiences. As such, dance can play an important role when discussing domestic violence and it has the additional quality of being able to translate violence and its brutality and pain quite effectively."

According to Ekenes, the artistic freedom they got from the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security (NMOJ) was significant for the creative process of the dance production.

"There were no limits or strict framework. I think this was important. The arts cannot thrive within a very tight framework. It is important to allow for artistic freedom and interpretations. I believe the key to quality and best practice is to allow the artist to express him or herself from their position of knowledge and experience."

The artistic process of making Soft Power

Can you tell us more about the process of creating the dance performance?

"We were already in dialogue with a Romanian choreographer, so it was convenient that this request from NMOJ came when it did, as there was already an artistic process going on in parallel with this. The Romanian choreographer was eager because the topic was important in Romania at the time," says Ekenes.

Ekenes also emphasises the importance of the Romanian artists.

"It enabled the delegates from those parts of Europe to identify themselves in the performance. When a topic such as violence against women is presented cross-culturally, it allows for a multitude of people to reflect upon and identify with the topic at hand. With a cross-cultural approach such as ours, the performance possibly spoke to more people than it would have if there were only Norwegian artists diving into the artistry," says Ekenes.

Panta Rei Dance Theatre and The Sibiu Ballet Theatre created a double bill, working parallel to each other before meeting in Romania. The Romanian choreographer collaborated with dancers in Romania, and Ekenes and Panta Rei Dance Theatre with dancers in Norway.

"We had a discussion at an artistic level and met twice in Romania. Together we found a slam poet from the US, Blythe Baird, who had been exposed to assaults and rape. Her engagement in the process added an emotional layer to the production as well."

"Since everyone has reflected upon the issue of gender-based violence in one way or another, we talked a lot with the dancers to ensure that they felt safe," says Ekenes.

Empowering women

The Panta Rei Dance Theatre and The Sibiu Ballet Theatre were in discussion with NMOJ about how to make certain that the audience would remember the performance after they left the show.

“Dance is an ephemeral art form and in many ways it is only with you while it is being shown. We decided to include something ‘physical’ and created specially designed postcards that the artists encouraged the delegates to send to a woman they think needs or deserves the attention, reminding them that there are efforts made across nations to combat inequality and unjust behaviour.”

At the front of the card, it says *Soft power* and there is an image from the production with the dancers ‘carrying’ each other.

“The title ‘Soft Power’ is also something we hope can empower women. Soft power is just as strong as the *masculine* or the hard core power often given more credit than the soft power,” says Ekenes.

“The world needs to lift the status of soft power. If we can do that globally I think we can achieve more peace and less domestic violence.”

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No global messages displayed at time of print.