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In *Always the Same Lies*, the dancers talk and fly through the air in hammocks.

DANCE/Jean Lenihan

## A lifetime in dance

Wim Vandekeybus/*Ultima Vez*  
On the Boards  
at the Moore Theater  
November 21-24

LAST YEAR IN HAMBURG, BELGIAN CHOREographer Wim Vandekeybus pointed his mini-camcorder off a dock at a scene of restless water. As he panned back to shore, the huge hook nose, winter-white skin, and bushy gray eyebrows of an 87-year-old man jumped into the camera frame. So began Vandekeybus' yearlong fascination with a feisty, opinionated, half-crooked man named Carlo. At the Moore Theater last week, we all met Carlo in Vandekeybus' new performance piece, *Always the Same Lies*, a work that includes dance, multilingual text, video, swinging desk chairs and hammocks, and flats and flats of raw brown eggs. It is an unflinching and disquieting portrait of a life span, as if Samuel Beckett and David Lynch had teamed up to do *Driving Miss Daisy*.

As the piece opens, we see video shots of Carlo, swinging his arms and marching and fastidiously blowing a dandelion. But it's too much: he blows for too long, he swings his arms too hugely as he marches, even the overhang of his nose is enormous. Carlo's excessiveness mirrors that of Vandekeybus and his ensemble, *Ultima Vez*, whose movement style blends exaggerated leaps, flying kicks, and whipped-out horizontal body splays with quiet hugs and em-

braces. In a group dance for men that's half social dance, half street fight, the dancers run and turn and jump into one another's arms and change direction. They carry and pass one another along through the air, as if making sure each man could keep his place in the formal structure.

Snatches of text reveal that Carlo is confused, angry, and awkward about his age. All the aggressive risks from the men's dance continue here in a pedestrian mode: one man hammers away angrily while others eat hot eggs straight from boiling water, then toss clothes into the audience and ask for them back. Carlo, we learn, had a bad time with women, he still dreams of erotic adventures. Overhead hang huge hammocks, knotted in the center and looking like over-

A lifetime of memory is shown as a glowing quilt of fabric.

size wishbones. The men wander off, and three loose-haired women blow through disruptively—pitching their frames through the air in horizontal hurls, stopping for bursts of excited footwork, spilling into splayed falls to the ground. They knock the hammocks loose and climb inside. They swoop with abandon, or hang like deadly malevolent lumps on their stomachs. As they roll and pitch, they, too, speak Carlo's words aloud.

As the women hold fort in the hammocks, the men roll up the fabric carpet and set it in place as a backdrop. A profusion of eggs arrives next, and the stage goes wild with activity. Eggs are carried in their

flats by men who look like nervous but well-meaning waiters, eggs are tossed singly down a chain of people, couples use flats of eggs as beds and pillows.

Each time a dancer breaks into a little jig, or a blast of dialogue, or a weird activity with an egg, it's an indication of Carlo's feistiness. But that's not to suggest that Carlo has nobly battled off the trappings of aging. Snatches of text reveal how pervasive his isolation is (his talk with Vandekeybus, he says, is the best time he's had in 15 years); video images show that he's lost all his top teeth; a scene in which a man repeatedly yells instructions to a woman as she stares blankly at a portable tape deck suggests the sad, confused way in which he moves through the world.

Throughout, the little snatches of Carlo singing or clicking his heels seem to hold these darker aspects at bay. But near the end, a knock-out dance section of Vandekeybus tumbles-and-leaps suggests that all Carlo can expect from the coming years is more alienation. The group energy in the section is too loud, too aggressively erotic, and too fast for a fragile body. Yet it's not unenticing: when the dancers break into tear-ass runs around the stage, the illusion of freedom overtakes rationality. The only choice for the non-participant is envy.

During this roughhouse section, however, the stage darkens and the back-lit quilt of clothing turns super-bright and -colorful. This is where Vandekeybus' original thinking really takes off. A lifetime of memory is presented not as the dusty gray cake of *Great Expectations*, but as a quilt of stitches, shapes, and fabrics that glows magnificently.

Over and over, Vandekeybus' new work shows us the real reasons we don't want life to end. Not because humans are morally acceptable creatures, but because we set courageous self-prescribed challenges for ourselves—like the man trying to mount an upside-down chair, or the woman hanging upside-down from a hammock, stacking flats of raw eggs into towers—and because it's sometimes possible to feel that the world is a happily bustling place (as when Vandekeybus throws a "pass the egg" party), and because we're sometimes moved to dance. ■