

Review of *Weak Dance Strong Questions*

Clara van den Broek, De Morgen, Belgium, 24th October 2001

Soundless movement on an empty stage

In the dance performance *Weak Dance Strong Questions*, the Dutch dramatist Jan Ritsema and the British choreographer and dancer Jonathan Burrows move around an empty stage, without music. They make hardly any recognisable dance movements, they just move, but they nevertheless have considerable effect. What Burrows and Ritsema have in common is their interest in what they call 'fundamental research in the performing arts'. The 'Questions' of the title concern what a dance performance is, should be and can be: but this piece is strong mainly because it transcends self-enquiry.

Burrows and Ritsema explore the boundaries of dance. They show us something that can barely be called dance: what is dance exactly? They also examine the characteristics of the theatrical context in which dance is performed. They touch on the relationship between the audience and the performance. How expectations determine the way you watch (you expect dance) and how, as a spectator, you are always projecting things into what is being shown. The spectator creates the performance. If he does not aid its construction and project things, it is nothing. The relationship with the audience is open, and there is an atmosphere of complicity. It is true that the theatrical context is thrown open, but it is not deconstructed. The classic audience arrangement is retained: they sit in a group in front of the stage. This means the classic notion of 'composition' is also kept: you watch an entity with tensions and internal rhythms. It is precisely because Burrows and Ritsema have not taken this stripping of essential characteristics to the extreme that the circle of self-examination is interrupted, and space for other meanings is formed. As the work itself indicates, the spectator's chief activity in this is projection. The dancers seem at times to be immersed in themselves. It is as if, in part unconsciously, their mind takes their body in tow. This gives all their movements something vital, because they are filled out.

The two dancers are thoroughly different. Although Ritsema has already danced for an audience several times, in a certain sense he remains a layman. He lacks the connection with and control over the body that characterises dancers; he moves a little like a demented elephant. By contrast, Burrows can scarcely hide the fact that he is a practised dancer.

If this performance had been purely self-reflective, its Belgian opening at the Cultural Centre in Maasmechelen would probably have fallen flat. The audience consisted largely of secondary school children. For many of them this was their first dance performance. Unsurprisingly there was initially plenty of giggling. Burrows and Ritsema responded with a smile, which was one of the means by which they gradually opened the door between themselves and the audience. This was an exceptional theatrical event. Although it was intended as an investigation into what a dance performance might be, *Weak Dance Strong Questions* reached out towards the essence of theatre. It was one of the best *theatre* performances in months.

Clara van den Broek