

Inasmuch as Life is borrowed...

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According to ancient belief, the death of a man is like the birth of a butterfly. The butterfly relieves itself of the cocoon in which it was imprisoned and flies away, weighing scarcely more than the air that carries it. Likewise, the human soul is relieved, with the last breath of death, of the cocoon that was the body during a lifetime. This vision, captured in this and other metaphors, has dominated ages of thought in Western as well as Eastern culture; life on earth is understood to be a temporary passage. Man, in fact, borrows life for a while. With death, Mother Nature (or God, or...) simply takes back and recovers what She (or He) lent, but which basically belongs to Her (or Him).

This and many more reflections inspired the Belgian choreographer Wim Vandekeybus while creating his new piece, 'Inasmuch as Life is borrowed...', that premiered on the 26th of April in Antwerp, Belgium. It is the first production since Vandekeybus' company Ultima Vez contracted a co-productional structure with the Festival of Flandres Brussels-Europe, after its forced departure from the Royal Flemish Theatre last year. The link with a primarily music-oriented festival (and not with an arts centre, for instance) is not so strange when one takes into account Vandekeybus's more than common interest in the choice of the music he works with. Rarely has he used pre-existing scores. Mostly, the musical scores have been developed simultaneously with the choreography. Whereas for his last piece, 'In Spite of Wishing and Wanting', he collaborated with the almost mythical David Byrne, composer and ex-leader of the Talking Heads, this time he roped in nobody less than New York guitarist Marc Ribot, famous for his work with Elvis Costello, Marianne Faithful, and Tom Waits. But 'Inasmuch as Life is borrowed...' lies not only on a musical level in the continuity of 'In Spite of Wishing and Wanting'. There is also a thematic line that relates to both pieces, and that goes back, in a more abstract way, to even earlier pieces by the choreographer. 'Inasmuch as Life is borrowed...' treats the sometimes cruel but always fascinating opposition between, on the one hand, the indifferent force of nature that generously gives life and blindly takes it back, and, on the other hand, the will to live, the passions and preoccupations of man during his lifetime. All kinds of longings (wishes and wantings...) haunt human life, originating from the fear one has of dying, ageing and making something valuable out of the short time one is accorded to live. As a matter of fact, no one has chosen to be alive. Life has just imposed itself on us and it pulses into our bodies with a tremendous, uncontrollable force. But whereas that force, a well known topic in Vandekeybus's work, showed itself in confrontations with external danger and risk in the first pieces of the choreographer, in his latter work it appears in more interior, cerebral factors, such as, like I already said, fear, passion, desire. 'Inasmuch as Life is borrowed...' begins with birth and ends with death. Between is life, seen as a period moved by passion. Birth and death are understood as being basically equal: equal in their confrontation with nature, in their struggle for life, in their inevitable necessity. Such is illustrated by two short films, one about the birth of a baby (that immediately begins ageing and dying), and the other about the death of an old man. Both scenarios take place in the same environmental structure, to stress the existential symmetry.

Likewise, at the beginning of the piece, which bathes in some indefinite atmosphere, the 11 dancers (male and female) hang on meat-hooks, hung in rows at each side of the stage. During the minute in which they all hang quietly, as dead, one has the impression it is a gallows one is looking at. Then one after the other they fall to the ground, symbol of birth. Death and birth coincide. The dance scene that follows is of an extraordinary pent-up force. Couples of dancers prop each other up, shoulder against shoulder, balancing each other in an almost horizontal position through friction and tension. That fricative status-quo of opposite forces that can explode at any moment is resumed in a thrilling image the tension life is made of.

This is only the first in a long list of symbols in Vandekeybus' vision on life. The dancers take each other's pulse, they pick imaginary fruit, one dancer imitates a photograph of himself as a baby, another renders ecstatic joy. Strong passions and pulsions of life, reinforced by the guitar sound of Marc Ribot, alternate with banality, tiredness and pedestrian daily choices. All types of people pass in revue. 'Pourquoi je dois me lever? Je n'ai rien à faire ici!', one dancer says; another tells a story of her standing in a supermarket and not knowing what to choose: fish or potatoes? Another, a dandy, says with terrible mannerism that he 'really can't eat any more when seeing all those starving people on television!', etc.

