**Une tendre guerre: a circle with a cross through it**

Forty-five years of dancing, fifty-six productions, and yet BREL is a kind of late début for Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. Never before has she danced a duet in a shared choreography. ‘For me, this production is largely an exercise in letting go.’ Her dance partner and co-choreographer Solal Mariotte was born in 2001, while she came into the world in 1960. She spent most of her life in a different century, while he is 21st-century through and through. ‘Duets are complicated anyway. There’s always the risk that you end up competing. Or that you’ll fall into archetypal relationships of attraction, rejection, conflict or something along amorous lines.’ Triangles are more stable, and in some ways that is what BREL actually is. Even if the third tip of the triangle - Brel himself - died almost half a century ago. Mariotte: ‘The production actually consists of two duets that we have carefully overlaid, with each of us swept up in a duet with Jacques Brel, each of us finding our own choreographic relationship with Brel, his music, his frenzy, his zest for life. Into that we also bring our own sensitivities, histories, physical training and background. This superposition also puts us in what is sometimes a direct, and at other times an indirect relationship to one another.’ You can see two dancers, two eras. You catch glimpses of the loneliness that also permeated Brel himself, but you also witness two dancers who never leave each other alone.

It didn’t take long for Mariotte and De Keersmaeker to decide they would dance their selection of songs in chronological order. And so the performance kicks off with ‘Le Diable’, from Brel’s first recordings at Radio Hasselt in 1953, and ends with a wide selection from Brel’s final LP, Les Marquises. The closing song 'Jojo’ completes the circle: Brel on guitar, delivering an elegy to his late *copain*, with a voice diminished by a lifelong smoking habit and a missing lung, deeply marked in the face of death. This performance spans a whole life of *chansons*. From his very first songs, described by Brel lover and fellow tearaway Johan Anthierens as ‘transparent with the dawn and sprinkled with dew’; to songs that are lucid, or sometimes ruthlessly intimate, and ‘harden at the same rate as their maker’; ending in a series of *chansons* that see the singer unblinkingly reconciling himself with death. An incredibly full life, squeezed into less than half a century - Brel died at only forty-nine years of age - a life that was ‘burning with love’. This ‘burning’ sensation is palpable in countless variations throughout his oeuvre. Perhaps Brel’s philosophy of life is most concisely captured in ‘La Quête’ from his adaptation of ‘L’homme de la Mancha’ (1968): ‘Brûle encore, bien qu’ayant tout brûlé / brûle encore, même trop, même mal / pour atteindre à s’en écarteler / pour atteindre l’inaccessible étoile.’ (‘Burn on, though everything is burnt / Burn on, so hot, so fast / Until drawn and quartered at last / The unattainable star is within my grasp’)

There is much to Brel that is *trop*, but he is one of the few artists who can be easily forgiven for it. ‘Il faut déborder de ce qu’on est’ – we must burst the banks of who we are. ‘When I cycled as a boy, I was never just cycling. I would pedal as fast as I could, pushing on and on, almost to the point of collapsing,’ said Brel. Relating to Brel also means relating to excess, to a life that burst its banks again and again, a life that burned and kept on burning until cinders were all that remained. A life of friendships and splendid isolation (again according to Anthierens): a man standing alone in the spotlight, who every night nerved himself like up like a boxer entering the ring, like a bull about to step into the arena - trying to vanquish his fears, ready to conquer his audience. That is how Brel described it in an interview, while remarkably not picturing himself as the matador, but rather as the bull. A daredevil who gained a pilot’s license in 1970, learned to ride a horse, and sailed across the Atlantic minus one lung, and with his wife and child on board. A passion for life is, ultimately, also a passion for death, especially when the ocean is involved.

Early on in the performance - ‘Quand on n’a que l’amour’ (1953) - there is a lone microphone on stage, standing in a sharply defined circle of light reminiscent of film footage of Brel’s performances. Standing outside this circle, just visible by the diffused light, is Anna Teresa De Keersmaeker. She is dancing upright - always vertical - and drawing circles - always circles. Deeper into the darkness on stage, Solal Mariotte is moving. The dancer in his early twenties circles around the dancer in her sixties. As ‘Quand on n’a que l’amour’ drifts through the space, Mariotte tries to shout over Brel from the darkness, disrespectfully, with a voice that catches in his throat, without the least restraint. The current century rubbing up against the last. The overlaying of two eras, with parallel tracks that overrule and intersect one another, characterises the entire performance. In terms of spatiality, too, the performance is a palimpsest: with De Keersmaeker dancing from her familiar circles, ellipses and spirals, Mariotte employs a cross-shaped pattern. This contrast provides the frictional energy that in turn charges the performance.

De Keersmaeker dances the interconnectedness of her own biography with Brel’s songs, their shared experience of their flat country or *vlakke land*, the rural farming life she once knew, the ‘land of low ceilings’ (Anthierens once again) that she occasionally hit her head on. She makes her body dance memories of her great aunt Marieke, frenetically pattering around the house, elastic bands tied around her legs to hold up her stockings. She dances barking dogs running around the gated farmyards of close-minded farming folk, dances the bustling Brussels of the seventies and eighties, the swagger of the brand of *Belgitude* that was introduced to her by Arno, shades of which she recognises still in the likes of Stromae.

