*Interview with Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker - De Standaard  
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# Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, with a renewed Rosas: ‘Every transformation can be as painful as it is beautiful’

Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker has turned 65, and she is spending her birthday dancing in Brel. On the eve of the French premiere, she takes a moment to look back, and then quickly looks ahead again. “You have to keep adjusting yourself. Keep listening, keep watching, keep moving.”

She smiles as she welcomes me, and sighs briefly when I start recording. Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker braces herself for this conversation. She always does that when she is expected to find the right words here and now, but perhaps even more so this time. It has been a while since she gave an extensive interview. During the crisis that her company Rosas has been through in recent years, she has “talked a lot”, but only internally. 'And that's the only right place to do that in times of crisis.'

Now that the entire organisation seems to have caught its breath, the outside world can come back in. She knows that's part of it. ‘As Amandine Beyer, the wonderful woman and musician with whom I love to work, has said to me several times: “Hai voluto la bicicletta. Adesso pedala.” You wanted the bike? Now pedal.’ She laughs, then becomes serious again. “Amandine is right, of course. Life is constantly about making choices, and what is inextricably linked to that: not shying away from the consequences of those choices, and perhaps even trying to embrace them.”

There has been a lot of talk, but over the past year De Keersmaeker has above all been thinking a lot, she says. About what it means to lead in these times, and what her generation – ‘I'm a baby boomer, if I'm not mistaken?’ – can learn from other generations, and vice versa. She has done this thinking in her own unique way, which Arno, one of her beloved Brussels companions, once captured in that beautiful waltz: ‘Elle pense quand elle danse.’ That is what she has been doing over the past year. As if De Keersmaeker has been trying to get a grip on what has happened in the way she has always tried to get a grip on things: by dancing them. With the performance Brel, she is back on stage herself, together with 24-year-old Solal Mariotte, a dancer “whose grandmother I could be”. Two divergent generations, each in their own way, yet together, seeking a form through which they can relate to the timeless monument that is Jacques Brel.

‘And it was with him, with Jacques Brel, that this performance began,’ emphasises De Keersmaeker. "Everything else is secondary, or at least comes afterwards. Brel is part of my history, as a Belgian, as a Brussels native, and as someone with Catholic roots. In my fourth year of secondary school, I wrote an essay for French class about ‘Le plat pays’. He has been with me for a long time. In 2001, I created the performance Once, set to music by Joan Baez, another artist I listened to endlessly in my youth. Brel had to happen at some point. And then, three years ago, I got talking to Solal, who graduated from our school Parts, and it turned out that he too had a great fascination for Brel, whom he had discovered on YouTube. I found that shared fascination, from such different backgrounds, enormously stimulating. 'Un jour on fera Brel', I said to him at the time. He apparently didn't take it seriously, but last year we finally got started on it.

**You don't just dance this duet together, you are also both choreographers.**

‘To be clear, this is by no means the first time I've shared the creation with someone else. But it is the first time that I'm on stage myself in such a shared creation. Solal and I both had desires and ambitions as dancers and choreographers, and we combined them as best we could.’

**How difficult was that?**

‘It was quite a challenge, of course. But every creation is an intensive process, with ups and downs. It comes down to being able to let go of each other and still find each other again in time. In all our differences. Solal has a background in hip hop and breakdancing, so he has a movement vocabulary that could never be mine. Certainly not now, but also not when I was young. That verticality, going high and low, I've never done that. I'm more horizontal.’

**It's a beautiful image in the performance: how you continue to spin your pirouettes in your circles, unperturbed, while Solal Mariotte breaks solo in the foreground.**

‘Ask a child to dance and they will immediately spin in a circle. It is the foundation, it is where it begins, and it is where everything culminates. It's also planetary – circles, spirals, ellipses. I actually prefer dancing in ellipses to dancing in circles. Do you know the mathematical definition of an ellipse? A circle with two centres. I find that so beautiful. I've always liked to approach dancing in a basic way; it feels logical to me. Look, a possible definition of choreography could be: the organisation of movement on a vertical and horizontal axis, in time and space. And so there are two basic laws you have to obey: gravity and electromagnetic force. In other words, dancing boils down to playing with both forces, or at least that's where I always start and end up.’

