

ANDREA PHILLIPS



European dreamtime

Wim Vandekeybus at the Tramway as part of the New Moves Festival Glasgow.

New European choreography has become increasingly adept at assembling vast, resonant wonderlands on stage, influenced as much by the history of film and performance art as by expressionistic traditions in dance. Like disrupted fairytales, they paint dreamworlds that hang in the air, seemingly casually constructed and yet painstakingly scored.

These post-Jungian parables open a tin-darbox of images and characters that demand interpretation. Leaving a trail of esoteric clues, they hunt at rich new worlds, constantly seeking to engage their audience's associative imagination as well as their appreciation of form and content. In this way, they are coded in a very different way from either formalist choreography or new dance.

This approach has opened a variety of critical and aesthetic horizons. Dance that is 'not dance' and scenes that are 'not scenes' beg questions of the definition of the form into which they have been slotted. The stage-crafting and intuitive techniques of the performance avant-garde are used; narrative, comic ability, multi-media skills, use of objects - all these things are brought into play as naturally as the construction of a sequence. The

dreamtime has the magic of a Bluebeard's Castle, but can also hide a mountain of mistakes.

Wim Vandekeybus' new piece, *Always The Same Lies*, is an important example of this dreamtime choreography. In it he uses what could now be classified as some of the recognisable aspects of what is rapidly becoming a technique. A laissez-faire attitude to stage presence, text in many languages, snippets of story, activities performed in real rather than 'acted' time, sudden changes of both physical and aesthetic direction. This he does with the simplicity, eccentricity and eclecticism of a true montagist who understands that the *mise-en-scène* has nothing to do with perceived logic. But although he delights in the maverick, he also falls prey to the illusion that creating the dreamtime is enough.

In previous work he brought to Britain, Vandekeybus pushed his audiences to the edge of their seats with nerve-rattling acrobatic sequences and a perfect understanding of the timing of suspense. In *What The Body does not Remember*, which premiered at The Third Eye Centre, Glasgow, in 1989, he mixed these sharp techniques with an emotional and meta-

phorical subtext that pitched men against women in a wry-looking world. His signature became a whip-lash diving roll, performed at immense speed by both women and men. This speed was mixed with a casualness of manner that constantly undermined the importance of particular actions, yet added to the overall emotional resonance of the piece.

Many of these techniques are used again in *Always The Same Lies*. Flying jumps, physical precision and daring are all mixed with this carefully constructed casualness and stylish abandon. Found objects litter the stage space; fleeting references to more prosaic worlds that tantalise with their simplicity and possible meanings. Like fellow Belgians, Arne Teresa de Keersmaecker and Michelle Ann de Mey, Vandekeybus makes a whole world on stage, and is expert at drawing his audiences along, gasping one minute, gawping the next.

It is interesting that in conversation, Vandekeybus refers to *Always The Same Lies* as a 'play'. This may be an appropriate mis-use of words, but certainly the work is as influenced by deconstructed new theatre and performance techniques as it is dance. The group of per-

formers - five men, three women - are not only expert in their physical abilities, but also exude strange and irreverent stage presences; clowns, stand-up comedians, musicians, actors, singers and tricksters in turns.

Although the nine performers do not tell his story, the piece centres around the image of the life of an old man, Carlo Verrano, who appears on a film that is projected onto a series of screens behind the action. Verrano is one of the main influences behind the piece, and seems to have provided Vandekeybus with a kind of *raison d'être* for the work. As the performers come on and off stage carrying objects, telling stories and performing action sequences of a more or less choreographed nature, Verrano's image appears, talking, smoking and dancing around on a quayside. Shot in scratchy Super-8, this old man gives the action depth and poignancy in a very simple, humanistic way. The company all very obviously care about him. There is an opposition between the youth of the performers and the frail age of the man - a kind of yearning sadness that pervades the piece in its less cluttered moments. The association of the young and old works precisely because it remains unfixated - unstated in any more blatant a fashion.

Around the film, the performers construct and destroy images, the men remaining separate from the women until the final scenes when they fling themselves together, violently cementing a previously barren relationship. It is the men who embody humour and softness throughout. They are the interpreters of the material, communicating directly to the audience either through up-front action or humour. The women remain hard and, literally, aloof - suspended for their initial appearances in low-slung hammocks from which they swing, talk in their own languages to each other, mocking the men.

At the beginning of the piece a man cooks an omelette whilst another attempts to jump onto a chair hung up in the lighting rig. In the semi-darkness, the play creeps onto the audience, suddenly twisting into a dance sequence, and then returning to the oddly mundane, the pointedly ordinary. The men are sexy, stupid and occasionally laddish in the face of an audience, like small boys showing off in the knowledge of their own silly audacity. A random pattern develops on stage, the rhythm of movement like a scattering constellation rather than a regular alternation between fullness and space. The omelette carries on cooking as another man tells a story in Italian. The floor is revealed to be covered in a carpet of dresses sown together. These dresses become a signature, as the carpet is winched up to the back wall half way through and more are brought on - clasped like lovers by the men and jumped upon by the women.

People and objects float on and off, short cameo roles that are dissolved by fast sequences. These sequences have become Vandekeybus' trademark, and the easiest way that young British choreographers have found to copy his technique. What they lack, however, is his versatility with the timing of such movement, and the understanding of the context into which they are placed. One dancer leaps over another, whilst the second throws him or herself to the ground, only to bounce up and reverse the sequence at breakneck speed. A touch of middle-European folk-dancing is perceptible, and the immaculate timing of a clown. The skill of these sequences is as much in their impromptu occurrence as in their execution. They are performed in an off-hand manner, as if just hiccupping in the progress from one side of the stage to another.

Towards the end of the piece, the women come down from their hammocks and start to play the game. As the soundtrack turns from old folk songs into Euro-funk, hundreds of eggs are brought on in huge trays. These are laid out in patterns on the floor and stacked on top of each other, as performers drop from their suspended positions with perilous proximity. As the performance dissolves, the eggs are thrown from one stage clown to another, sometimes breaking and sometimes being caught with nonchalant accuracy.

But is the creation of this European dreamtime enough? In many ways the achievement of this cool form has been in the abandoning of old forms rather than the making of new ones. Many of the concepts have been assimilated from other media in illuminating ways, challenging the notion of dance as a series of steps and presenting new and fertile

collaborations with other disciplines. But, although *Always The Same Lies* mixes all the right ingredients, it fails to appropriate them in anything other than a shallow way.

One of the most awkward and yet intriguing problems of the piece is in its relationship with narrative, calling into question the idea of a performance collage that alludes to meaning but does not set up the structure with which to tell. The signals are set up, but each one dissipates into a random collection of events. What is left is a form that has no room for further interpretation (everything is intuitive). The form can never become any more complex or multi-layered than the collection of objects that are constantly in transition across the stage.

But this entropic world is rougher than a fairytale, and more resilient than the deconstructed associative work that came before it. It has a tactile presence unlike any other 'dance' work, and touches the audience on many more levels than more formalist movement. Because it is framed as a dreamworld, it has the ability to transport audiences, leaving them dazzled by lack of logic and soothed with humour. Ironically for work that seeks so much to depart from the traditional frame of dance, it is, in the end, the speed and electricity of the dance that cements the work into a whole, rather than the collection of ideas and references that surround this. Despite the lack of development in the form, the real thrill of the piece comes from the arrogant leaps and dives.

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