

Blind beasts of prey

Twitching, writhing, crashing into each other: Wim Vandekeybus's infernal choreography "Nieuw Zwart" (New Black) at the Hebbel am Ufer

A crashing and splintering, as when a number of cars collide. The dance performance "New Black" at the Hebbel Theatre begins and ends with the sounds of an accident. Also, bodies fall on top of each other under pale flashes of light and are thrown to the ground. There are many shock moments like this in the new production from Wim Vandekeybus. Once again the Flemish choreographer makes crash test dummies of his seven dancers. Issues of survival are dealt with in "New Black", and so much energy is pumped onto the stage that people in the audience have the feeling that they are being run over by a bus.

Vandekeybus had his first success in 1987 with the production "What The Body Does Not Remember". Since then, with his company Ultima Vez Vandekeybus has again and again caused a furore. His wild, daring dance style with dancers falling over and colliding has been copied many times, but the original has remained unmatched in its psychological vehemence and psychological urgency. The madman of the stage, who was last the guest in Berlin seven years ago, had been eagerly anticipated, and with his new company was on top form. He gave a rousing high point to the Context Festival, which had started so tamely this time.

When at the beginning the rustling gold foil is pulled away, there is a throng of naked bodies. The dancers twitch, wriggle, writhe and tense up as if in agony. Three musicians trudge through the people with glow sticks; they look at the creatures with cold interest.

The actress Kylie Walters flits about through the action with her blonde hair in a high wig; breathlessly she speaks the words of Peter Verhelst – a feverish monologue that cries out the landscapes of the unconscious. Verhelst takes up what for Vandekeybus is the important motif of the blind man. The hallucinating ego binds its eyes. Without being able to see, it wanders through the wood and hits its forehead, causing it to bleed. The hounded ego fights with a mountain and with black-painted dogs and becomes a "fist of fury". But for the most part the words remain a gloomy murmuring in the background, because Vandekeybus is directing his own hellish trip. The dancers continually undergo new metamorphoses. Sometimes they are helpless creatures, then highly developed beasts of prey, then dancing warriors.

The tour de force is driven on by gloom rockers around the guitarist Mauro Pawlowski. Three musicians float on a gondola over the stage, and pile up abrupt sounds on each other, while the actors throw themselves wholeheartedly into battle and go mad to the point of exhaustion. Vandekeybus, who studied psychology, understands man as being a creature of instinct. The nerves are exposed in his adrenaline-fuelled dances, which involve a high risk – in one confrontation one of the performers almost falls off the stage. All of this one experiences in a state of extreme wakefulness, and at the same time as if in a trance. As if in a nightmare.

But Vandekeybus succeeds in always putting back into order and reshaping the chaos that has broken free. And his dancers are phenomenal. Ulrike Reinbott comes over like a black panther, always ready to leap, always ready to attack. The black David Loren hops around this big cat like an agitated ape, but when she suddenly lies on him, ready to mate, he loses his courage. After this amusing excursion into zoology the choreographer shows immediately again where the hammer lies and has the dancers crash on top of each other with unrestrained aggression. But he also finds shocking images for mental trauma.

All hopes, all desires are foregone. It is neo-existentialist at the end, "This is the new black". In its wild furore, the notorious pessimism of Wim Vandekeybus and Ultima Vez is simply breathtaking.

SANDRA LUZINA

Hounded ego. Dancers from "New Black" at the HAU1.