

Vera Tussing on *The Palm of Your Hand*, interviewed by dramaturg Sebastian Kann (summer 2017)

Sebastian Kann: This piece requires a lot of co-operation from the audience. Although I suppose one could say 'no' when you offer us the palms of your hands, I never felt inclined to refuse! Is this because of how you do it - was this way of gently getting us to play along a discovery? Or is it simply a function of the conventions of theatre spaces, which imply certain rules for audiences, 'don't make a fuss' and so forth... Do people ever say 'no', and how do you deal with that if so?

Vera Tussing: I was trying to understand to what degree communication is possible in a space that is already so coded for behaviour. The audience has their place in the auditorium, we (the performers) have our place on stage: still, in most cases of dance in performance, we move at distance and are watched at distance. Diminishing or shrinking the space between us and our audience is a way of putting that code into question. For *The Palm of Your Hand*, the audience surrounds the performance space in the shape of an ellipse while the performers move inside the ellipse. The main work takes place at the edge of the space where audience and performers are in close proximity to each other. We took a specific approach for this interaction: to start with, we tried to understand the hierarchies at play in the spaces we perform in, the unwritten rules that code people's behaviour, and then use the knowledge and the sensibilities around these codes to invite the audience into a work that constantly seeks to reposition them within those codes.

The answer on your question if anybody ever said: 'no'

Yes, but I have to say very few people usually do... one or two people per show, I would say. We discussed this a lot in the creation process - how to offer rather than force, how to actually encounter the audience. Eventually, with time, I started to consider it to be a compliment to us as a team of performers if people would decline the proposal we make in the work. For me, it reads as the work allowing people to make up their own mind.

We don't intend to coerce people into movement or participation, we try to create space for them to act within. So having people refuse our proposals means we're not abusing our position as the ones who know and force our audience into consensus.

This is something that takes a lot of individual attention from each performer to maintain, sometimes we fail ...but it's one of the main challenges that I think over every time before performing the piece. It's a thing we're working towards - let's say 'freeing' the spectator from the dominating conventions of spectatorship - even knowing that the codes are so strong we will never fully manage to subvert them. It's more an ideal image that keeps us busy than a state we hope to actually arrive at.

Practically a 'no' means we don't touch, we don't push, we continue what we do but keep distance. 'No's' are also not all the same: sometimes a hand disappears where before it had been present. Sometimes a hand that declined to participate at the start joins later.

S.K.: What I found very intriguing was the way the unusual distribution of sense stimuli in 'Palm' plays out afterwards in memory. Most cultural objects - dances, paintings, films, etc - seem to get stored as visual memory. But when I think about 'Palm', my memories are mostly tactile or proprioceptive: I remember feelings, quite literally. It's an unusual experience!

Classically, aesthetic experience is something that happens at a distance: me in my chair, dispassionate, assessing; you up on stage, sweating away and demonstrating your craftsmanship. Of course, some would say that this mode of detachment is no longer sustainable - 'me over here, you over there' is the motto of the neoliberal, no? - but I think audiences still come to see work expecting to see something closed and finished, to be a subject before an object. You shatter these expectations. Has it been challenging to get people to accept the mode of performance you are proposing?

V.T.: The work is personal and up-close, and we always receive a lot of comments on that. In regards to the general mode of performance, some programmers have commented on what they describe as our 'workshop style' (an assessment sometimes delivered in a sort of negative tone). For me, the style which we ended up performing is simply what we came up with in order to allow this to be a dance performance that negotiates over tactile encounters.

I remember a moment in the process when I understood that in order for the tactile elements to have any communicative value, we could not 'perform touch' at people. Rather, we needed to facilitate 'felt experience', or a series of felt negotiations. Touch is something that happens between two people; it relies on proximity. Our research questions the 'me over here, you over there' attitude you mentioned impossible from the very beginning.

Audience members often tell me how quickly they forgot their nervousness at having performers so close. It's a very deliberately chosen journey that we take in the work. We communicate from the start with our audience - we pick them up outside the theatre, and so forth. We use a specific, shared vocabulary to introduce the work. I hope the verbal introduction helps demystify us a little! I never liked to be the 'voiceless' dancer at distance.

