

Blush Wall Street Journal

Vandekeybus's *Blush* Culls Sources Old and New To Test Emotional Limits

Juliane Von Reppert-Bismarck

Brussels – On a recent evening, five women danced under white studio lights. Their muscular bodies leapt and curled around one another in the air in violent motions. They crashed into men at the far end of the stage and left them convulsing on the floor.

When the music stopped, three of the women started to cry. Others roamed the studio, gathering up wrist bandages, knee supports, ointments and stiff pads to protect the lower back.

The 10 performers are members of *Ultima Vez*, a Belgian troupe that is part of an avant-garde movement in European theatre and dance. They were rehearsing their new show, *Blush* which began a European tour last month.

Directed by Wim Vandekeybus, the show combines powerful dance sequences, video footage, rock music by David Eugene Edwards, and prose that wanders into poetry. The performances go to the extremes of emotion and physical strength, giving the show a powerful and disturbing energy.

'Vandekeybus tries to transcend the order that is given to the body by speeding it up and breaking up control,' says Steven De Belder, who teaches performance art at Antwerp University. 'He's not replacing choreography, but pushing beyond the limitations that we usually attribute to choreography.'

The Flemish-born photographer and filmmaker emerged on the theatre scene in 1985, when he performed in a play by the Belgian artist Jan Fabre. Two years later, with no formal training in dance or theatre, Mr. Vandekeybus had formed *Ultima Vez* and presented his first show, 'What the body does not remember.'

The show won the prestigious Bessie award for theater and dance in New York, and was lauded for introducing a radical new investment in theatrical dance. Since then, Mr. Vandekeybus has established himself among Belgium's elite of experimental choreographers.

It took three-and-a-half months to create *Blush*. For five and sometimes six days a week, the cast spent 10 hours a day dancing and brainstorming. Mr. Vandekeybus, who also performs in the show, chose performers from seven countries – selected, he says, from 700 auditions.

All performers contributed to the writing of *Blush* and a result of this international mix is it's performed in English, Dutch, French, Spanish and Greek, though during the tour the language of the core text will be adapted to the host country. The text emerged through countless edits and rewrites. 'When you work with Wim, you should forget what you want,' says novelist and scriptwriter Peter Verhelst. 'You have to be prepared to throw out everything from one minute to the next.' Mr. Verhelst joined *Ultima Vez* after another writer left in frustration.

The final text draws on films such as *The Deer Hunter* and *The night of the Hunter* and from Ovid's tale of Orpheus rescuing Euridice from the underworld. 'But the woman in *Blush* don't want to be rescued,' says Mr. Verhelst. 'They want to stay in the underworld, and they'll do anything to tempt the men to turn around and face them.'

Blush comes as a sequence of loosely connected images held together with a narrative thread spoken by Belgian actress Ina Geerts. During the two-hour show, men and women cavort in an ecstatic dance.

Depictions of romantic love seem to teeter on the brink of powerlessness and violence. A dancer, weighing herself down a brick on her long dark hair, screams for help. A wall of black bags collapses and actors' heads pop out. They bounce and spit

like hellish embryos while men beat a woman dressed in white. 'I want to show the beautiful and the ugly,' says the 39-year-old choreographer. 'I want to show confrontation, what it's like to be out of control.'

While Ultima Vez has been largely applauded, its style has attracted some criticism. Critics dismiss the extreme physicality and the lack of a decipherable plot. Some worry about the intense pressures the performers, particularly the women, are subjected to.

Yet Ultima Vez's dancers are devoted to its style. 'Our bodies are our investments,' says Laura Ariz Alvarez, a Spanish-born dancer who has been with Ultima Vez for three years. 'We use them to express emotion.' The 25-year old spends *Blush's* final scene scratching contorted with chalk marks into the stage and shaking with grief. 'Wim likes emotion-extreme emotion,' she says. 'So of course I cry, yes, but I also laugh. I don't take any of it home with me. And the audience loves it.'