

press Japan

At Last, a Real Festival: 'Always the Same Lies'

Theater

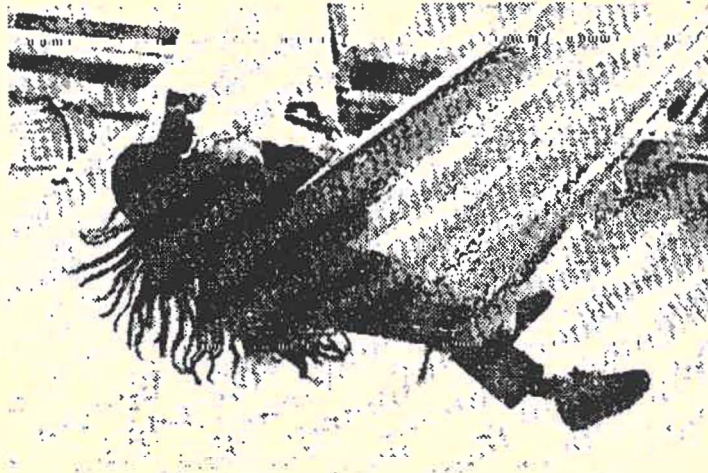
By Dan Furst

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Little by little, trial by error, Japan is starting to get comfortable with the idea of a theater festival. As this year's Tokyo International Theater Festival '92 (TITF) has already shown, Japan may be ready to step beyond the limits of the generally timid performance "festivals" it has seen up to now—they're usually programs of safe works by famous artists, all staged in sequence in a single venue, and tightly controlled by a powerful artistic director, an even more powerful sponsor, or both—and into the realm of festivals that are really festive, and have the lively mix of color, movement, variety, excitement, unpredictability and even danger that a first-rate festival should have.

Tokyo isn't ready to rival Munich or Dublin just yet. But there's been significant progress in the right directions. For the first time, TITF will be held not only at its home theater, the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space, but at many theaters throughout the city. Shows will run concurrently and will feature some outdoor performances, including two works by the Ilotopic group of France. And, in what may be the most surprising move of all, the festival now has a fringe program that numbers, at last count, 23 new shows by Japanese avant-garde groups. Few of these have appeared as of this writing—but if titles such as *Shut Out* and *Asshole* are any indication, some of TITF's wilder citizens may be getting as assertive as any screeching crew cut on High Street in Edinburgh.

In deciding which foreign performers to invite or in-



A scene from "Always the Same Lies" by Wim Vandekeybus at the Tokyo International Theater Festival '92.

clude, TITF has skirted the problems of the language barrier this time by choosing dance and musical theater pieces. Only one of the festival's foreign plays, *The Wizard of Jazz* by The New Theatre of London, has an actual script. Another uses lines from half a dozen languages within a complex texture of dance, acrobatics, video and music.

Always the Same Lies by the Belgian actor/choreographer Wim Vandekeybus and his eight-member Ultima Vez company opens tonight as the most eagerly awaited European play that TITF will host this month. A few thousand brave Tokyoites are about to feel the full gasp and shudder of what may be the most ferociously risky, gale-force dance theater in the world, by a 29-year-old artist who has grown so influential so fast that he now has to duck questions about whether he's just become the central figure in a newborn Flemish school of dance.

Ironically, Vandekeybus isn't even a dancer. Before he organized Ultima Vez seven years ago, he was a photographer and video artist who had trained as an acrobat. And before that he was an equestrian, fascinat-

ed from boyhood by the uncanny instinct that horses have for sensing a pitfall or an obstacle, and suddenly jumping or swerving to avoid it.

The horse's sense of danger and perfectly timed movements shows in all of Vandekeybus' works, which typically feature such occupational hazards as bricks flying across the stage and dancers running with trays full of eggs through a dizzying gauntlet of hurtling bodies, sliding chairs and swinging hammocks and ropes. Vandekeybus is not for the faint of heart, either on stage or in the audience—but at least those who can't help covering their eyes now and then can still listen to the amazing score of respiratory sounds and music by Peter Vermeersch and Charo Calvo.

Always the Same Lies was inspired by Vandekeybus' friendship with 89-year-old Carlo Wegener, a kind of no-frills philosopher and holy fool who has been a cigarette seller, a movie ticket-taker and a bowling pin setter, and has done and been a whole cosmos of experiences. He has no possessions, except for a number of old dresses that belong to his wife.

(The set's backdrop is a quilt of some 400 dresses.)

What Carlo does have is the focus and passion of a man who has lived intensely and long, and knows he has little time left. For Vandekeybus, Carlo is the central symbol, dreamer and storyteller in an elaborate game and struggle of memories and reveries, all lit and fired by the central premise that age and wisdom bring an incomparable clarity, a vision of beauty, pain and terror far deeper than youth can ever know.

"In the mind of this rebel," Vandekeybus says, "wonderful memories become even more beautiful, meanness gets more cruel and the extremes eliminate everything in between." When Carlo's mind takes flesh on stage, the result is pure, immediate, stunningly beautiful theater.

Always the Same Lies is at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space Sept. 16 and 18-19 at 7 p.m., and Sept. 20 at 4 p.m. Regular tickets are ¥5,500 and ¥4,500, students ¥2,500. Information available from 03-7777-7776 or 03-7777-1933.