

Paul Verduyckt, **Knack**, March 13th, 1996

"A Body Without Head"

'Bereft of a Blissful Union' about chaos.

Wim Vandekeybus is still amazing. 'Bereft of a Blissful Union' was announced as a fusion of live music and existing stage material, an intensified compilation of recent work, such as 'The Weight of a Hand' was six years ago. It would seem that the new production is finally much more than that. The chaos theme that began in 'Mountains Made of Barking' (1994) is now elaborated by the 32-year-old devil-artist. He blended in his inimitable manner music, dance, theater and especially film, a lot of film. Richard Wagner found a word for it: *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

With this piece the image-maker Vandekeybus again shows his strongest side. He pulls his powerful images from the absurd, the surreal and the unconscious. It surprises and confuses at the same time, but it also opens a wide fan of possibilities, associations and interpretations with which the spectator is confronted and from which he can choose according to his taste. That the dance sometimes has difficulty fighting against the force of the film and music doesn't make it less so.

"The scream as the summit of what, at the beginning, could have been happiness, but just as well anger", reads one of the citations in the program book. Life starts with the scream of the new-born; in 'Bereft of a Blissful Union' as well. At the beginning of the performance, the actor-dancers let off cries and howls that pierce to the marrow, but which quickly turn into cheers or laughter. The observer doesn't know any more: is it to laugh with or to cry with?

Another scene from the first part of the show disarms the audience. Curved, bare, female backs in a diagonal line. The bodies have the robust beauty of a classical sculpture and are touched by others as such.

Squatting on vases, these living sculptures seem like a female inversion of the mythical Atlas figure. With the difference that they don't carry the world, the world carries them. When the clay pots suddenly, without reason, fly into shards, their world also bursts.

## **Sheepskin**

The film images call up a totally different universe. They play under water-level, which in fact seems to be a huge sheepskin. In 'Mountains Made of Barking', the blind actor Saïd Gharbi smothered his fears under such a cover. But in the underwater scenes of the film, the fish-like swimmers beat in turn the underside of the surface, or the sheepskin. From panic or from anger? On the other side lies a beautiful blond Ophelia, who is startled by the literal under-skin force. Through a nearly invisible split-screen technique, the two eyes of the startled Madonna look at each other, and

sometimes in opposite directions. What rumbles in her head? The thematic contrast between chaos and harmony, tension under the skin and outer calm, between serious and funny in the realistic scenes appears to be like a running gag throughout the show. The realism of a checkered tablecloth, the sound of a spoon turning in a cup or of a domestic squabble are in shrill contrast with physical appearance of the two characters of this *kitchen-sink drama*: a body without head and a head without body. The on-looker can not help it, but these appearances put mythological, archetypal and even literary connotations (Salomé, Seneca, Hamlet, Macbeth) in movement.

In the recent work by Wim Vandekeybus the body isn't what it used to be. Not in 'Bereft of a Blissful Union' either. The perspective is no longer is the body or the physique, but what is under it. The 'Blissful Union' is finished. The unity between body and soul is lost forever.