

Review of *Weak Dance Strong Questions*

Pieter T'Jonck, Financieel Economische Tijd, Belgium, October 2001

Confusingly Clear

At first sight one could describe this performance in a few sentences. This does not much increase our understanding, however, in fact all one can do is to sum up its 'preconditions' and they are extremely simple. The room is evenly lit, large windows allow the sights and sounds of the outside world to trickle into the performance. The audience is on more or less conventional raked seating starting from the edge of the dance floor. At the start Burrows explains in a brief introduction that the piece lasts 50 minutes, a few cushions are handed out, and then the two men start to dance. No virtuoso dance - Ritsema was after all not trained as a dancer and he makes no effort to remedy this - nor is it a duet in the conventional sense of the word. The only rule in this dance seems to be that one must never stop moving throughout the 50 minutes. After some time you notice that there may be a second rule: if anything like a definite pattern begins to take shape in the movements, or a hint of bravura, it is instantly ended. There is not a single trace to be found of any move towards 'content' or a 'choreographic theme', let alone a story.

It therefore seems as if the dancers move only on the impulse of the moment. This makes the dance just about as disparate and discontinuous as the random stream of thoughts that runs through your mind at an unguarded moment. The same applies to the movements; they are rarely 'ordinary'. It is Burrows in particular who stands out, with his combinations of strange and twisted attitudes in torso and limbs. It is as if he is always asking himself what movement might still be possible once he has tied himself into a knot. At other times he moves his arms and head exactly as if he were so immersed in his thoughts that he does not notice that he is involuntarily expressing his musings spatially by means of gestures. But however strangely it goes, these situations are never tolerated for long or developed. Nor are they seized upon in order to score points or to seduce; the tempo of the performance is much too restful for this. Every movement is entered into clearly and very slowly. You can clearly see the effort it requires, but it is never accentuated.

Watching helplessly

At first, watching this performance feels uncomfortable, even awkward. Its sometimes clumsy nature and lack of cohesion make you somewhat helpless. Should you be embarrassed by what is happening here? Is there anything to understand? What should one look at? What are the questions mentioned in the title?

After a short time you only have two possibilities left: you lose interest and leave, or you let yourself be carried along by this steady stream of movements. If you do the latter, the effect is decidedly odd. You realise that for once, as a spectator, you are not being pushed into a corner where something has to be understood or judged. You watch an unexpected, unfamiliar collection of movements whose coherence recedes ever further. Every question you ask about what you are seeing ricochets off the performance itself and generates more questions. The only label that applies to all these movements is that of two bodies with their own physical possibilities, and even tics. With all inessentials removed, they assume an unexpectedly powerful 'presence'. They are no longer fitted out with a choreography and a stage setting, but stand for themselves, in their own right. It seems as if, for the first time, you are watching dancing bodies that refer to nothing outside themselves.

In a conversation after the performance, Burrows and Ritsema explain a few things again. Both of them have been teaching for some time at P.A.R.T.S., the choreographic course linked to Rosas and La Monnaie. At a certain moment they decided to create a performance together. During their second session, after an initial talk, they tried out some movements, until Burrows came up with the suggestion of 'dancing questions'. Although neither of them knew how one might do it, this paradoxical task became the basis of the performance. The rehearsal process consisted of alternate long discussions and 'real' dance sessions. These discussions have still not run their course: they often have differences of opinion, not about the basis of the undertaking, but about the formulation and interpretation of the purpose of the performance. This is not surprising, considering the nature of the enterprise.

Jonathan Burrows: 'I like the idea of inadequate art, an art that isn't about showing the audience something bigger or better than them, art that isn't concerned with more than what is. But at the same time we're aiming for more or less the opposite of Mies van der Rohe's 'Less is more', we want to avoid any principle that might lead to our limiting or excluding things. People sometimes ask why there's no stillness in what we do, but stillness isn't really our natural state as human beings, our bodies are always in motion, just as thinking never stops. The tasks we have in the piece are very clear but they also allow us to accept whatever we are and might do. Why should one make a selection from all this, why should one limit it? That's partly also why we like to let street sounds and light into the performance.'

