

A Frenzy of Threat: Ultima Vez's "What the Body Does Not Remember" : The New Yorker

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The Belgian choreographer Wim Vandekuybus was only twenty-four when his first work, "What the Body Does Not Remember," was performed at the Kitchen, in 1987, the same year he founded his company, Ultima Vez. The piece was a sensation, and audiences came away talking about the raw physicality, the brutal theatricality, put forth by this virtual unknown. I don't remember why I wasn't able to see "What the Body Does Not Remember" back then, and I never thought the chance would come again. But, twenty-five years after its creation, the work is on a world tour, and recently made a stop in New York, at Pace University's Michael Schimmel Center for the Arts.

A menacing tone was set as soon as the first lighting cue came up, in silence: eight narrow strips of light crossing the floor from end to end, which created a sharp, forbidding environment, a trap that awaited unsuspecting victims. Soon enough, two men walked in and lay down. Pavel Masek and Eddie Oroyan, in shirts, pants, and shoes, shifted their positions as if asleep, moving about the stage without getting up, palpably uncomfortable and fitful. After a few minutes, a woman, Livia Balazova, in a black dress and boots, sat at a small table upstage, which was lit from above. Gradually, she began moving her hands, palms up and palms down, in sweeping motions along the surface of the table, making light rasping and scraping sounds, which were amplified. The effect was hypnotic but, because of the murkily lit stage and Balazova's intense focus on the table, it was also unsettling. Suddenly, she pounded the table with both hands and glared at the men, and Masek and Oroyan, now side by side just in front of her, rolled quickly into a straight-armed pushup position. This woman meant business.

For several more minutes, she stroked and rapped and pounded the table, each sound causing the men to move, as she watched them devilishly, seeming to relish her power over them. Smaller, scratchier sounds made them twitch nervously; Balazova alternated hands at times, each hand controlling a different man. At each double hand slam, though, both would obediently respond with the pushup. As her hand gestures on the table sped up, so did the men's movements about the stage. They abandoned their tight formation and changed facings, occasionally rolling backward, up and over their shoulders, their bodies falling heavily on the floor. On one final thump by Balazova, the lights went out and the dancers left the stage.

A feeling of being out of control or ill at ease was present throughout the piece. At times, it arose out of chaos, as

in a section in which the nine dancers, all in street clothes, ran wildly around the stage, accompanied by fast atonal music, and tossed chalk bricks in the air, which most of the time were caught by other dancers but sometimes broke on the ground. The dancers clapped the bricks together, walked on them, and slid them along the floor, and the dust they created added to the mayhem. In the middle of this, a simple, beautiful phrase slipped in and then disappeared just as quickly: Oroyan and Zebastían Méndez Marín, holding hands, flung each other into airy sprawling leaps as they circled the stage. Butterflies on a battlefield.

That brief phrase was an anomaly. “What the Body Does Not Remember” was full of rough edges and discomfort, and was performed in a no-nonsense, task-oriented way. There were passages of personal violation, as when dancers walking briskly on the diagonal deftly stole one another’s suit jackets or the towels they’d put on after stripping to their underwear; alienation and isolation, at the end of that same section, when a lone man, Ricardo Ambrozio, was burdened with all the towels and had to dispose of them himself; invasion of personal space, as when, in three simultaneous duets, the men repeatedly frisked their female partners, who stood spread-eagled and submitted to the intrusions at first but flinched more and more angrily with each subsequent touch, eventually lashing out and attempting to escape.

The piece’s score, by Thierry De Mey and Peter Vermeersch, wove in and out, underpinning the dramas unfolding onstage. For the frisking duets, the music complemented the intensity, beginning with a relentless tribal percussiveness and then slowing and dropping out altogether when the central couple, Masek and Maria Kolegova, spotlit at center stage, became more tender with each other. His antagonism turned into caressing, her reactions softened. But Vandekuybus was not content to let affection linger, and the relationship hardened again, and Kolegova spun away from Masek, only to leap back into his arms. In one of the other harsh duets churning around them, Aymara Parola struggled with Oroyan, at one point pouncing on him, landing with her feet planted on his hips, gargoyle-like. At the end, the stage was filled with tortured embraces. Just offstage, Ambrozio sat quietly, looking down.

Ambrozio—lean, balding, with a trim black beard and a sad face—was a refuge of calm throughout. Entering with a white chair, he scanned the floor as he wandered around the stage, trying to find the right place to alight. Eventually, he rested the chair on one leg, and tried to sit but fell forward. So he laid the chair on its back and “sat” in it that way, staring straight ahead, up at the ceiling. Balazova, enraptured by Ambrozio, mimicked his seated postures, but with her chair in the conventional upright position; she kept an eye on him, crossing her legs when he did, folding her arms to match him. Soon, the other dancers joined her, and together they created tableaux, like old-fashioned portrait photographs. Meanwhile, the music had drifted in, first subtle plucking and then horns and woodwinds, and piano. Eight dancers coalesced into a triumphant arrangement again as Ambrozio reclined just in front of them. Noticing the group, he adjusted his position so that they might join him in his alternative facing, which they did, eagerly.

Even in a relatively placid section of the dance such as this, glimpses of unease crept in—here, when the dancers, in between group formations, retreated to the edges of the stage to stand on chalk bricks, as though they were safe zones in a game of exclusion. Someone was always left out, momentarily bereft. A similarly benign chair section had its own tinge of cruelty in an otherwise comic landscape. The tall dancer Damien Chapelle sat downstage, facing us, as Balazova stood by him, watching him with curiosity, clearly wanting to be part of his world. Balazova sat in Chapelle’s lap, and contentedness seemed to settle in. For her, at least. Chapelle began to fidget, a claustrophobic response to such an imposition. In his squirming, holding on to the sleeping Balazova, he somehow managed to remove the long-sleeved shirt that he wore and also to put it on her. Other seated pairs populated the stage, and the dancers on the laps were unceremoniously dumped to the ground, and ended up being rolled back and forth by their heads—a quiet, strange violence.

There was no such violence in a brief passage before the end. In silence, Méndez Marín, Parola, and Balazova each puffed at a small white feather, keeping it aloft as long as possible. Occasionally, a dancer had to lick a feather up off the floor and set on its way again; Méndez Marín swallowed his feather and had to spit it out, and the little blob sailed in a gentle arc toward us and landed damply. The bit of comedy was a reminder that there had been such moments all along—in the playful brick tossing, the wrapping and unwrapping of towels, the chair on its side.

The piece ended, though, as it began, with two dancers trapped in the taut wires of light crossing the stage. This time it was Kolegova and Tanja Marin Fridjónsdóttir, and it wasn’t raps on a table that provided the aural accompaniment; it was other dancers stamping and jumping loudly, terrorizing the women by landing quite near them. All of the dancers came and went, trading places as aggressors and victims, in a frenzy of threat and noise, though some purposely landed lightly, their silence softening the blows around them, or perhaps only making them seem that much harder by comparison. The melee was one last demonstration of how ferociously talented these dancers are—how committed, in a hell-for-leather way.

Finally, only the normally placid Ambrozio was left, stomping away, until he grew tired, or unsure about why his body was engaging in this dire activity in the first place. He looked exhausted, and fearful that he’d be led back into Vandekuybus’s vortex all over again. As he would be.

Photograph by Danny Willems.