

## INTERVIEW WITH WIM VANDEKEYBUS (BY IAN MUNDELL)

# LEAPING OFF THE PAGE



CHOREOGRAPHER WIM VANDEKEYBUS FREQUENTLY USES FILM AND VIDEO IN HIS STAGE PERFORMANCES, BUT A DESIRE TO TELL STORIES HAS DRAWN HIM IRRESISTIBLY TOWARDS CINEMA. THE FEATURE-LENGTH AND VENICE-SELECTED *MONKEY SANDWICH* IS HIS FIRST DIALOGUE-DRIVEN PROJECT, A STEPPING-STONE TO THE LONG-PLANNED FILM *GALLOPING MIND*.

TEXT

PORTRAIT

Wim Vandekeybus began exploring photography and film while studying psychology at university, and both these interests stayed with him when he transferred his allegiances to theatre and dance. A successful audition with artist and theatre director Jan Fabre in 1985 led to a two-year period performing in 'The Power of Theatrical Madness', after which Vandekeybus set up his own group, Ultima Vez.

His first production, 'What the Body Does Not Remember' in 1987, began an acclaimed series of stage works that frequently included film elements. But he wanted to do things differently from his contemporaries. 'I didn't like at all the way people were using visuals in live performance,' he says. 'Mostly what they did was film the dancers and put the two together. For me film was much more another world, a door that opened onto the unconscious or a shared dream.'



maverick

He made short films such as *Elba and Federico* and *The Last Words*, based on stories by Italo Calvino and Julio Cortázar respectively, as components of dance performances, but they also had an independent career in film festivals. Vandekeybus also reversed the process, using his dance performances as the starting point for films.

In the stage work 'Blush', he arranged a collision between the worlds of film and dance. 'We had a screen made of elastic which meant that people could dive 'through' the screen, appear under water and swim away,' Vandekeybus explains. 'Other people appeared to swim in and jump out of the screen. So it was two dimensions and three dimensions combined.'

He subsequently went to Corsica to film some of the dance sequences in natural environments for the 'fiction-dance' film *Blush*, which had a theatrical release in France. But despite the success of this project and the subsequent *Here After*, Vandekeybus still craved pure narrative. 'I wanted to tell a story from the beginning to the end, and not to have to link to what is going on on stage,' he says.

He began work on this first feature project, *Galloping Mind*, in a typically unconventional way, during a trip to Chile. 'I travelled around and I said: I'm going to photograph the characters of my film, without letting the people know.' He told people he was documenting different professions, and in each town he visited he photographed policemen, radio presenters and so on. 'I came back with a huge portfolio of the whole movie.'

The story that took shape around these images involved the crossed destinies of several characters in a city poised between the desert and the ocean. A man, his wife, his mistress and her twin children cross paths at different moments in their lives, ultimately discovering a common history, impossible love and surreal freedom. All the while, the city is being terrorised by a gang of kids on ponies.

'It's about the adult world and the children's world, where there are different freedoms, different ways of thinking, different limits,' Vandekeybus explains. 'They have similar problems, even if they deal with the problems in different ways.'

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The initial idea of filming in Chile was abandoned because of a lack of co-production funds, and Vandekeybus turned to Brazil. Plans were made, but after 18 months the production partnership in Brazil fell apart as well.

In the meantime his Flemish producer, Bart Van Langendonck from Savage Film, had had a positive experience shooting in South Africa, so Vandekeybus went there to scout locations, eventually settling on Durban. 'It's very tropical, and visually very interesting, with a big Indian community,' he explains.

Even so, a production in South Africa will involve challenges, for instance finding younger cast members. 'I have to find a theatre school for kids where they can learn to act,' he explains. At the same time, this is one of the project's positive impacts. 'There's a social impact on the people with whom you work, so it's not just a project where we arrive, film and then leave.'



While working on *Galloping Mind*, Vandekeybus has had to deal with many pre-conceptions about his abilities, given his background in dance. 'People said that I was a good director for images and I could edit and choreograph images and music, but could I let people speak? So I said: OK, I'll write a project when people only speak. That was *Monkey Sandwich*.'

This feature-length film is based around urban myths, known in Dutch as 'broodjeaapverhalen', or 'monkey sandwich stories'. Its three sections are linked by the presence of English actor Jerry Killick (who also has one of the main roles in *Galloping Mind*) although it is not entirely clear if he is the same character in each case.

In the first section Killick plays an obsessive, tyrannical opera director, imposing his will on his company, to hilarious effect. 'It's like a Dogme film,' Vandekeybus says.

In a second section, Killick's character has set up his own community, establishing a village on land created by the merging of two rivers into one. But the engineering work is unstable and a flood washes away the village, including his young family. In the third section, Killick's character goes in search of his unborn son, discovering him in different disguises.

Once again Vandekeybus linked his film to the stage, projecting it in a theatre while a lone dancer performed in front of the screen. But the ultimate aim is for *Monkey Sandwich* to appear in cinemas or at film festivals, such as Venice which selected the film for its Orizzonti programme.



*Monkey Sandwich*

At present Vandekeybus is busy with his stage work, with projects lined up until June 2012. After then he plans to devote himself entirely to making *Galloping Mind*. Beyond that he wants to work much more in film, but without completely abandoning live performance.

'I'm very productive in performance, so I can scale back, but a well-financed film still takes three years to write and put together, so it is good to have two professions,' he says. 'I've been making *Galloping Mind* for a long time, but I made other films in-between and I've done lots of other work, so in this way I'm not frustrated.'

Although completion of *Galloping Mind* is still some way off, he is already thinking of the future. 'I have a story in mind that I'm starting to write in outline, but I also wouldn't mind adapting a book. That might be faster, because writing a story is a long journey.'

His working method is partly to blame. 'I don't follow rules. I follow impulses and energies,' he admits. 'But I like this chaotic way of working, and then to purify the story.'

He doesn't have a particular book in mind for adaptation, but since one of his next stage projects is a version of the Oedipus myth, the classics spring to mind. 'There is a big potential in the classics,' he says. 'It's not so fashionable now – Pasolini was 30 or 40 years ago – but if you can do a classic story in your own way, then why not?' ⓘ

## WIM VANDEKEYBUS (\*1963)\*

(2011) – MONKEY SANDWICH  
 (2007) – HERE AFTER  
 (2005) – BLUSH  
 (2002) – IN SPITE OF WISHING AND WANTING  
 (2000) – NASMUCH

\*Selected filmography

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