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Keep the faith

WIM VANDEKEYBUS



Choreographer Wim Vandekeybus (left) and writer Bart Meuleman, facing the camera between the seven "chosen ones"

WIM VANDEKEYBUS

'Religion is also a form of creation'

EN

In *Mockumentary of a Contemporary Saviour*, a piece about religion with the aesthetic of 1970s sci-fi films, seven atypical dancers play seven “chosen” people who are saved from an uninhabitable world. “We are going to invent a new faith on the stage,” says choreographer Wim Vandekeybus. **MICHAËL BELLON • PHOTO: SASKIA VANDERSTICHELE**

“I had been thinking about this piece for a long time,” Wim Vandekeybus tells us between two rehearsals in his studio in Molenbeek. “But it is a subject that I wanted to research first. That is why it took so long. I have always been fascinated by artists who deal with religion. Not with faith as such, but with faith as a product of the human spirit, and with the connection between religion and creation. Because religion is also a form of creation. In other words,

this piece about religion and the coming of a messiah is an excuse to talk about people. It is not about an existing religion, though Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism were all sources of inspiration.”

Do you remember the origin of this fascination?

WIM VANDEKEYBUS: Films like *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Martin Scorsese left a lasting impression on me. I still think that film is better than *Silence* [Scorsese’s 2016 religious film - MB]

because the latter is very classical, while in *The Last Temptation* God might appear as a lion, for example.

Messiah stories have continued to emerge throughout the centuries. In the time of Jesus, there were numerous prophets who announced that the end of the world was nigh. That was the common language of insurgents who were then crucified by the Romans. It was a period in which messianic figures rebelled against regimes more than they proclaimed a genuine

and profound faith. Figures like John the Baptist, a kind of anti-messiah who preceded the true messiah, also appear in many stories.

I am fascinated by the way these stories about religious superstars were able to spread in a time without the internet and with very few written documents. There are similar stories in Islam or in Eastern religions. These are good scripts because they were usually written down with great care and only years after the fact, based on various versions. So I don't want to fixate on one specific story. It is also about religious freedom and doubt. Why do we believe and when do we believe? In times of prosperity the temples are not as full as in times of crisis.

Do you perhaps also connect the semi-fictions of messiah myths to the alternative facts with which political populists wrap the masses around their finger?

VANDEKEYBUS: That link is certainly there, but maybe we should reflect on it more later, with the benefit of hindsight and perspective. But if the question relates to how these charismatic figures are able to inspire such confidence and offer people something to hold on to, then of course it relates to the themes that have been important to my work for a long time, such as life, death, and hope.

You have again forged an alliance with another artist - this time with author and theatre director Bart Meuleman.

VANDEKEYBUS: I've known Bart for a long time. Since his work with De Zweep, in fact, which I think was one of the best theatre collectives that there has ever been, with Herwig Ilegems and Mark Verstraete. They made completely off-the-wall pieces.

I was looking for someone to collaborate on this theatrical mockumentary, somebody who could write dialogues, handle complex dramaturgy, and was willing to commit to tackling a subject like religion in the contemporary context.

I had suggested it to Bart before, and eventually managed to convince him by emphasising that I wanted to make something universal. Bart knows his history, but he's not the kind of person who would just rewrite something. Bart is a creative spirit who seeks interaction. He brings people closer together, he can be very direct sometimes, and he can actually attack to initiate something; to hear what people are saying and why.



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“Nobody has ever sat down for a coffee with God”

What is the plot premise of *Mockumentary of a Contemporary Saviour*?

VANDEKEYBUS: The world has become uninhabitable, but seven people are chosen and are taken to a secure location to be saved. They represent the remnants of a world that no longer exists. The remnants of various languages and cultures. Each character was pre-determined and represents something specific. We cast the roles in function of these requirements. There is an Asian, a Russian, an American, an Arab, an Englishman, an Italian, and a woman from Liège who is the mother of the Saviour.

The outside world is called Anarchaos, and the seven are locked in a kind of safe room. They might already have been there for a long time because I like a non-linear, timeless universe in which you might



In his new piece, Wim Vandekeybus has placed more emphasis on the theatrical than on dance

meet someone who lived six hundred years ago.

The whole script was written during the rehearsals to suit the performers, and then gradually started to form a unity. This is a very theatrical piece with much less dance than usual. You can't only dance on this theme because that makes it all much too symbolic.

Moreover, these are all atypical dancers. Saïd Gharbi [the blind dancer who had already danced for *Ultima Vez* in the 1990s - MB] has joined the group. Like a kind of blind visionary who seems to know much more than everyone else, he pulls all the strings unnoticed because he wants to get his fair share. Jason Quarles is a black American with a soul memory that stretches to distant Africa. Maria Kolegova represents the old Siberian mys-

tery, and Yun Liu the Asian world, and the genocide of the Chinese one-child policy. That is where we cast her. She is 18 years old and didn't speak a word of English, but we wanted a fighter and she knows kung fu. It is not dance, but there is something magical about it, and it is closely related to religion. We are going to invent a new faith on the stage. What do these people believe? What are their values and how can we learn from their humanity?

And what form will all this take?

VANDEKEYBUS: I consider the piece to be science fiction, but of a very retro kind. The period is left completely vague, so it is only indirectly about today. I started reading sci-fi books for the very first time for this piece. Ursula K. Le Guin and people like that: really fantastic. The genre is very theatrical because it can simply omit things that are part of our everyday reality in order to focus on something very specific. Theatre and dance share that quality. You make your own codes. But this is not sci-fi with impressive visual effects. I am particularly interested in the atmosphere of seventies sci-fi films, like George Lucas's *THX 1138* by or Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*.

Another extremely important element is the sound that our composer Charo Calvo came up with in collaboration with Manuel Poletti of the Parisian Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique. IRCAM can make the voice of one singer sound like a fifteen-member choir and thus be as suggestive. With a safe room, you also need the suggestion of an outside world, which in the piece we evoke only through sound. We use surround sound so that everyone gets sucked in.

Why have you called this a mockumentary?

So that you can deal with a serious subject but still keep your options open?

VANDEKEYBUS: No. I genuinely take the subject very seriously. But it can't be a real documentary because it is set in the future. What's more, documentary is a film genre and what we have created is not film but dance theatre.

A "saviour" is always somebody who can

—
 "I like a timeless universe in which you might meet someone who lived six hundred years ago"

articulate their faith in an attractive, compelling way. While ineffability or doubt might sometimes be much more important. Eastern religions, with their concept of reincarnation, are sometimes much more interesting because the career or materialistic aspirations of the messiah are less important. That is why our characters do not hide their weaknesses and less attractive human aspects. You've always fallen into something of a trap if you're waiting for the real messiah. No one has ever sat down for a coffee with God. Most religions assume that there is only one God, so if there are ten religions who each claim that same God, it makes you think. These saviours are thus a bit like the workers of God who don't carry a contract. ■

📍 **MOCKUMENTARY OF A CONTEMPORARY SAVIOUR**

14 > 22/4, KVS BOL, www.kvs.be

NL | Voor zijn nieuwe productie *Mockumentary of a contemporary saviour* laat choreograaf Wim Vandekeybus het theatrale opnieuw zwaarder doorwegen dan de dans. Schrijver Bart Meuleman leverde de tekst.

FR | Dans *Mockumentary of a Contemporary Saviour*, la nouvelle production du chorégraphe Wim Vandekeybus, le théâtre l'emporte encore une fois sur la danse. L'écrivain Bart Meuleman s'est chargé du texte.