

'MOVEMENT, AND ESPECIALLY THE ENCOUNTER WITH MOVEMENT, IS WHO WE ARE'

Interview with Vera Tussing and Esse Vanderbruggen, by Sebastian Kann, (18 and 19 February, 2018).

Both, Two is a duet about duets. Why the necessity to reflect on the duet form?

Vera Tussing: The duet is, I suppose, the smallest unit of togetherness. In that form, all aspects of human interaction – verbal, physical, formal, emotional, cognitive, etc. – are extremely concentrated. How that translates into communication through dance and movement has been fascinating to explore with Esse.

Esse Vanderbruggen: At the beginning, it was also a practical decision to make a duet: the more we talked about the current situation in the arts field, the more it seemed like a good idea. It's very hard to get more than two artists in the same room together nowadays. In order to sustain yourself you're sort of pushed to participate in many projects at once. It's one thing to set time aside for making work, because these are large blocks of time, but performances tend to come more one by one and then it's hard to co-ordinate everyone's schedules. It's a strange situation. With two it's a little easier.

The interest in the duet as a form came after we decided to work together. We were researching videos of duets on Facebook and YouTube, and started noticing some patterns, many of which we felt the need to question. The form has quite some history, not all of it very progressive. We ended up making a list of questions, mostly relating to hierarchies to do with two, and we started working from there.

Would you say this is a feminist work?

EV: Well, so many of the problematic patterns that we were noticing as we did research on the internet involved gender roles. In partner dances, there's very often one stronger dancer who lifts, and one dancer who's more on display. The fact that we're two female bodies – let's say we were very aware of it when making the piece.

VT: Feminism is obviously a very big topic – probably too big to really treat in depth in a single evening. What I would say is that the duet comes with a very heavy weight of cultural expectations, especially around gender and sexuality. Maybe this is an attempt to reflect on some of that baggage... The work definitely attempts to be aware of its own power structures – both in relation to the content of the piece itself, and to the history of the duet in which it is situated.

EV: And in relation to our working process, right? For me there's a strong sense that the working process was intentionally constructed with regard to power structures, which is super feminist, I think. We decided from the beginning that the piece was going to be made by the both of us in a horizontal way, even though Vera has had a longer career trajectory than I have. So from the beginning we were dealing with hierarchy, in and out of the studio.

Yes, how did that work? I notice that you are both credited as creators, but that Vera is the 'director'.

VT: I have been making work for over ten years, and *Both Two* is heavily intertwined with many

themes I have explored in that practice. But at the same time, Esse and I wanted to deconstruct and redistribute power within duets, and it seemed totally strange to try to do that without first re-designing the distribution of power in the studio...

EV: It is a little bit artificial; we created an artificial power structure. Of course, the decision to credit the both of us is a decision only Vera can make: she's just had a longer artistic trajectory than I have, and so she has that power. But we also had this principle we wanted to experiment with, about making things more horizontal. For me this created a really interesting friction at times, really bringing the question of power to the forefront in a tangible way.

VT: In the studio, we worked together very closely. The direction credit is just a way of being honest about the fact that I at times drove the overall agenda... For me, it's a lot easier to acknowledge that there is actually some kind of hierarchy than to work in a 'pretend equal' way.

And could you talk a little bit about this agenda? How does *Both, Two* fit into your choreographic oeuvre, Vera? I notice, for example, that you've maintained an interest in tactility, but that it functions in a very different way here than in your previous pieces.

VT: Last year I was invited by several European theatres to recreate my piece *The Palm Of Your Hand* for a blind and partially-sighted audience. This was a huge learning moment, working with an audience whose perception of movement does not begin with sight. My last few creations have all explored touch and its role in communication and imagination, but *Both, Two* approaches that territory with my experience with blind and partially-sighted audiences specifically in mind. The tactile guide note is something I came to from that angle: working with the blind and partially-sighted community has definitely made me curious about movement and performance in a new way.

EV: Vera's research into the sensory was part of what made me really excited to work with her. It's always been an interest for me as a performer, and I think we ended up meeting and working together because we were already interested in similar things. It's funny; although we're talking about moving *away* from the eyes as the primary sense organ, I actually notice that my sense of sight has evolved a lot since beginning the work with Vera. We've been talking so much about sound and texture that I see things differently. I notice patterns I never noticed before. Even smell starts to make my visual experience richer.

