

‘Weak Dance Strong Questions’, Frankfurter Allgemeine, 10th May 2001

Really strong this weak dance

Process-oriented and not based on specific content: Jonathan Burrows’ and Jan Ritsema’s new choreography

The choreographies of Jonathan Burrows need to be viewed twice. Often only a few minutes long, they are presented in such a modest way and with such small segments that their exceptional quality tends initially to be overlooked. An insignificant choreography for a finger that flits over the thigh of the choreographer, a filigree game of hands and a walk with stretched legs: Burrows likes to isolate and locate the centres of movement in individual parts of the body, only to fit them together again afterwards, systematically building up one on the other. At the same time, he likes to subject the dancing body to an external tempo which does not follow the biological rhythm of breathing or the natural flow of movement. As in his showpiece ‘The Stop Quartet’ from 1996, which forced the movements of four dancers under the yoke of a metronome, the secret of his choreographies lies in the abandonment of the dance, in the interruption from which movement develops afresh.

Together with the Dutch theatre director Jan Ritsema, who has been working at the Brussels Kaaithheater for over ten years and has gained experience as a dancer in Meg Stuart’s ‘Crash Landing’ projects, Burrows has now created a piece which consists only of interruptions. Having taken a whole year to produce, ‘Weak Dance Strong Questions’ is presented, even at its first night in the Frankfurt Mousonturm, less as a solitary work than as a process. Any dramatisation of the dance is dispensed with. The light in the emptied auditorium stays on throughout the 50-minute duration of the piece. The members of the audience can place their own seats along the dance floor on level ground. Almost unnoticed, Jonathan Burrows and Jan Ritsema, both in outdoor dress, mix amongst the audience and begin, with small steps and a careful touch with the arms, to take the floor.

A slight pressing forward of the head, unstable balancing, sinking down and standing up again, contorsions, twisting of the upper body and the trunk as if they wanted to get their bodies into positions from which they can only be freed by being broken up: movement develops here from a mental stance towards ‘strong’ questioning, a questioning which, however, cannot be reduced to specific contents. Through their unusual and unrepresentative style, they take as their theme the production and reception of dance and the expectations which are linked with it. Burrows and Ritsema provide no answers to their questions. They leave everything open whilst, at the same time, everything is revealed. Here things are down to earth and austere. Any flight of fancy is avoided.

Thus it takes some time before the performance actually unveils its fascination. Every movement is taken back just at the moment that it is executed. There is no logical connection, no structure which could lead to a choreography in the traditional sense of the word. The material arising from the moment, and which visibly develops afresh at every moment, produces such a poised situation which, if one ignores a few moments of intensification and acceleration, has consistent dynamics and phrasing. Nothing stands out. Everything is equally matched. Hardly anyone goes down. Burrows and Ritsema seek the pure present which accompanies modern art like a

fantasy. For them the special thing about this presence lies less in an epiphany-type fulfilment which brings the moment self-sufficiently to an end, than in its potential to open up possibilities and scope of action. Every step which the two of them take leads into the unknown and the unseen. Burrows and Ritsema thereby open up for the dance a huge and uncultivated field of unspent and exciting movement.

The bodies of the dancers, who circle around one another in the empty space, approach and then move away from one another without their being any discernable agreement between them, thereby becoming themselves question marks. They signify nothing, stand for no emotionalism. Against the backdrop of contemporary dance with its virtuoso techniques which overwhelm and carry the audience, such a piece is in fact a 'weak dance'. But that is exactly where its strength lies. Whilst the bodies are completely unreadable, they multiply like an explosion questions and possible answers in the consciousness of the audience. The dance is opened up and conveyed to the audience who are left to find the choreographic routines themselves.

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