S.K.: Can you say something about stage presence? I don't know if it's only a function of being unusually close to the performers, but the four of you seem present in a very particular way. Did you discuss this mode of presence, or did it arise naturally from your choreographic research?

V.T.: That has sort of crept up on us. As I said before, we're always negotiating with the spectator in real-time, while simultaneously keeping half our attention on performing a fairly set piece of choreography - sometimes the four of us in unison. It definitely creates a particular presence. In the beginning we were also very shy, so some of us just seemed to have a constant smile on our face. It was just to allow things to happen. I hope that we are getting a bit more nuanced.

S.K.: This is 'Palm of Your Hand #2', a revised version of the piece for blind and partially sighted audiences. Obviously I can still enjoy it if I am not blind? Although who is not 'partially sighted', actually ...

V.T.: Yes, the work that we present is a re-creation, meaning the work existed already, and we made an adaptation in order to invite more people in.

The process was rather fast. I decided to ask for help from experts in the field. Said Gharby was one of them. I clearly remember the moment when I was asked to not label and point our blind audience members in the performance. I am also aware that the information 'this is for blind people' is often necessary to communicate prior to the show.

Eventually, this necessity of labelling stuck with me, and I tried to focus my thinking around it. So I would like to refer to the re-creation as a process wherein I worked on enhancing the work's voice through different sense channels.

Eventually I decided to not open the 'touch tour' that takes place just prior to the show to every audience member: it was created for our blind and partially sighted audience members. The information they receive in this segment replaces information available visually to sighted audiences.

S.K.: So what was the adaptation process like? The role of touch was already very prominent in the original work, so I guess you didn't have to change much. Or did it turn out to be a big challenge?

V.T.: Yes, the role of touch was prominent. But if you think about it in terms of numbers - we are 4 performers and there are 60 audience members-, there are usually about 56 people at each touched moment that are without touch. The light, the sound, and all the other sense information that is transmitted therefor takes on a rather important role.

In regards to the approach and process of the re-creation: I opted for a rather unusual approach. Usually, dance for the partially sighted works by making a sort of audio translation. After a try-out and several conversations with blind or partially sighted people, we decided that the work communicates beyond the visual and without a spoken sound track. I am well aware that this might be a controversial choice for some people. I am curious if this decision holds up over the course of the tour. The decision was very much based on the fact that, in contrast to most dance performances in a black box theatre, 'The Palm of Your Hand' operates via different set of parameters. We decided as a group that there was enough sense information available throughout the work to create a coherent narrative beyond the visual and the linguistic.

The adaptation process was very interesting. There was also a fair amount of confrontation with our own limits. Especially when it came to language, me and my team found it very hard to not be constantly stuck in the visual when communicating to our first blind and partially sighted audience members. This is a big learning moment for me and my team and every performance will be a challenge for us, there is no doubt. It has already confronted me with some of the assumptions I had about my own work: in the end, 'The Palm of Your Hand' in its original state was a much more visual work - also from a performer's point of view - than I had thought!

So yes, the work is for everybody who enjoys receiving and communicating via various senses. We do our best to move between those channels and create entrances into the work on multiple levels.

S.K.: It's kind of unusual for a choreographer to revise a piece and re-release it. We're so focused on generating new works these days, it feels like the pace of everything is increasing, creation processes are shorter and shorter, and so forth. What was it like to jump into an old process again, years later? Is this also a comment on the economy of novelty in contemporary dance today?

V.T.: Yes, I guess it's a novelty that I am allowed to revisit and re-release work! But I often have the tendency to re-think past creations in order to reflect on processes, to identify difficulties when creating new work and in order to tackle them in future creation. So I have a sense of a dialogue with my own creative past. I hope this does not sound too self-involved... I mean it more in the sense that I see re-occurring problems in my work, and the comparison of several years of creative processes allows me to make those problems productive.

The value in the re-creation was that I was allowed to spend time thinking about the work via a sense apparatus with a different bias than my own. In my more recent work 'Both, Two' (2018), a duet with Esse Vanderbruggen, I go further with the reflections on sight-centric-ness that this re-creation stimulated. It can't help but think how absurd it is that we are so often just surrounded and in company with people 'like us', both in personal and professional environments. We get so few reminders that not everybody perceives and receives the world as we do. I think we have a lot of work to do to overcome the universalising thinking that has grown out of that bias!