

Ultima Vez at Michael Schimmel Center for the Arts

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By BRIAN SEIBERT

Dance Review

Light as a Feather, Hard as a Brick: Harsh Realities at Warp Speed



Ultima Vez Aymara Parola and Eddie Oroyan, center, in "What the Body Does Not Remember" at the Michael Schimmel Center for the Arts. The troupe first performed the work, by Wim Vandekeybus, 26 years ago.

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Twenty-six years ago the Belgian choreographer Wim Vandekeybus founded a company called [Ultima Vez](#) and staged his first work, "What the Body Does Not Remember." The piece made a splash, earning [acclaim](#) for its aggressive physicality and brutal confrontations. Now it's on an anniversary tour, and at the Michael Schimmel Center for the Arts this past weekend, as part of Pace Presents, it still made waves.

The production is constructed of scenes that start simple and build through repetition and variation. In one a man crosses the stage by stepping on bricks, picking up the ones behind him and laying them down in front. Another man builds towers with larger bricks and balances on top. More dancers appear, running around as in a game of tag, stealing bricks and pitching them high in the air. At the last second the bricks are caught, or not.

This is action at the speed of reflex, and it's ingenious how the risk is carefully orchestrated without losing the sense of danger. In the next section the stakes are lower, but the speed is similar. In the midst of crossing the stage dancers snatch jackets, then towels, from one another. These split-second social encounters have sharp edges, yet the tone is light. Tossing and catching towels is not the same as tossing bricks.

Levity is essential to the work's best moment, when three dancers, given feathers by partners who then abandon them, struggle to keep the plumage aloft by breath. And there's an absurdist lightness to a scene in which the shifting positions of a man in a chair tipped over on the floor are copied by upright dancers posing as if for family portraits. The comedy of perspective heightens the comedy of conformity.

But this is a work about instinct, and the tone is not always light. In the opening vignette two men roll and flounder as a woman seems to control them with the amplified sounds of her hands against a desk. The slow build of repetition and variation allows us to learn her signals by the time the men are really thrashing.

In the final section dancers roll on the floor to avoid the stomping feet of others. As the scene escalates, stomping aggressors and rolling victims swap places, men and women. The whole swirling composition weaves in bits of previous scenes, but it does not resolve what is repellent in the dance.

Earlier, three attractive women in short skirts spread their legs and arms to be frisked by men. The men grope inner thighs. They grab breasts. The women show displeasure and resist a bit, but soon, under the spell of some Stockholm syndrome, they caress and embrace the men. The ingenious staging comes close to aestheticizing rape.

Twenty-six years ago I was 12. (Mr. Vandekeybus was 24.) In the intervening years I was taught, by several American women my age, to see scenes like that frisking as exploitation, not art — taught to be disturbed and to object. After the performance, when the American woman I was with found nothing objectionable, I was confused. The differences between American and European gender politics, and between men and women, remain up in the air.