Jan Ritsema: 'The question we asked was whether a performance like this was possible, whether people would tolerate it. The reason we are able to try this is that together we have a great deal of experience of theatre. We know how it works. After all, this is quite explicitly a performance. We are not trying to 'act

naturally'. For example, you could not do this on the street, you would get the wrong sort of attention. The movements we make are not ordinary but dance movements, however unusual they may sometimes be.'

This performance is very bare, with all theatrical means reduced to the absolute minimum. You also ignore almost every theatrical convention. The only thing that is normal is the position of the audience with regard to the performers. Why do you not do it in the round, since there is no clear focus?

Burrows: 'Seating people around the performance is a convention too. It's no good just replacing one convention by another. You might equally ask why we don't allow the audience to wander around rather than sit down. If you walked around you might not have the same chance to meet yourself, but it might happen if you sit quietly in one place. I also think performing in the round would close the thing up too much into itself.'

Ritsema: 'We ask the viewer to accept a new aesthetic. If they sit in an usual setting they will think about it, and that will just deflect their attention from the matter in hand. Nor do I agree that the performance is bare. That assertion only stands up if you assume there is a certain standard for what theatre should look like, but art does not have to keep to standards. On the contrary, one could say that the performance is very rich, because it allows so much.'

Not for, not against

Jonathan Burrows: 'This performance is not against other people's aesthetics, in fact it isn't for or against anything. What interests us is to look at the act of performance itself. It often feels extremely uncomfortable to dance in this way, trying to stay conscious in the moment and not get caught up in remembering what you've just done, or anticipating what you might do. The point is that we try also to allow this sort of discomfort. This unease exists in all performances, it's always hard to do things in front of a hundred people because as people we're highly self-conscious. During a performance you generally try to keep such thoughts at a distance. Here, however, all the contradictory thoughts and feelings are present, we don't put on a 'cool body' if we don't feel 'cool'. Of course this confronts the audience also at times with their own discomfort. But one of the qualities of the piece, which I've discovered by talking to people, is that the watchers often seem to share the same experiences as we do, as the piece unfolds.'

Ritsema: 'The audience's contradictory experiences, whichever way they go, also have something to do with our set-up. We do not want to keep the thing under our own control. We do not in any way direct the use of time and space. All we plan to do is make something we can make, and to do it as clearly as possible. We want to keep everything in an 'in between' state. In this performance there is no

horse trading between audience and dancers, whereby you immediately deal with what is happening. In ordinary performances you often have a humiliating relationship between the spectators and the performers. The spectator sits there, ready to judge pitilessly what is happening onstage. The performers are no better: striving for effect, they treat the audience like a bunch of toddlers who can only grasp what is going on from the most explicit signals. But although we are well aware of what we are doing, it continues to astonish us how sharply audiences react to this work.'

Isn't that also because dance usually gives the spectator much more freedom of interpretation? In spoken theatre, possible meanings are much more tightly restricted just by the words themselves. You can't 'dance questions'.

Burrows: 'Of course it's true that dance is an art form which doesn't necessarily articulate or conceptualise by means of spoken or written language. This is its strength, but it can also be a weakness. Freedom from the concrete, which allows dance to take great risks, can easily end up as mystery and vagueness: so we gave ourselves the task to try and find some kind of clarity, best we could, despite the inevitable contradictions.'

Ritsema: 'We are not seeking depth, or struggle. What we are doing is stretching out the surface of things as far as possible. We are showing as much as we can of what presents itself on the surface. Seen this way, you could say that the performance is puzzling because of its expansiveness, while also being superficial. We have absorbed everything, the most beautiful and the most ugly, into the surface of the dance.'

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