

The Guardian



Stage

Don't look into the wardrobe: are Peeping Tom the world's freakiest theatre troupe?

The Belgian dance-theatre company love to create unnerving environments – and are set to put the apocalypse on stage. They talk about their taboo-trouncing shows

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Mon 12 Dec 2022 08.00 GMT

Knock, knock. Who's there? In *Peeping Tom*'s suspenseful shows you can never be sure. The Belgium-based dance-theatre company builds atmospheric and often bewildering stage architecture. *The Missing Door*, *The Lost Room* and *The Hidden Floor* – a triptych they are taking to the UK – open up noirish worlds of intrigue, illusions and lugubrious comedy. These walls not only have ears but full-blown personalities; the closets don't

have skeletons but whole bodies; look in one of their mirrors and the face you see won't be yours.

The triptych is an intense night out, opening with a maid mopping up blood and ending with nothing less than the apocalypse. But co-artistic director Franck Chartier, wearing a goatee and a big grin, is in a breezy mood when he arrives on his scooter to meet for morning coffee in Ostend. It's more than 20 years since he founded the company with his partner, Gabriela Carrizo. Where did that name come from? "We are always a bit like this as creators," he says, leaning over conspiratorially. "We look at people," he continues, casting an eye at the unsuspecting couple next to us in the cafe. "We watch how people eat, who they are, we get ideas. We look for situations in real life and in our families. We talk about taboos. We thought, 'OK, we are kind of peeping toms.'" He looks a little uneasy. "I don't know – in English, it has a sexual connotation?"



Peeping Tom's Eurudike de Beul in Child (Kind), which played in London in 2020. Photograph: Tristram Kenton/The Guardian

Their first creation, *Caravana* in 1999, was performed in a motorhome. "We were inside," he explains, "and the audience were looking in." Locked rooms, of the psyche or otherwise, have always interested the company, as have different types of inheritance. "In the house of my mother there is a long history of ghosts," he says matter-of-factly, telling me stories about the spectres of a family who lived there. "But me? I never felt it," he adds with a shrug.

The *Missing Door* started out as a 2013 collaboration between Carrizo and *Nederlands Dans Theater*. "Those dancers are ..." Chartier searches for the word but settles on a wondrous "ooooof!" Remounting it this time, alongside

the trilogy's later instalments, "We thought, 'OK, it's quite complicated technically. We have to find people who are able to do this.'" They advertised, received 2,000 applications from around the world and auditioned a staggering 600 people. "We're not used to doing auditions," he explains, as the company often reuses the same performers. He and Carrizo think about the set before the characters. "We might not yet know *who* we are but we know *where* we are." In the triptych, we see those sets dressed and dismantled as Peeping Tom highlight the artifice of a show and the hive of technical activity required to put it on. Set and lighting also combine as if to frame the action on stage in wide screen and there are freeze-frames and fast-forwards in the storytelling. Chartier marvels at the power of cinematic surround-sound – "it has a hypnotic quality of helping you identify with the character, putting you inside their head" – and says they strive for that impact in theatre. "We used to think image is 75% of a scene. Then we realised sound is 75%."



Franck Chartier (right) with his co-artistic director of Peeping Tom, Gabriela Carrizo. Photograph: Jesse Willems

When Chartier started out as a dancer he never thought he would direct: "I didn't have that ambition." From the age of 15 he studied ballet at Rosella Hightower school in Cannes. "I left all my family and friends," he remembers. "It was hard for me." At 19 he joined Maurice Béjart's Ballet du XX^e Siècle; he mimes his jaw dropping when recalling his arrival. After three years he grew wary of the competitive environment: "I thought,

‘Dance is not this.’” Theatre and dance would become blended for him by working with Alain Platel’s company Les Ballets C de la B, where he met Carrizo. “Normally a choreographer says, ‘Do this, do this.’ But Alain opened up the situation. In the beginning this was frightening but it gives responsibility to the dancer as creator.”

Peeping Tom’s own methods require “giving a lot of yourself”, he says. “We have no limits in the studio.” But he is quick to acknowledge that “we need to protect the artist’s fragility – to allow them to give something really personal and not feel judged. The environment is quite relaxed so everyone can say what they want.”

When the triptych reaches London international mime festival, it will bring them back to the Barbican, where they had a hit with **32 Rue**

Vandenbranden which won an Olivier award in 2015. With a guilty twinkle he recalls a party after opening night. They’d been given a bouquet of flowers to mark the occasion. “We became a bit wild and started to dance. By the end, there were no flowers left.” The Barbican told them they’d never realised “how many things you can do with flowers”. Perhaps they should have known this is a company who never leave a room in the state they found it.

- Peeping Tom: Triptych is at the Barbican, London, 2-5 February as part of London international mime festival, 16 January-5 February. Chris Wiegand’s trip to Belgium was provided by the Barbican.

Source: https://amp.theguardian.com/stage/2022/dec/12/peeping-tom-dance-theatre-interview-franck-chartier?fbclid=PAaAYglx1pxvrUjYFeg_met09XSt2Hulg6ZOeDAliNPcbS3Wuu_GgFMUXAnWE