

Gesturing history, practice and idiosyncrasy

ON SARA MANENTE'S "FAIRE UN FOUR"

By Jeroen Peeters, published in Etcetera, jg. 29, nr. 127, december 2011.

While one enters the theatre, music resounds on stage. With a few curtains a black box is hung in there, yet in such a way that the surrounding space is still visible in some places. At the back of this draughty theatre a man (Christophe Albertijn) plays on a harmonium; it's a slow, nearly endless melody that already started before the spectators arrived. That endlessness could also be interpreted in a figurative sense: even before the artists took over the stage, even before the first word was uttered or the first step danced, this theatre space is always already blown life into – sometimes settled in a layer of dust, at other times slumbering like melodies.

The dance performance *Faire un Four* by Sara Manente had its opening night on 27 October 2011 at arts centre Monty in Antwerp – or better still: its *first* opening night, since the piece consists mainly of improvisations and keeps on opening. The first step needs to be invented time and again, while that step inevitably also needs to negotiate with pathways already carved – and it is precisely this tension and its impact on the bodies of individual dancers that Manente and co. unfold.

Sedimentation

Four dancers (Jonas Chéreau, Ondine Cloez, Madeleine Fournier, Marcos Simoes) enter from the audience, climb onto the stage as if to take over that space, to explore it and add their own history. Alternatingly they guide the others, move in one another's wake and thereby copy one another's gestures, like a learning process. They bring simple, almost primitive movements in which resonances of a protohuman body play up, as if it concerned a primal scene: bending, turning around one's axis, grasping, boxing. It concerns *instrumental* movements that embody our profoundly technological relation to things. Stripped of their purpose, on the dance floor these actions become mere *gestures*. The reminiscence of images and practices stored in the body now appears in a sense on the plane of evolutionary time – almost in passing, *Faire un Four* stretches our common understanding of a few centuries of "dance history" to a larger scale. Not grace is what permeates these bodies in their clumsy attempts at a pirouette, but a bizarre clotting of artistic, pedestrian and anthropological references, which at once obstruct and enable the invention of new movements.

In *Faire un Four* yet another layer has sedimented in the dancers' bodies: the memory of the creation process itself and of the movement material created in that framework. This material is the departure point for a series of improvised solos in which the performers dance "homages", though it is not exactly clear to whom or according to which rules. These improvisations have nevertheless a formal clarity nurtured by a shared language, or better still a shared *practice*. That is yet another form of "instrumentality", of which the principles are almost literally demonstrated in the group scenes that alternate with the solos.

Armed with a map of Brussels, a K-Way, an iPod and a towel with calendar print, the four dancers yield to an "improper" use of those things: they transform the instrument into an object and the action into a gesture. In another scene the performers stand in a row and slowly improvise word series, associations that happen via content, rhyme, alliteration, synonyms, homonyms, etc. What else do these performers do than learning to speak again by stringing together words in surprising ways? The series ends with the words "*homme – homage*", upon which three dancers touch one another lightly whilst watching a solo of number four. They form somewhat clumsy chains of bodies, as if they were continuing the logic of the word series in a physical way. However, a configuration of bodies isn't a group yet, let alone a model for living together: in *Faire un Four* this step

towards the social strands in the promise of a shared language. There is still too much noise in the speech and the mutual relations – yet are new meanings possible at all without this wayward materiality of gestures?

Despite its literal character, the demonstration of principles is never didactic or illustrative. It charges the choreography with a fictional layer and spurs on the imagination – moreover, all of this happens in a playful way, with a dry, contained yet infectious humour. At the end follows another word improvisation that revolves around names of pop stars and actors, but eventually also of normal people: naming as an act that affirms people's singularity.

Recalcitrance

The homage principle of the solos stimulates the reminiscence of earlier dance performances and all kinds of projection by the spectator. Though these solos have a similar quality, each individual body also appears as a particular collection in which one's own physiognomy relates itself idiosyncratically to the group and the social. Inevitably there is friction, an awareness that both quotidian and stylized movements initially feel like ill-fitted clothes – another principle shown literally when the dancers exchange clothes. Learning to dance again is not self-evident and certainly does not require to make tabula rasa or celebrate a naïve, organic image of man. *Faire un Four* searches for its condition of possibility in cultural history, personal history and the history of the artistic creation process, which moreover expands with each performance; yet it also has attention for the uncharted chaos and the noise lingering in that layered substrate. What grants new (dance) practices and meanings intelligibility is precisely this simultaneity of language and matter that can be witnessed in the "gestural".

Other than the bulk of dance performances today, Sara Manente's *Faire un Four* is not an endless stringing together of movement material, it doesn't last the obligatory 55 minutes, it doesn't strike a dramaturgical punchline, and the dance isn't exactly "pure" either. Moreover, the performance contains a good deal of loose threads that cannot be integrated right away but that do clearly appear as artistic choices – a musician who doesn't really know what to do after the opening scene, to return at the end with a narrative soundtrack while the performers dismantle the stage; a DVD with studio impressions everyone can take home. In these loose ends, Sara Manente looks for openings to the world, to the working process, to issues that remain to be investigated, to learning processes and to an indeterminate future. In the small Flemish dance world that appears to be rather uniform and conservative (though it continues to call itself the laboratory of the arts) the intricate recalcitrance of *Faire un Four* is no less than a joy.

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