Long, not always accurate, theatrical passages alternate with strong dance sequences, in which the dancers seem to dance, literally, as if their life depended on it, propelled by an incredible force that one only encounters with Vandekeybus.

But it is not only the body that is dancing. Inside, the soul, the spark that voyages with life, moves too. But how to make the soul perceptible on stage? The writer Paul Bowles would say, as he once, in another context, did to Vandekeybus : 'It is impossible. It's about the invisible'. And yet, we can see the soul in all kinds of theatrical symbols : dust, smoke, stars, being billions of reflections of it. With smoke sticks, the dancers show us the dance of the soul. Others try to dance the dance of the smoke. Their movements are rather homologous too, and surely as attractive as those of their souls... A little further, two dancers dance a duet without touching each other, as if they were dancing with each other's life energy.

Life is passed from generation to generation, from individual to individual, as shown in the scene in which the dancers pass the flame of matches, extinguishing the fire each time it has been surrendered. Or, another symbolisation of the same idea, as said by one dancer : 'I can recognise the rhythm of my people!' Life is passed on and is in that sense immortal. But each of us disposes of only the little piece given to him. Therefore, the threatening force of nature scares him, because in her blindness she claws ferociously, and one can get hurt or killed. That pain can be seen in both real and mental space. Life is a scourge, as we say. On stage, it results in a virtual sword fight : two dancers carry red paint and brushes and lash each other with them. The psychological side of this (risk of) pain from nature and the life she puts into us, is a scene in which some of the dancers change into werewolves (always that animalisation with Vandekeybus : nature and instinct awaken in us). Those werewolves devour a dancer and bring his body to a female dancer sitting in front of the stage. She looks at his dead body, and describes the loss of life, the last pulsation of blood, while he speaks of the swelling then decomposition of his body.

The body swells, the blood flows: elsewhere life goes on. Life pulses. The dancers show it by contractions of their bodies.

As we see, Vandekeybus is not afraid of using symbols, even literal ones, easily decodable. 'Inasmuch as Life is borrowed...' is a very poetic performance in a dreamy ambiance. Regularly, an explosion of energy emerges out of the quietness. Behind every movement, you feel a necessity. At least in the dance sequences. The theatrical passages are much less evident and clear. They seem too long, too incoherent, a little insignificant also. The passage about the fish and the potatoes in the supermarket seems totally irrelevant. The conversations with the public about who has said 'Nice tits' to a lady in the audience, also. It seems that Vandekeybus is not strict enough during the creation process when the time comes to select material that the dancers have made. Too much is being let in. During theatrical sequences, one longs for more dance. Of Vandekeybus' dance, you cannot get enough. He's too good at it, at injecting it with a vital energy that goes straight to the audience.

It is surely a little absurd sticking to the 'idée fixe' of many critics that Wim Vandekeybus is a choreographer who now and then makes excursions into the world of theatre. After all those productions he's made by now, we might begin to see that theatre constitutes an essential component in his form of expression. But it still remains that he's at his best while choreographing. His dance is, in its nature, necessary, whereas his theatre is less. Perhaps because theatre needs a more concrete anchorage, which is not in keeping with the direct physical language which is his. His theatre passages are too thin, too gratuit. It lacks an overall rigidity, which would give it its necessity. Of course, the work of Vandekeybus always has something centrifugal. It is very difficult to give it one denominator, which may even be dissident towards the seizing of logical comprehension. But the centrifugality of his dance splashes you right in the face, whereas his theatre stays where it is : on the stage.

Apart from this, the multi-directionality of his structuring has much to do with the lack of a sharp direction in life itself. The scenography of 'Inasmuch as Life is borrowed...' is, once again, wide. His scenes seem much more extensive than in reality. They are non-identified spaces, in the middle of nowhere, it seems. That is not only a consequence of the scenography, but also of the manner in which the dancers move. They lay themselves, they lose themselves not only in themselves, but also in space. They bump against invisible walls, against air. That exaggerated activity in the huge space gives them something puny which conveys, in its turn, the extensiveness of space. You lose yourself in it as in life itself. It's like the American writer Paul Auster said : 'Our lives don't really belong to us, you see, they belong to the world, and in spite of our efforts to make sense of it, the world is a place beyond our understanding.'