

The Desire to Fly

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Wim Vandekeybus never sits still. Last week in Italy was the premiere of “In Spite of Wishing and Wanting”, Ultima Vez’s most recent production. Rehearsals lasted three months in Brussels, followed by ten intense days in Italy. A world tour is about to start.

With an almost entirely new company of ten male dancers, a new production is created around desire as the main driving force in human life. “In Spite of Wishing and Wanting” obviously carries the original and more and more known signature of Wim Vandekeybus : a strong, colourful company, explosive movement material, but also theatre, film and a multitude of warm, poetic images.

However, this performance is very different from his previous works: more sober, yet at the same time richer, multi-layered and full of nuances. “The Day of Heaven and Hell”, last autumn’s Pasolini project, may be at the root of this change. Most likely as well the collaboration with David Byrne, ex-lead singer of Talking Heads, who not only composed the music, but also created a soundscape for the production.

Ferrara, March 12th, Friday afternoon, around 4 PM. The Ultima Vez dancers enter the Ferrara Teatro Comunale one by one. In almost four hours, the moment will have come : Ultima Vez’s newest production is about to come to life.

A quick bite to eat, a short briefing after a successful dress rehearsal the previous evening, and a warm-up session: the last step before the real thing. Wim Vandekeybus is also warming-up: he will pop up yet again unannounced, tonight on stage.

Although some faces show signs of fatigue, in all, the atmosphere is relatively relaxed. Everyone has trust in the situation, and no great problem arises.

Three weeks ago, during a week of rehearsals at deSingel in Antwerp, it was clear that the structure of “In Spite of Wishing and Wanting” was going the right direction. Since then, the work has consisted of refining and editing, and long series of run-throughs took place, how many, none of the dancers really remembers.

Yet, Wim Vandekeybus does not want everything to let up just before the premiere. A couple of scenes are still being rehearsed, and, here and there, are some details still to be settled. Meanwhile, faxes arrive, mainly from ex-dancers spread out across Europe.

Everyone wishes everyone else good luck. Rock star David Byrne comes in and out, almost unnoticed: friendly, but enigmatic. From 6 o'clock on, everyone prefers to be alone for the last nervous moments before the show. Those who can sleep a bit. A nervous French-speaking actor is still practising his lines in Italian with some of the local technicians. At a terrace, next to the theatre, some are getting their last Italian caffeine fix.

Ferrara, March 12th, Friday night, 8:40 PM. From the open wings, Saïd Gharbi, who is back with the company, emerges on stage. Walking somewhat hesitantly, yet firmly, the blind dancer is searching for two chairs and microphones which are on the other side of the stage.

Together with Igor Paszkiewicz, he tells a childhood story, as more and more dancers, incarnating roaring, unwilling horses, make their way to the front of the podium. Back light keeps the stage in the half-dark, David Byrne's music rears up and gallops like an animal's heartbeat.

RATHER QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS.

As always with *Ultima Vez*, "In Spite of Wishing and Wanting" is a poetic and mysterious title that hides a rich and hybrid content. Long dance sequences; "The Last Words", a short film in two parts based on bizarre, surrealist short stories by Julio Cortazar; and, diverging theatrical moments, interpreted by the unique performers themselves.

Each new scene obliges the spectator to keep an open eye. One can feel a certain cohesion, but then suddenly, it disappears. Snatches of text, pictures or film images, such as that of Pasolini, highly personal flashes of wit or little stories: they have been the starting point, and now and then, they appear in the final result.

Wim Vandekeybus never really looks for answers. Rather for questions that stimulate his inspiration and his imagination. Questions he uses as his main themes in his search of material and in the structure of his final performance.

What influence do our innermost desires, often unconscious, have on our bodies, on our physical behaviour? Who or what do we desire to be? In the end, what really happens during our sleep, what kind of life are we living in our dreams? These are the questions on which "In Spite of Wishing and Wanting" is based, and they follow naturally from the earlier work of Vandekeybus. On always finds in his work the striving to place the human body, and perhaps the human psyche, in situations where cautious and luxurious certainties crumble. Man in direct confrontation with his vital and extreme instincts, barely controllable.

