

Interview with Wim Vandekeybus on the occasion of the première of "Mountains Made of Barking" (from the Flemish magazine "Knack", May 21st, '94)

Your productions have the strangest titles. "Mountains Made of Barking" is no exception. What comes first: the name or the concept?

WIM VANDEKEYBUS: Most often, the title comes first. One needs a theme, an idea, before being able to create a movement. Actually, dance in itself doesn't really interest me. And if it doesn't express something, it doesn't interest me at all. I have to know what I wish to communicate in order to explain to my people - although very vaguely - why they do something. The titles suggest something, but leave plenty of room. The circle is not closed. A lot of things can still float in, like a port where ships sail in and out. The world outside is in fact much more important than the one inside. I cannot really explain the titles, and not the title "Mountains Made of Barking" either. Tomorrow I'll probably tell you something different than today. Every day a new title spins around in my head, and I find new interpretations.

How do you arrive at something as fantastic as "Mountains Made of Barking" ?

VANDEKEYBUS : All of a sudden there's a moment when I realize 'this is it'. It happens very intuitively, as with most of my work. In fact, I was not trained to do this work. I have never enjoyed tuition either as photographer or as dancer.

Then, you are not a professional but only a dilettant ?

VANDEKEYBUS : Is that important? I take on my work in a very professional way. When Saïd Gharby, the blind Moroccan dancer, walked in here last year, I thought he worked very professionally, although he didn't have the least experience. I like working with actors who don't regard themselves as actors and remain modest. My dancers never make a pirouette: that wouldn't have a place in my performances. What it all comes down to is *to be or not to be*.

My audience is always struggling with the question 'What can I hold onto?'. They have to dig inside themselves to pin down their interpretation. After a while you lose your line of thought and have to look for something else. I believe it is important to have people doubt.

Don't the actors ask themselves what they're actually doing ?

VANDEKEYBUS : I think I talk with them enough. I like to work with new people every time because they ask me : 'But what *do* you want ?'. The most difficult and critical of them I usually keep around me. Do you know "The Delicate Prey" by Paul Bowles? I think the title is incredible and very apt. The audience looks at us as prey - you have to present yourself as prey. Some so-called professionals are very vain. They always want to show their faces, although their backs are saying much more. The first scene of "Mountains Made of Barking" is very simple. I wanted people without faces. It's horrible to look at since everything becomes indifferent, in the way nature is indifferent to human passion and tragedy. Maybe that's the theme of this production. The whole performance is about what's *under* the skin.

One of my best friends was *Carlo Verano*. I knew him for about four years, and then he came to live in Brussels when he was eighty-five. He could scratch himself with a brush - sometimes even until he bled - to get rid of an itch. 'It's the poison that's inside me', he used to say, 'The inner pain.'

In Tangiers I went to see Paul Bowles. I told him I was very moved by his story "The Circular Valley". It's about a monster living in a castle who crawls into the skin of a priest, a panther or a crook to discover their feelings. At a certain moment a couple arrives and the monster crawls into the man. It notices that the man is suffering badly because he so intensely desires this woman. The monster can't take it and crawls into the woman. There he discovers a different world : she oversees everything and the man is just a part of nature. 'Why', Bowles asked me, 'do people always take the most difficult path?' Then he remained silent. For twenty minutes there was no more talk, and then he said, 'Maybe because they want to try the impossible. You can't put the story onto film, it's about the invisible.' When I started filming I remembered these words. That was the story : the impossibility of showing the invisible. At a certain moment somebody in the movie says : 'Do you see that mountain? It's not made of sand. When the dog barks, the mountain grows.' It's very simple and logical.

The world is not rationally explainable ?

VANDEKEYBUS : There are many things that cannot be explained. Falling in love, for example. One cannot explain, measure or weigh it, and yet we're constantly obsessed by it. So we just stick a name on it. That's the way it goes with my work. I don't know if the title suits this piece - it could be used for other productions. When I was in Mexico, I stayed with people in a hut on the beach. They had a three-month-old child who didn't have a name yet. Only when he would become half-a-year-old would the parents consider the time ripe. One of the kids' names was 'Sun and Sea', another's Cynthia. Probably an American tourist who passed by had played with her. You don't know the story, but you do feel there was something different going on.

We live in a society threatened by running past itself. Everything becomes faster. You are moving just as frenetically on stage. Does speed create superficiality ?

VANDEKEYBUS : Not always. In "What the Body Does Not Remember" I focused on the moment right before an accident happens. At that moment you don't remember whether you're a man or a woman, rich or poor. Your body reacts without you controlling it. It's purely instinctive and impossible to react against. In this era we need those reflexes less and less because everything has become safer, even though faster. On top of that, nowadays you can get an insurance for almost everything.

Speed has also become very unreal and unphysical. Contact with things has become more distant. Actually, speed is very relative. A rocket to the moon is incredibly fast, but it actually goes very slowly. Speed is created when objects are put next to one another. The same goes for humor. Something that's funny is only funny because of what comes

before or after. In itself, humor does not exist. This performance is probably less spectacular than the previous ones. It's more secretive, more complex.

