

## Review Monkey Sandwich

### Els Van Steenberghe – KNACK – 12.09.10 (English translation)

---

If everything is against you, it sometimes helps to make yourself very, very small. To put on your favourite record. And crawl as close as possible to the speakers. So that you can disappear into the music. And softly rock yourself away from the world. Sometimes it also works by creeping up as close as possible to the screen on which your favourite film is playing. You then have the illusion that the world can be moulded, that the disasters are only a nightmare and that life is nothing more or less than swaying to your favourite melody or disappearing into your favourite images. Only briefly.

#### PATIENCE PLEASE

In Vandekeybus' *Monkey Sandwich* (3½ stars) this 'only briefly' lasts around two hours. It is an extremely fascinating and memorable trip which, admittedly, takes some time to get up to cruising speed.

In recent years, choreographer Vandekeybus has developed into a fleet-footed film-maker. He operates the camera with a flourish – hand-held or fixed, depending upon the dynamic he wants in the scene – and travels the world in search of marvellous locations where he can let his imagination run wild. In *Monkey Sandwich* the film-maker meets the choreographer. The performance therefore opens in cheerful meta-theatrical fashion – with a film in which we follow a director (played superbly by Jerry Killick from the British company Forced Entertainment) who demands everything of his actors except acting. They must not pretend, they must act genuinely. Really devour, really murder their fellow actors. It goes without saying that sparks fly in rehearsal and it should not surprise us if this is the alter ego of Vandekeybus himself.

This can all be seen on a large screen which hangs above the stage. On the stage are several windmills, an aquarium and some strange paper dolls. *That's it*. For the interaction between the sparkingly edited film and that stage, we have to wait.

Suddenly, when someone on the screen dies, a boy falls onto the stage out of the heap of paper dolls. As if he is being born. His naked body is illuminated such that his skin looks like marble. The boy sits with his back to the audience. He appears to be fixing something together.

#### DANCE?

The young man gradually takes over the stage and the paper dolls appear to represent his world. In an enchanting performance, Damien Chappelle embodies the archetype of the searching, lonely person. Abandoned in a cheerless no man's land with a few dolls and vinyl records to keep him company. He attempts to bring his favourite record to life and sways to and fro next to 'his' vinyl record like a huddled heap of humanity. Or he climbs up a pole to be as close as possible to his favourite film. Or he crosses the stage as if he is actually living in the film. At one point there appears to be eye contact between him and the director on the screen. It is touching because, as a spectator, you feel that the young man believes in the film characters while you are equally well aware that they are only an illusion and apparition. They exist in his head.

Chappelle dances like someone who has never met another person, or at least has not seen one for a long time. Paper dolls, animals and invented film characters are the only beings in

his world. He emits sounds which you often do not but sometimes do understand. When you understand them, they cut straight to the bone by their simplicity. (With thanks to the author Toon Tellegen, his ant and squirrel).

Vandekeybus avails himself of literature and film just as he 'makes use' of dance. He uses the artistic genres in order to express his unbridled passion and awe for our fascinating clump of earth (including the beings who rummage around there). In Vandekeybus' world, dancing is consummate acting without words. He has Chapelle crawl, climb and slide across the stage with the primary aim of depicting the wandering individual. The movements are purposeful rather than isolated. The young man moves in relation to his dolls, a pillar and his desire to lose himself in the film. Only occasionally does a pure dance movement emerge from amongst them, one which distinguishes itself from the other movements in its abstraction and as a result is all the more impressive.

### **FASTEN YOUR SEATBELTS**

As Chapelle's occupation of the stage becomes grander, broader and higher, the film (and the imagination of the film director) continues to swirl. Literally. We are just happy that we are sitting amongst acquaintances in the plush seats. We drum it into ourselves that we are not being deluged. 'Not!' Because Vandekeybus does his very best to make us believe in this illusion. It is one of the most memorable scenes from this film/performance. One of many. Our fingers are itching to describe a few more of the memorable images. However, we will not allow them the pleasure. So that we do not detract from your pleasure in discovering Vandekeybus' wonderful world. Or even better, the discovery of a wonderfully designed 'post-apocalyptic' world, because the young man on stage might easily be the only survivor of a natural disaster...

The performance gets into its stride like the windmills on stage. Cumbersome and slow, but it eventually reaches a driving tempo and makes a deep impression.

### **ODE TO THE PRIMAL FORCE**

Vandekeybus does not play only on our hunger for illusion and dream images as an escape from reality. He also shows how this occasionally gruesome reality is an inexhaustible source of inspiration for artists who, through their work, make the audience sensitive to *and* arm it against the misery of the world, which is too often caused by the unscrupulous amongst us who are more than happy to bend nature to their will.

This is what makes *Monkey Sandwich* so powerful. It is a jumble of stories which pays tribute to the healing power of the imagination, but simultaneously warns against believing in dreams that are all too unrealistic. This makes the performance a shocking public statement.

At the same time, the production is an artistic statement from a toiling, questing artist with an explosive imagination who enthusiastically tests his boundaries and devotes himself to the impossible: merging film and theatre. In *Monkey Sandwich*, the impossible seems possible. But it is just an illusion, which is maintained until even after the credits have rolled.

Might we ask you – when you hurry to the nearest theatre to wonder at this rough diamond – not to applaud until after the credits? This way you will not miss the final fascinating scene. A scene which shows someone sobering up when awakening from having submerged himself in his favourite film or music. It is a silent apotheosis which reverberates until your applause is received.

---