

MARY BRENNAN discovers the reasons why a choreographer has decided to revive his first piece

Body of work still in shape

IN THE late eighties, a young Belgian choreographer threw a concrete breeze block up in the air... and almost before a fellow performer had, leaping, caught it, there came the spreading sound of shattering conventions.

Within a year or so, venues from London to New York were being shaken to their foundations by a new movement vocabulary that was soon referred to — not always affectionately — as Euro-crash. Wim Vandekeybus had unwittingly occasioned a trend, a host of (often second-rate) imitators — but by then, of course, he himself had moved on in other, more challenging directions.

Originally, as part of the Tramway element of this year's National Review of Live Art, we were going to see the British premier of one such new direction. First shown in *Mountains Made of Barkings* brought together film and text, as well as music and movement, in a concept that bordered on violent hallucination.

Vandekeybus, ever curious, ever restless, had picked up on Martin Scorsese's comment that mental aggression is stronger than physical aggression and had sought out ways of conveying this in live staged performance. Unfortunately, injury

stopped him in his tracks and forced a change of programme. NOLA audiences will how see, instead, that first radical work which established Vandekeybus as an influential innovator — and coincidentally won him New York's prestigious Bessie award in 1988.

When Vandekeybus made *What the Body Does Not Remember* he had, by his own admission, no formal background training in either dance or theatre. But he did have a driving impulse to explore certain ideas, certain themes — instinct, for instance, and how it can surface, unexpectedly.

And what he describes as "the indifference of nature. People, in my piece, stomp on the floor. It's aggressive behaviour, it's full of tremendous energy. And the audience will react to this, with their own thoughts. But the space, the floor — this remains indifferent. There's an extreme in this that interests me, that is a factor in my work, yes."

Extremeness, in *What the Body Does Not Remember* comes in various guises. I can, in fact, remember very clearly the sensations the piece produced in me — and in the audience as a whole — when it first toured. His bold use of props — not just those famous blocks, but towels, jackets, feathers even — generated an electric awareness of risk and brinkmanship and the nature of timing which is probably more instinctive than learned.

Suddenly catching a flying block, or balancing — a slowly arranged block at a time — took on all the tensions of real time. This was

somehow very different from the balancing on pointe that lies at the heart of classical ballet technique.

There, it fosters romantic illusions of things ethereal, vaguely uncorporeal. When Vandekeybus had his dancers balance, it felt as if they were on the gritty edge of some decisive precipice — maybe about to topple into some personal emotional crisis, or simply break an ankle.

He agrees he's not interested in making work that is beautiful to look at, but not much more. "I won't try to entertain people with just a pretty picture, a beautiful move. The work has to look beyond that. When I make a duet, it's not a pas de deux, it's a confrontation. It's an exercise in communication.

It's flesh and sweat mixing. And you get these physical extremes. Like in the frisking scene in *What the Body*... The girl is standing there, she's in an open position. Vulnerable. Open to touching. Having to be touched."

The scene he refers to is one of the most unsettling in the work — and for some people it plays as a very intrusive, violating exploration of the woman's body. For Vandekeybus, however, this frisking scene confronts something that perhaps we prefer not to acknowledge: the place

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of hate within love, of repulsion within attraction. The business of extremeness, again, and the energy that flows between opposite polarities. Bringing this, his first piece, back into the company's current repertoire — he revived it last year and now tours it with more recent works — has, by and large, proved an interesting experience for him and a rewarding one for audiences, particularly those who didn't have a chance to see it first time round.

As his work shifts into other dimensions, becomes more technically sophisticated, he sees *What the Body*... as a useful and proven reminder of the strengths of simplicity. "Work that is more complicated is not necessarily stronger work. This piece is still, for me, very fresh. It is the basis of my language. It's from that first moment when I said 'I don't want to do whatever anyone else is doing — let's go back to reality' and I made a language that came through from my belly, the belly of the people I was working with."

The strength of those gut reactions wrought a profound and radical change on the contemporary dance scene. The reverberations still pulse through work that is being made nearly a decade later.

It will be good to see, again, the fierce and vehement work that subsequently sent so many wannabe-Wims crashing madly in its wake. I promise you will find the original is still the greatest.

What the *Body Does Not Remember* comes to Glasgow's Tramway tomorrow and Saturday at 8pm.

THE HERALD