The main theme in the first performances was the instinctive reaction of the body to physical danger. Later, the emphasis gradually turned to the world of primitive emotions, often unconscious, and the extreme way out that they take.

In “Mountains Made of Barking”, the main theme was the world of nightmares, in “7 for a Secret Never To Be Told”, it was that of superstitions and myths.

We can call this fragmented dramaturgy, and in an extension to that, various media complete and mutually transform each other with a naturalness that indeed seems to be coming from a world of dreams.

Still the new production makes a more coherent and organic impression than the work of the last couple of years.

There are very good reasons for this.

MEN'S MOST FEMININE SIDE

Ten men. At first side, Ultima Vez's movement language has a particularly masculine touch, but surprisingly, this cast does not especially emphasise that. In many scenes, the men show their most feminine, sensitive side, and here and there the erotic tension can even be felt. In short, neither the movement material, nor the emotional colouring of theatrical scenes have suffered from this choice, on the contrary. In fact, the audience does feel a special, very intense unity on stage: as if these men, being without women, have it easier to prove that they can get along together very well.

In “The Day of Heaven and Hell”, we saw mostly men, and that project also seems to have made a difference in other aspects. Wim Vandekeybus has always liked to work with people who have hardly had any training as a dancer. Apparently, he has even become better at that.

A few actors, such as the young Benoît Gob from Liège, are also part of the cast of “In Spite of Wishing and Wanting”, and more before, they have found interesting ways of integrating text material into a Wim Vandekeybus production. Intense and raw, but comprehensible and emotionally full of nuances. Beyond improvisation.

“The Last Words”, a short film in two parts, would have been entirely different without “The Day of Heaven and Hell”. Although they had little time or money in order to film, the result is much more exuberant, even more fairy tale-like, than in his previous work, plus the spoken language is Italian.

The young Roman actor, Max Cuccaro, who played in the Pasolini performance and who plays the role of the man who sells screams is a real phenomenon. He is also the type of actor Vandekeybus really needed. He has a magic beauty, is strong, and says his texts as if he were inventing the words on the spot. Thanks to the acting, not only Cuccaro's, it is clear that the link between the film and the action on stage must be found in an extremely emotional intensity.

“In Spite of Wishing and Wanting” takes place on an almost vacant stage. There are no stage sets, just a large empty stage and an impressive series of spot lights set up in the shape of a roof above the stage. With the music, the lighting gives the performance a shape that is indispensable.

There is no backstage, everything is visible. Wim Vandekeybus exploited that formal opening and this remarkable emptiness. He transforms the nervous, whirling dancers into a poetic and passionate event.

The sobriety of the performance seems to be a very good thing in the end.

Although Wim Vandekeybus dared in his recent productions to lose himself in spectacular theatrical inspirations that stood on their own, “In Spite of Wishing and Wanting” uses these elements in a much tighter way. Of course there still are strong images, but they work in a more functional way. And that can only be beneficial to the coherence and fighting spirit of it all.

EVERY SINGLE RULE IS THROWN OVERBOARD

Any way one looks at this production, it is unthinkable without David Byrne’s music.

Seven years ago in Seattle, David Byrne saw his first Ultima Vez performance. He was touched by the non artistic everyday movements. Vandekeybus and David Byrne crossed paths several times throughout the years, and last summer, Byrne seemed to have time to collaborate on the project.

This collaboration opened a series of perspectives. First of all, David Byrne developed a real sound concept rather than just a soundtrack. Moreover, David Byrne’s music which is hierarchic and full of nuances and energy, but also very sensitive, allowed Wim Vandekeybus to diversify his dance vocabulary. More than in any other Ultima Vez production, there is space for immobility, slowness, almost sculpture-like poses from which the dancers suddenly and brutally emerge or from which they escape almost unnoticed. In short, the palette of movements is that much richer and more colourful.

Vandekeybus is enthusiastic about David Byrne’s collaboration, especially about the fact that the musician made the effort to attend extensive rehearsals. Close to an hour before the premiere of “In Spite of Wishing and Wanting” in Ferrara, David Byrne also seemed happy with the final result. He said: “Last night, during the dress rehearsal, was the first time I felt as though everything was coming into place. Now, the dancers know the details of their movements and feel the music perfectly. The timing is right and all the different elements are coming together beautifully. I am also satisfied with the sound concept and background noises which I have added. Now the scenes with and without music no longer differ that much. Each silence has its meaning.”