**There seems to be a lot of yourself in the performance. Your aunt who modelled for your interpretation of “Marieke”, the nod to the name Rosas, the dance quotes from Fase and Rosas danst Rosas.**

‘Of course there is a lot of me in this performance, but it is not about me at all. It is about Solal and Brel and me, and about our love triangle, and even more: it is about everyone. This is a biography of all of us. That is the beauty of Brel's lyrics: they touch on just about all universal themes. Brel is about life and death. Death seems to resonate in almost every song, and that is precisely why every song is also a celebration of life. And that is a combination that reminds me very much of Bach – also a JB. (smiles) What an oeuvre Brel wrote in barely fifteen years, I find that incomprehensible. With songs like “Ne me quitte pas”, which are world heritage, with interpretations by Nina Simone and Frank Sinatra alone, but also so many lesser-known beautiful works. Like “Ces gens-là”, one of my favourites, with devastating lyrics. 'On ne vit pas, on triche.' We don't live, we cheat. That's one of those lines that hits me right in the heart, but there are many like that in Brel's work.’

**As an artist, do you also feel a kinship with Brel?**

‘Brel always said, “Talent doesn't exist, only hard work.” I would like to qualify that statement about his talent, but it's certainly true that Brel worked extremely hard. He did 320 performances a year. There was something maniacal about that.’

**Something that doesn't seem entirely unfamiliar to you.**

‘Am I somewhat of a workaholic? Yes, undoubtedly. But work has never been an end in itself. It's simply the fascination with finding the right form.’

**And that fascination has something existentially compulsive about it? It has to be?**

‘Apparently so. Brel always said that he started singing because no one else wanted to sing his lyrics. And there may well be a parallel there. I desperately wanted to dance, but I quickly felt that I couldn't do that within the framework of classical ballet, or even contemporary dance. I knew I had to find my own voice. And that is a quest that, in the best case scenario, never ends.’

Progressive insight

The search continues. Especially now. Just like the site in Vorst where the company is based, Rosas itself seems to be undergoing a complete transformation. We are having this conversation against a backdrop of bulldozers and cranes, and this total spatial rearrangement seems to symbolise the transition that the company is undergoing, just like Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker herself.

At one point in the performance, Mariotte stands emphatically next to De Keersmaeker and sings the line “C'est un conflit des générations” with Brel. That moment, but also the overall humour and self-relativisation, De Keersmaeker's naked surrender to 'Ne me quitte pas', even the fact that this is the very first co-creation in which she herself dances: it is tempting to read the performance as a response to the crisis that Rosas has gone through. That crisis began several years ago, but became public last year when testimonies from former dancers and employees about problematic leadership appeared in this newspaper.

‘To be clear, I did not want to dance an answer, as I said: the performance was based solely on Brel. But of course, my life always resonates in my dancing, and that includes my distant and recent past. So, inevitably, some things can perhaps be read in the light of the past crisis. But that was certainly not the intention.’

**A year has passed. How do you look back on it?**

‘It has been intense, of course, but I still don't think that newspapers, or the media in general, are the place to discuss this in detail. They simply don't offer enough space for all the nuance, context, empathy and, above all, discretion that a healing process requires. When the article appeared, we were already well advanced in a reorganisation and in the search for solutions to make Rosas a better place to work. It felt as if we had been catapulted back in time. Shortly after publication, we published a statement about our reorganisation on our website, and a few months later, during a lecture at a dance heritage conference, I explicitly took responsibility as a manager and apologised personally to everyone I had hurt and disappointed.’

