

The invasion of the egg ladies

The Search for Intelligent Life of dance hits Boston

by T. J. Medrek, Jr.

Wim Vandekeybus and Ultima Vez in 'Always the Same Lies,' presented by The Arts Company and Dance Umbrella—choreography, direction and scenery by Wim Vandekeybus, music by Peter Vermeersch, Charo Calvo and Carlo Wegener— at the Emerson Majestic Theatre, Oct. 31, Nov. 1 & 2.

Belgian choreographer Wim Vandekeybus brought his company, Ultima Vez, and his latest work, *Always the Same Lies*, to the Emerson Majestic Theatre last weekend. Billed as a dance theatre piece, it was a multi-media affair that included dance, drama, music and film. At various moments, it seemed to refer to, among others, Richard Wagner, the Kipper Kids, even, improbably, the American Gladiators. If it sounds pretentious, it surely might have been. Instead, Vandekeybus has taken a form that can get stuck in the misery of self-aggrandizement and created a work that is warm, witty and wonderfully entertaining.

European dance theatre is a genre that has not flourished in this country for a variety of reasons. Above all, the form stems from a grand style opera house

tradition that to us not only reeks of an establishment desire for the safe distance of imported culture but also requires enormous expense to produce even the most modest entertainment. To Europeans, the opera house is the traditional cultural home, one that is often willing to subsidize work that, say, your senator mind find disturbing. Another reason is that the Europeans do not have the desperate need to categorize every stage work as popular music, classical music, musical theatre, opera, ballet, dance or drama. Thus, they enjoy and accept a freer flow of ideas that allows for Mark Morris to choreograph a *Nutcracker*, Anja Silja to sing Eliza Doolittle, and Robert Wilson to do anything he likes. Meanwhile, in this country, we still worry about whether Meredith Monk is a dancer, a musician, a filmmaker or a performance artist.

An old man's past

Another problem that Americans have with this genre is that it so often seems based on personal or collective guilt or despair that is not a deeply-rooted part of American culture. Our view of the expression of this kind of angst is exactly what *Saturday Night Live's* "Sprockets" segments satirize so well. But Vandekeybus will have none of it. As a reference point,



Representing European dance. Wim Vandekeybus and Ultima Vez in 'Always the Same Lies.' In the foreground: Octavio Iturbe.

he uses the story of Carlo Wegener, an 88-year-old German he happened upon while testing a new Super-8 movie camera. Wegener broke into a little dance while Vandekeybus was filming on a pier, a moment reverentially preserved in *Always the Same Lies*. The choreographer befriended the former singer-dancer-actor, and ideas for the work came from their conversations about his past. Wegener's recorded voice speaks and sings at regular intervals, the performers quote him in various languages, and incidents he related to Vandekeybus are represented onstage. Wegener's life may seem sad and lonely, but his indomitable spirit is captured on tape and film with a sweet optimism.

Most important to Vandekeybus, however, are the basic elements of daily life—

Wegener's and everybody else's—and you cannot get much more basic an element or symbol than an egg. There are, in fact, eggs aplenty onstage: raw, hard-boiled, scrambled. Yes, they are a metaphor for both life's essence and its precariousness. But in the hands of Vandekeybus and his company, they are also a source of zany humor, as when eggs are tossed down a line to Octavio Iturbe, who checks each one, identifying it as "chicken" or "duck," or when the men frantically try to build a tower of egg cartons and protect it from furiously flying women suspended in hammocks determined to destroy it. Are these women Valkyries? She-devils? Glorious usurpers of phallo-centrism? Possibly all of the above, but primarily, they

are part of a group of performers directed by a choreographer who knows what works onstage and what does not, and uses this knowledge to create a world of daffy survivors of a most eccentric universe. In this, it is a cousin to Jane Wagner's *Search for Signs of Intelligent Life*. The works are totally different in form, but are closely related in their concepts of humanity.

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'60s drag—uh, dresses

Always the Same Lies is full of wonderful images that will linger long in the audience's memory. Octavio Iturbe appears to be an obsessive stage manager, rising to great heights of mania as he tries to instruct disinterested company members in the correct use of a boom box. Peter Kern's rubber-legged Mexican Hat Dance is a highlight, as is his asking the other members of the company to relate their wishes. The music, recordings of Wegener himself, Charo Calvo's trio of unaccompanied heavy breathers, and Peter Vermeersch's "speedmetaljazz" group X-Legged Sally, is appropriate and effective. Perhaps most memorable is the floor covering, a crazy quilt made of dresses that

appear to be from the early '60s. During an unusually elegiac moment, the covering is pulled upstage while three men hang from chairs suspended from the flies and Wegener's voice is heard repeating a line from Wagner's *Die Walküre* over and over. Later, Iturbe hoists the covering up to form a backdrop stunningly backlit.

The only element of the evening that could be found wanting was the level of dance invention. The tradition in America, like it or not, is pure dance, and pure dance requires an inventiveness of movement that is not an essential part of the European dance theatre agenda. So the performers, both dancers and non-dancers, hurl themselves about, tumbling and grappling energetically, diving into the floor enthusiastically, and curiously, from time to time, executing a few barrel turns, the kind that drive ballet lovers to ecstasy when done by a Nureyev or Baryshnikov. The floor patterns develop interestingly, the groupings intriguingly (Vandekeybus will play two against one, then add a fourth for the discordant trio to play against, etc.), but after a while, the movement well runs dry, and the effect is purposelessly repetitive of both step and mood.

Still, within Vandekeybus' chosen aesthetic this is, like it or not, a minor quibble. The overpowering impression is that Vandekeybus is, at 28, already a master of his craft. In a program interview, he says he has enough material from Wegener to do five more years worth of his work. If that is the case, the dance theatre world may be on the brink of five of its most important and exciting years. ▼