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A CONFLUENCE OF OPPOSITES: the age-old tug between love and hate, kindness and cruelty.

A day in the life

Wim Vandekeybus spins truths
out of *Always the Same Lies*

by Thea Singer

At the core of Flemish choreographer Wim Vandekeybus's *Always the Same Lies* spin dual truths: the tenuousness of life, the certainty of death. Struggling against those absolutes is the indomitability of the human spirit, embodied here in the memories, reflections, and wizened features of Vandekeybus's friend the 88-year-old Carlo Wegener. Hence the central metaphor of *Lies* — an egg. "It's very strong, it's very fragile, it's an object of daily life," explains Vandekeybus from the jumble of his hotel room at the Tremont House.

Just like Carlo. Just like you and me.

If all this sounds more emotionally charged than most contemporary dance, that's because Vandekeybus's vision encompasses not abstractions but the drama of being. Presented last weekend by the Arts Company and Dance Umbrella, and performed at the Emerson Majestic Theatre by his nine-member international troupe, *Ultima Vez*, this provocative treatise on the human condition (all of us, not just octogenarians, live every day on the edge) veers between the violent and the tender, the intense and the whimsical, the stunning and the lackluster. It does so by commingling film, dance, text (in seven languages), a *cappella* sound by Charo Calvo, and a score by Peter Vermeersch that's played by his "speedmetaljazz" group, X-Legged Sally.

Because of this focus on meaning, extremes of energy and physicality (manifestations of the precariousness of existence) take precedence over movement invention. And so, despite the intricate rhythms pounded out by these wild and dedicated players, the pure "dance" sections — which rely heavily on repetition — become predictable, tiresome. In effect, the *idea* of danger comes through more clearly than the kinetic fact.

Still, particular events can't help but shock. A man hangs upside down in a

chair dangling from the ceiling, then lets loose his grip and crashes to the boards. Tiny leaps and whiplash turns skim into whirlwind rolls. One man hooks an arm around the neck of another and spins like the stripes ascending a barber pole. A character jumps skyward, twirls in midair, slams horizontally into a partner's gut. Taking wing, a man dives over rolling bodies. On their bellies, several men jolt upward as if propelled by a spring, hover for a moment, then crash-land. Three men re-enact Newton's theory of gravity, dropping women like so many apples raining from trees. Soon the trio of women clang-roll upstage, catapult into the air and tuck — they're bomb-diving into an empty pool.

But though the variety of movement can disappoint, the imagery (and the interweaving of Carlo's story with those of the performers, who speak his words in their native tongues) astonishes. Vandekeybus posits on stage a topsy-turvy world where nothing is certain, a land of hanging off-kilter chairs, floors that become walls and windows, hammocks that are cradles not of rest but hotbeds of sexual conflict.

A multi-colored carpet of 400 women's skirts covers the stage. (It's an allusion to Carlo's lying out his deceased wife's dresses on the floor of his tiny apartment after Vandekeybus convinced him to pull up the carpet. Although a beautiful wooden floor lay beneath, Carlo complained, "I have nothing to look at now," and took its interior decoration into his own hands.) The three hammocks, when still, cast triangular shadows that are as much a part of the *mise-en-scène* as the 720 eggs that later make their debut. When activated by women's rolling torsos, they lash about like winds in a hurricane. The skirted floor covering is soon pulled upstage in scalloped increments, bringing to mind the receding tide. Later a man in profile, singing, slowly hoists the sartorial drop cloth, as if he were raising a flag. The light behind the dresses-as-backdrop makes of them a kaleidoscope caught in mid spin.

Initial hand-held-camera projections of

Carlo's face, his gnarled hands, his lips blowing a dandelion (tough little milkweeds, he knocks the remnants off with the arm of his glasses) are later replaced by a mounted projector and a screen that shines like a window opening through the strung-up tapestry. On film, Carlo dances a jig (later translated to "real life" by one of the performers); draws an arm across his face, a gesture stylized as a matador's; plays not air guitar but air mandolin. The hole in the skirts through which we see all this footage may be a hole in his heart.

Still, his motto is never say die. A stream of men lay crates of eggs in rectangular formation beneath one hammock. The space becomes a minefield of hammocks propelled by women grabbing at the egg-bearing men to trip them up. The men sense disaster, but they straddle and dodge, duck and cover to complete their mission. Two fellows lie down on the bed of eggs — breaking nary a shell. Later, a line of four toss eggs from hand-held carton to hand-held carton, as if each were a giant baseball mitt.

The actors alone, however, don't satisfy Vandekeybus's obsession with chance. "The public has to be a second creator," he notes. At impeccably timed moments, the players break through the fourth wall to engage the audience. By directing them to do so, Vandekeybus both creates a spell and breaks it: the saw that splits a chair into firewood (an activity Carlo performs at home to keep warm) is miked, a technological contrivance Vandekeybus makes sure we are aware of. A man tosses his jacket into the audience only to return later to ask: "Can I have my jacket back, please?"

This deeply emotional work stimulates more analysis of ideas than do most contemporary dances, an effect of the clarity of Vandekeybus's imagery. Take the demonstrations of the idea that the end of one thing is the beginning of another: a fall resolves into a rise; a broken egg (the end of a life) becomes an omelet (nourishment); a decimated chair produces firewood and heat.

At the end of this evolutionary chain, we are left with four puddles staining the stage apron (the results of a woman's futile attempt to make coffee in her pocket), the smell of fried eggs, the shimmer of light and dark that is the backlit scrim. In fact, the confluence of opposites depicted in the last could serve as a metaphor for all of *Lies* — the age-old tug between love and hate, tenderness and violence, kindness and cruelty. Carlo, too, is "very destructive, but on the other hand he's so creative, he can sing a song and improvise it in a moment," says Vandekeybus. He speaks to the survival instinct in us all. □