**You don't deny that mistakes were made?**

‘Mistakes were certainly made. I myself certainly made mistakes. But I want to emphasise that I never believed that suffering and conflict were prerequisites for artistic quality. I particularly regret that I lost touch with some people with whom I shared a real passion and created beautiful things. Tensions had been building up internally for some time – on an organisational, financial and human level – and the Covid period suddenly brought all those tensions to a head. I am very pleased that Lies Martens, who was with us in the 1990s, has returned as business manager to manage the crisis. Together with the entire Rosas team, she has taken charge like no other and developed new structures in which we can work on change. It is a slow process of progressive insight, a learning process that continues every day. For myself, I have learned above all the absolute necessity of listening more. I embrace that. I need to be more patient and listen.’

**Did you do that too little?**

‘I think so, yes. Over the past two years, we have invited a lot of people, including former dancers and employees from long ago, for a chat – some accepted, others didn't. We were assisted in those conversations by professional coaches, and still are, in fact. That guidance can be confrontational at times, but above all it has made me think hard about what it means to lead. And that, of course, varies greatly depending on the size of the group. When you work with more than five people, different mechanisms come into play. And since I am not the kind of choreographer who comes in and says “everyone to the left, everyone to the right”, but prefer to set out individual trajectories, there is sometimes a grey area where confusion can arise about who makes the final decision. When I start to intervene at a certain point in the process as both leader and author, I inevitably cause disappointment. I have also learned that different people within the same group sometimes need different types of leadership throughout the creative process. Some insist on their autonomy, while others ask for strict guidelines.’

**I understand that you are hesitant to work with large groups anymore?**

‘To be honest, I am afraid to work with large groups anymore, yes. Generational differences in desires and expectations of leadership and collective creation are quite significant. The younger generation has developed a vocabulary of horizontality, solidarity, and empathy, but at the same time, they also expect a lot of attention to be paid to individual and personal agendas. What's more, a different relationship between work and life has emerged. When I was twenty, I didn't feel any distinction. I just wanted to do my thing. Now I've heard young dancers talking about their retirement age. That leaves me speechless. Although it may well be justified that they do so, I'm not saying that at all.’

**So it's mainly about finding balance in a changing zeitgeist?**

‘To be clear, I don't want to hide behind a changed zeitgeist. That wasn't the cause, but it does set the context. A zeitgeist changes in waves, and sometimes in shock waves. Historical corrections take place, which are necessary, but which cause painful imbalances for a moment within such a shock wave. That is the case with every evolution. When I made Rosas danst Rosas, it was considered a feminist statement, while I still had an aversion to that at the time. I didn't want to be co-opted by a movement. I didn't want to make a statement at all, I just wanted to dance in a way that was closest to me. Feminism also came in waves and shock waves, within which the different parties did not always understand each other well. Now, after 45 years of work, I am much more of a feminist than I was then. Ultimately, everything returns to its proper proportions, and we find ourselves in a new, better era. Even though there is still a long way to go. I think it's important to remain flexible in order to keep yourself afloat in the shock waves. You have to keep adjusting yourself. Keep listening, keep watching, keep moving. That is a daily task.’

Rebirth

Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker turned 65 around the same time as the premiere of Brel. It is not entirely surprising that she wanted to spend her birthday dancing – ‘It’s what I love doing most. And perhaps what I do best.’ What is surprising, however, is that an extensive interview book with her is also being published for the occasion. She usually prefers discretion and dancing to talking, but a few years ago she got into a hungry conversation with French writer Laure Adler, and they have continued it over many sessions.

De Keersmaeker looks back and forward, and what stands out is how incredibly well she always seems to have known what she wanted. How, at the age of twenty, after two years at the world-renowned Mudra in Brussels, she left on her own for the Tisch School of the Arts in New York because she thought she could learn more there. How she decided almost immediately to remove all the mirrors from the dance studio and trust her instincts instead – a move whose historic significance she could not possibly have realised at the time. The same determination is evident in her very first grant application in 1981, which reads like a manifesto. ‘In short: every movement can and may be done.’ And above all, the non-ballerina emphasised, what should be avoided is ‘a slavish execution of the movements imposed by the choreographer that are not natural to the dancer’.