During the 80’s, David Byrne collaborated on productions with choreographer Twyla Tharp and Robert Wilson. Yet, he says the comparison is not obvious : “Twyla Tharp’s work is somewhat similar, but Wim’s performances are much more theatrical and my music had to be that much more

diversified. I have created real dance music here and there, but it was often a matter of supporting a dramatic element, as on a soundtrack, where rhythm and movements are less important. What fascinated me here is that we created together and at the same time: I went to rehearsals, I sent rough material, and based on the feedback, I looked for the right direction to take. Throughout the process, it was a question of give and take. In fact, from time to time, some things were rejected, but that was not a problem for me. It did not mean that the music was bad, but instead that it did not go with the context.

In answer to the question of what really touched him in Ultima Vez's work and why he decided to collaborate on the project, he says without hesitation: "What touched me is the opening of all the various angles : different media with the integration of movement, theatre and film, but also various artists, dancers and actors, of all nationalities and all types. All these aspects make the work much more interesting than for a classic dance performance. There are many more meanings, and it's a lot closer to real life. To give it an almost political content : what I liked in Ultima Vez is that they were ready to throw all the rules overboard, except for that which says that there must be a direct relationship with the audience that works."

David Byrne does not think that the only interest in Wim Vandekeybus' productions is their hybrid characteristic. "I find that open-minded attitude a lot more important and I don't think it directly corresponds to the mixing of various media. Wim will probably limit himself more in the next few years and will dedicate his time to film, or maybe to theatre. What is crucial is that Wim has built up an open-minded audience, ready to follow him throughout his experiments."

Finally, David Byrne says that his experience with Ultima Vez will most likely have an effect on his work, but he does not know how, yet.

Will he continue to attend Wim's performances? David Byrne : "There's no doubt about it. I will also go to Taiwan."

EMBRACING LIFE

"In Spite of Wishing and Wanting" is a truly touching production because of its enormous generosity. Apart from the general dramatic text and formal experiences, the real and deepest interest in the work of Wim Vandekeybus and his dancers could be elsewhere : in this unconditional willingness to embrace life, whole-heartedly, in all its aspects, and with an exceptional and moving point of view, without any prejudice. Sometimes, there are brutal moments, but there is always a core of tenderness : in the midst of all that violent dancing, the dancers take care of one another.

The openness is indeed crucial, this type of work excludes no one : everyone has a part to play. Anyone can come and see it. Ultima Vez invades you as a spectator and leaves you with the feeling that life is always worth it, as long as you live it and share it with others. Or how, because of Saïd Gharbi's bravery and the discreet attention he receives from the other dancers, you, the audience,

may really forget that the young man is blind.

Ali Salmi, an Algerian dancer who used to play in street theatre expresses this quite delicately : “As we were creating this production, I gave a lot of myself and it was absolutely worth it. But the efforts to be made are enormous. For each performance, you have to go through with in, to the end, and dare to face the audience, naked, and if you cannot do that, the work makes no sense. I hope I will still be able to do this after the 100th performance.”

The very last, glorious scene in “In Spite of Wishing and Wanting” overflows with the same generosity: all the dancers are lying on the floor and, like birds, attempt to take off. As if their energy and vital strength were too much for them: they must get airborne, somehow there must be a way to free themselves. Then finally, they find something a lot stronger. They go towards the audience and offer them their exhausted hearts. What more can one ask as a spectator?

“In Spite of Wishing and Wanting” is a splendid, warm and sparkling production which consolidates what was already good and also offers new perspectives. It is also truly mature. Wim Vandekeybus has not lost an eye for the reverse side of desire. Regret and loss are clearly part of the undertow of this production. In spite of all your wishes, as a man, you will most likely never take off the ground like a bird. But the efforts and hopes are what counts. And as Giovanni Scarcella says in the performance : ‘Tomorrow is another day’.

Jan Goossens

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