And does this research into the 'other senses' – that is, those besides vision – also translate back into your dancing? Does it change the way you think about making or performing a dance phrase, for example?

VT: Very much. Just the other day we had a studio visit from one of the partially-sighted collaborators who had worked on *The Palm of Your Hand*. It took an hour and a half just to find the right words to describe the opening of the performance, like the first ten minutes of material. An hour and a half! The difficulty you run up against when trying to verbalize dance makes you aware of a lot of our limitations. Depending on how one receives that, it can be either reductive or empowering. When you start thinking about dancing something that is describable, or start dancing and creating description at the same time, you start dancing differently. Discovering and experimenting with this has been a real pleasure.

EV: At the beginning of the creation, we spent a fair amount of time making ‘instant compositions’: we would describe what we were doing as we were doing it and write it down. These descriptions became scores that the other would dance back. It brought a very different awareness, a listening: you would be listening to your dancing in order to describe it, and also listening to your own description in order to memorize it. It’s a practice that very much changes the timing of the body, as well as the movement quality. I think a lot of the material that came after was informed by my memory of this technique.

VT: And thinking about the ‘other’ senses of course influenced our compositional process a lot. For example, there’s this circular trajectory that keeps coming back in the work. A lot of the time, we move around it in ways related to walking and running. We could have done all sorts of jumps and leaps, but we stuck to something simpler to make the way we travel through space clear to someone who might be listening rather than seeing.

You both have a very close connection on stage, and there’s a lot of very original movement research in *Both, Two*. I imagine you spent a lot of the creation process experimenting through dancing together. At the same time, you set out to do quite a specific research, one that’s almost sociological or dance-historical. How do you negotiate staying ‘on topic’, so to speak, when researching through the body? Is it important to you?

VT: How could we possibly be off topic, or unspecific – for us, it’s very clear that at the core of it, the moving body is the topic. Our starting point is movement; or rather, all of our questions about power and togetherness are already asked from the point of view of kinetics. Whether movement is abstract or reveals concrete ideas – well, that very much depends on your way of reading movement. When it comes to staging, of course we’re searching for a certain kind of dramaturgy that lets us underline and expose the things we find interesting about the results of our research, but always in a very multiple way.

EV: We danced together a lot, but we also watched a lot of video of ourselves dancing. Video is a new tool for me. When we watch ourselves, we also become observers of the movement: ‘interpreters’ in a very different sense. That really helps us to stay on topic, to not lose ourselves physically. We also have a system: we improvised for a maximum of ten minutes. We didn’t do two-hour improvisations. That really helps our research stay specific.

VT: When we created movement material that was interesting, it was always interesting in relation to something specific. Movement that had no concrete point of interest – we forgot about that material pretty quickly. The stuff that stayed always revealed something interesting about our relation. It’s the material that puts our roles into question and that constantly requires an active positioning.

I notice in a lot of your answers there are wishes for a kind of better world. I say this in the least cheesy way possible! But for example, with regard to gender relations, the hierarchy of the senses, and even the role of movement and physical practice... can you elaborate a little on this utopian vision?

EV: For me, it has to do with remaining in a state of questioning. I wouldn’t say there’s a particular vision we’re pushing except for this ideal of critical engagement; making it normal to ask questions about power, and about the current state of things. This is what we’re trying to do on stage, to

remain in this active or reactive mode, not just accepting what the other proposes or ignoring it but asking it a question: the question of what it is to dance with two, including how it can be heard, how it can be felt. The question is what stays for me.

VT: The longer I work with movement the more it becomes clear to me that movement and dance are not things that exist parallel to who we are. Movement, and especially the encounter with movement, *is* who we are. And yes, having a more diverse and reflected idea of how gender biases infiltrate our experiences of mobility – who is allowed to lead and who is invited to follow – has become a rather urgent topic for me. But I also remain very concerned with the hierarchal arrangement of the senses, and working with blind and partially-sighted audiences has made it clear how rigid we are in our assumptions around the experience of movement, both for the mover and the audience.

I think there is something in tactility that has an exciting potential with regard to these issues. Touch has to do with communication, with directness, and it also takes time and requires a consideration of the other. Maybe profound thinking about touch could help us out of our current situation. I hope that our research might make a small contribution towards finding more genuine and diverse forms of togetherness.