

Antwerp premiere of *IT 3.0* by Wim Vandekeybus and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui

Old dance gets new life

by Pieter T'Jonck

IT 3.0 opened at the Bourla Theatre in Antwerp on Wednesday evening. For the second time, Wim Vandekeybus and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui offer a reinterpretation of their original IT dance performance. While at the same time the musicians Roland van Campenhout, Elko Blijweert and Jeroen Stevens tell the story of a spirit that can move from any living being to any other.

Le vif du sujet is one of the nicest parts of the Avignon Festival. The idea is simple: an up-and-coming talented young dancer asks a mature choreographer to create a solo for them. In 2002 Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui asked this favour of Wim Vandekeybus. Assisted by a donkey, they together made *IT*, a marvellous piece. Almost ten years later, now that Sidi Larbi has also made it as a choreographer, they are returning to the original material.

But this isn't the first time. They had already made a second version of this work in 2003. The donkey was then only a virtual presence, in the form of film images. And Vandekeybus stayed in the wings, looking on. That choreography stayed close to the original. This is not the case for *IT 3.0*. Vandekeybus again joins in as a dancer, but the donkey only makes a brief appearance during the film passages, which are here shown once again. This changes the whole intention of the piece.

This change is not without logic. Not only because a perfect re-enactment of an old performance is never entirely successful and because it is therefore sometimes better to rethink it from the ground up, but also because *IT* was itself based on *The Circular Valley*, an intriguing story by Paul Bowles. It is about a spirit, Atlajala, which haunts a valley with an old monastery. It can inhabit all living beings and thereby share and influence their experiences. The donkey in the original version was one of these creatures. It 'told' the spirit's story through loudspeakers on its back.

At the time, Vandekeybus chose this story because he was so much impressed by Sidi Larbi's versatility. 'He is extremely good at transformations. He is able to play with various energies and qualities.' There's no denying it: it was as if movements rippled over Sidi Larbi like whimsical waves over the surface of water. His limbs moved in every direction as if they barely belonged to the same body. Exactly how you would imagine a spirit that is only a notion, with no substance.

This time the two choreographers wanted to show different aspects of the spirit. To this end they selected different excerpts from the story: a monk becoming possessed by the spirit, bandits occupying the monastery, and lastly a young couple who end up there and the spirit falls in love with the woman's spirit. This time they left the narrative to a three-man band, who also tell the story while playing the music. And actually it's a fantastic band: guitarist and

narrator Roland Van Campenhout, guitarist Elko Blijweert and percussionist, and later narrator too, Jeroen Stevens, who together create an evocative layer of sound and occasionally give it all they've got, despite their limited numbers.

They actually do this mainly when Vandekeybus is in action. The basic pattern of the performance is still built around the wonderfully graceful and fitful movements of Sidi Larbi, but Vandekeybus now replies to them. But his movements are completely different: more brusque and energetic, and above much more extravert. Sidi Larbi's idiom appears to emerge primarily from an attentive listening to an inner voice. By contrast, Vandekeybus, bursting with impulsiveness, occasionally ventures to the edge of the stage, where he vehemently sends out signals to the audience.

Of course, you read into this sort of dance dialogue more or less what you like. What's more, there's quite a lot of improvisation, because both these gents have such busy lives that only a little of the performance was laid down in detail. Yet it works wonderfully well. To start with, in their choice of movements they nevertheless do often evoke something of the text. Sometimes in a quite comical fashion. In the section on the bandits, for example, they very clearly imitate a gunfight. They also fixed a number of key moments in the course of the performance. At the start of the piece, for example, Vandekeybus stands showily beating his chest, and delivers blows at the meditatively swaying Sidi Larbi. The band underlines this with furious drumming. But the roles are suddenly and unexpectedly reversed and Sidi Larbi delivers a blow himself.

Another clever thing is the way they illustrate the reciprocity between them with film images of the second version of the piece. After a skirmish, for instance, Vandekeybus ends up on a raised platform against the film screen upstage. Where a spirit suddenly appears to escape from his head. You soon realise that these are manipulated images from the 2003 performance: Sidi Larbi's body whirls over the screen in every direction, first as a distant speck, then in close-up. This is a fine way of retrieving the presence of the original work while at the same time showing the individual character of the new interpretation. It's a shame that there will only be four performances.