Beauty by accident is difficult to explain. It is like an unseizable network. It's actually quite difficult to think about just one thing. A very good book is The Road to Flanders by Claude Simon, where the most bizarre stories are woven into each other.

This was how it was with Carlo. When he talked about his life, he made a list of the things he had never done. All of a sudden something would be added or something disappeared. When he came to Belgium, he had forgotten his age. He thought that he was forty years old because his new situation made him remember a time when he was so much younger. He asked me how many times one can use a teabag. I explained it to him again and again, but he kept asking the same question. In spite of the chaos his life was really structured like a network. Simon's book is similar, and also my performances have a resemblance to it. It's very hard to say how I work, but it's quite chaotic, actually.

One doesn't remain twenty years old. What will happen when the years wear you down and you will be forced to live and dance at a slower pace ?

VANDEKEYBUS : I will find another way. The fantastic world you see in this performance will be deepened throughout the next years. It will be slower, but the content will become stronger. The inner force will strengthen. I will continue making dance performances, but not my whole life. That's why I've started filming now.

You now work with text. Is it as a reaction to the limitations of dance ?

VANDEKEYBUS : When speaking one is responsible for what one is saying. I like to listen to languages I don't understand. Dance is a language no one speaks, and thus only the emotion or the expression counts. That's the fascinating thing about dance. I've changed the dance language so it's my language and no one else speaks it. Of course, people recognize things. One can't invent ten new languages in a lifetime. When you come up with one or two ideas that are really your own, you can be satisfied. In this performance I'm working on the same ideas but in a totally different context. A text has a face, an identity. Dance is purely ethereal, it has no face. Saïd has a face, but he can't see it.

In his Fatal Strategies, a book of much importance to me, Jean Baudrillard talks about the slowing down of time. He says that sight is the fastest way of communicating. If we were to slow that down, it would probably cause a major catastrophe. You would feel a blow, and only then would you see it coming at you. That's the world in which Saïd lives - his sight has just slowed down. He can see you alright, you can't hide from him, but it's in slow-motion.

Text is also a slower means of communication.

VANDEKEYBUS : Slower than sight in any case. When you work around the senses, there's a moment when you have to come out with something, and texts are very apt for that. I am fascinated by texts that have tragedy in them, and that grab you by the throat. But I was tired of seeing theatre where it's all fake and played.

In this production one is constantly confronted with eyes. Those of Saïd, a blind dog, the horse.

VANDEKEYBUS : This story is in fact seen through the eyes of an animal. All my life I've ridden horses, and the house was full of dogs, cats and other animals. My father was a vet. Sometimes he woke me up at 4 a.m. because a pig had to deliver and my hand was still small enough. Then I had to feel. A head? Feet? Ok, pull! Three years later it was my younger brother's turn, as my hands had become too large. So I do have a feeling for animals, but I don't think one should humanize them, as is happening sometimes nowadays.

An animal has something incredibly peaceful. It can't explain the things around which we build stories. An animal is as it is. It will only kill when hungry. The skin of an animal is so completely different than ours. I like playing with contrast. In my imagination also. I have a very catastrophic imagination. I always see things that could happen, that might collide; that's what gives me energy, a spark. I try to put people into situations that result in chain reactions. I don't work with structures and I'm not a mathematician. I prefer to work with images. A chicken being killed, trembling... that's instinct.

Can images transmit everything ?

VANDEKEYBUS : I believe that sound is just as important. Sometimes it's even stronger.

You're now thirty and have been praised by the entire world press. Far different than Carlo. Isn't so much success suffocating ?

That's why irony and relativity are so important. I don't attach much importance to success. An audience that appreciates you is important. We have also had bad reviews. I've been working for 3 months now, 24 hours a day. The working process is far more important than the reception after the première. When I think we performed well, but the reviews are bad, it really doesn't touch me. People have to be able to say what they want, but they should stop labelling me. They know I don't know a thing about choreography, don't they? I've never made a secret of that.

Do you stage things because you live at ill-peace with the world, or are society's problems far from your bed ?

The art world should tell something. A message is a loaded word, but simply criticizing is too cold. You have to create something. That's why I like working on something timeless. I know what's in my head. It's clear to me, but it is quite chaotic, and I have no idea how critics will respond to that.

You were talking about catastrophes that don't happen. A lot of them do happen. Sarajevo, for example. Or do you say, my God, what can an artist change about that?

Absolutely not. In the end something winds up totally insensible, and suddenly all is quiet, but then someone stands up and opens your eyes again. I feel the need for the extreme. I like fighting with my emotions and the impossibility of doing something about it. I don't make these performances because of Sarajevo, but I do believe it's important that it is

telling something. Today you can't talk about trivialities. In my last performance (Her Body Doesn't Fit Her Soul) the aesthetic emotion counted too much. It was too poetic and I was too tender with Saïd. This performance is a howl.

Paul Goossens