Mariotte was born in France and lacks an emotional connection to Belgium. He never listened to Brel as a child, only discovering him on YouTube as a teenager. This means his relationship with Brel is fundamentally different. ‘When I first listened to ‘Le Chanson des vieux amants’, I thought it was a bit over the top. Almost kitsch, with bloated arrangements, big feelings, archaic words. Even just ‘amant’ in itself is a word I’d never used seriously. But after a while, I found that there was an intensity that touched me, a truthfulness that moves me through and through. The radical vulnerability of his writing, of his performance, the way he gives everything he has to give, the total investment of his energy, his body and soul - the old-fashioned words that also fit his attitude on stage. My origins as a dancer are in breakdancing, in a world of dance battles and jams. That world taught me a great many things, but it didn’t teach me how to be vulnerable on stage - especially as a man. Which isn’t to say there isn’t humour in how Brel plays with his own representation, and the person he very quickly came to be perceived as. For my part, I have allowed myself the freedom to play with that representation, with the icon that he became. Playing with coming near, with the search for a physical translation of the energy he unleashes in his music and his stage presence.

(As I write this, I am listening to ‘Chanson des vieux amants’ - *la tendre guerre* - one of the most beautiful, bitter-sweet, all-encompassing declarations of love I have ever heard. All-encompassing, because it faces up to, embraces and honours the beauty and ugliness, the big stuff as well as the small, the burning passion of young love and the resignation of the old, adultery and loyalty. And because of lyrics like: ‘Il nous fallut bien du talent / pour être vieux sans être adultes.’ - It takes a great deal of talent / to be old but not mature. I am reminded of the fact that all children dance, all children sing. Some children keep on dancing and singing as they get older. Some of them keep dancing in circles, with increasing stubbornness and concentration, round and round, in the hope of circling something while they dance, completing a circle without faltering. De Keersmaeker’s geometry may be complex, her idea of dance may be profoundly philosophical, in essence it boils down to this [in her own words]: ‘My body likes to rotate.’)

In the production that is BREL, another tender war is raging. To a dancer, there is nothing more complicated than ageing: a battle against the march of time, the fight that is required to keep the oxygen flowing in an oeuvre, a perspective, a way of moving. A battle against stagnation, against iconisation, against the institution one becomes. De Keersmaeker is unprecedented in the lengths she goes to in her attempts to defoliate and expose herself. She uses the arc that spans across Brel’s life in song, from childhood to death, from Brussels across the ocean to Les Marquises, in order to tap into something ‘oceanic’ within herself - the feeling described by Freud as the convergence of an individual with the wider world. Throughout the performance, she draws a trail of memories of her own life as a dancer, joining echoes of old phrases, updating the moving archive that is her body.

For Mariotte, Brel is more complicated. ‘To me, Brel represents an archive that I can draw inspiration from, but he is also an authority, with a cultural weight that can be crushing. My dialogue with Brel is also a confrontation: looking at myself through Brel's gaze. Brel is someone who draws me in, destabilises me, reveals something about myself. But Brel is dead - he has been captured and recorded, canonised. If I want my dialogue to be alive, I have to betray - *trahir* - Brel. If I want to bring movement to him, then occasionally I need to dance in a way that makes him turn in his grave. This production offers me a chance to think about what I want to take away from Brel, and from an older idea of masculinity, of performance, of *feeling* - what I want to change, and what it is about him I want to leave behind. A *tendre guerre*, with Brel himself as well. ‘Brel déteste amoureusement la Belgique’, in the words of his biographer Olivier Todd. ‘Brel lovingly detests Belgium.’ A similarly enamoured aversion occasionally shines through in the way Mariotte dances BREL.

Betraying heritage - *trahir* - as a strategy to keep something alive. Curiously, the words ‘tradition’ and ‘betrayal’ share the same origins - the Latin ‘traditio’. The actions of Judas towards Christ are called ‘traditio’ in the Latin version of the Bible. It indicates passing something down for the future, but this surrender also damages the thing that is passed on. There can be no tradition without destruction, wrote Walter Benjamin, who was supremely sensitive to this ambivalence.

De Keersmaeker is also a figure of authority. A veritable institution. Someone who, over the course of forty-five years of dancing, forty-five years of circling around what dance means to her, has developed a philosophy of dance with ever increasing density. At the same time, there is always that reflex to knock herself off course, to prevent dancing from solidifying into a kind of dogma, from maturing or completing. (I often write that De Keersmaeker dances in circles, but it would be more accurate to say she dances in spirals, endlessly opening out from the smallest turn around a point on stage, to the furthest reaches). There is always the reflex in her to lighten the relative weight of her vision on dance, to give it air, so that at the end of the performance all you see a girl of sixty-five years old, who is never happier than when she is dancing.

For one final time - the *tendre guerre*. De Keersmaeker considers BREL to be a declaration of love for Jacques Brel, for dance, for love itself, in a broader sense. ‘Brel's oeuvre is imbued with love. Not so much romantic love as a love for humanity, a love of being human. An *amor mundi –* a love of the world. Love as a basic attitude. But it is a lucid love, free of sentimentality, that doesn't flinch in the face of what is dark and ugly. A love that recognises and embraces the *plénitude*, the fullness and completeness of life, love and death. And so Brel does not shrink from big gestures, from singing ‘Je t’aime’ in capital letters, without a trace of irony. This is a love that embraces the totality of what it is to be human, to be young, to be old, to be bursting with energy, to slowly decline. A love that burns, and singes those who come too close.

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