**Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker Revisits The Debut: Back to the First *Fase***

This autumn, the Festival d’Automne à Paris will be presenting a ‘*Portrait Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker*’ amidst a selection of ten recent and less recent Rosas productions. Among these is a retake of De Keersmaeker’s breakthrough piece *Fase, Four Movements to the Music of Steve Reich* from 1982, now performed, for the first time danced, by a set of two new dancers. Together with De Keersmaeker, we decided to have a look at a capital work so personally cherished by the choreographer.

**Resolutions**

In 1982, *Fase* was the true dance debut of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker after her more theatrical *Asch* from 1980. The four-piece performance was conceived when she left for the New York University Tisch School of Arts after her training at the Mudra dance school. It wasn’t only these *Four Movements to the Music of Steve Reich* but in fact her entire oeuvre that started with a swing of the right arm, symbolizing the incisiveness and determination De Keersmaeker has demonstrated since that debut.

The first swing of *Fase* arrives almost immediately after the lights go out. De Keersmaeker: “The stage lights go on, followed by six measures of music, and then we start. It is true that *Fase* is a dance that is brimming with resolve and determination. Borderline complacency. In fact, *Asch* also had a bit that was called ‘*la danse des bras*’: this fragment was also very repetitive, physically intense and the arms were again the motor that drove the movement. In Chinese medicine, the arms and the forearms in particular, are associated with willpower. I remember the people of Maatschappij Discordia (a legendary Dutch theatre company, ed.) once stayed at my apartment when I was away. When I got back, Jan Joris Lamers (founding member of Discordia, ed.) remarked that my clothes rack was filled with blouses with sleeves rolled up. The notion of ‘rolling up one’s sleeves’ has been my guiding idea from the very beginning. That and the idea that dancing – and working – can give one a certain pleasure. *Work is always focused play*. Dancing is my way of thinking. The choreography of *Fase* shows an odd mixture of rigor and anarchy: *a dangerous but nice place to be*. It has a radical structure to it, within which freedom is performed in a highly fluent and versatile manner. Watching the opening duet *Piano Phase*, one realizes there are very few dances beyond this one that allow for so little wiggle room for ‘cheating’. The movements, most of them enacted in unison, take place below shoulder level and unfold in accordance with a determinate logic. It is twist and walk. So it’s not a virtuoso thing but the synchronicity between the two partners must be mechanically precise. In all modesty I believe that the entire piece is an exceptional combination of simplicity and complexity.”

**Subtle Differences**

“When you ask children to dance, what do they do?” De Keersmaeker asks, only to answer the question herself: “Probably twist, jump, wave the arms and sway of their hips a little. In fact, those movements constitute – in a highly reduced version – the exact vocabulary of *Fase*: *Piano Phase* is made up of twisting and walking; in the second part named *Come Out*, two dancers are waving their hands whilst sitting on a chair, *Violin Phase* is spinning and the fourth part *Clapping Music* is jumping and swaying the hips. This allows people to recognize themselves in the choreography. After a performance, while waiting for the bus, they may try a few of these moments for a brief amount of time. It’s always nice to think of it in those terms.

Admittedly, in *Fase* this ‘childlike’ dance is tied to a rigid sense of spatial organization. Yet it does follow geometrical patterns which are not all that complex either. “Parallel lateral lines in *Piano Phase*. Movements around an axis in *Come Out*. Circles and various straight lines in *Violin Phase*. Diagonals in *Clapping Music*. We also see two women dancing and not a woman and a man. This structural unity is necessary when it comes to repeating the same movements with only subtle differences interspersed between them. The costumes have hues ranging from white to beige and from white to gray. In *Piano Phase* there is the uniform-like, twisty *simple dress;* in *Come Out* masculine, almost militaristic long pants and vests. There is unity and there are alternates. The only parameter that undergoes constant change is time. While the one movement continues, the other gradually changes, pulling it out of phase à la Reich.”

For a debut – a format in which artists often want to offer a full sampling of their abilities – this sobriety, strict organization and deceptive simplicity is far from self-evident. But De Keersmaeker likes to point out the formidable nature of the limitations she was confronted with as an artist starting out. “As a choreographer”, she claims, “I began as autodidact. I learned how to dance, not how to choreograph. Measured by dance standards prevalent at that time, I wasn’t considered to be that good a dancer. From the very beginning, I wanted to construct my own language and from thereon in I had the obstinacy, or the intelligence, to literally and figuratively proceed with my own project step by step. I am not a quick writer. I am a ‘developmental’ writer. Some people have the capacity to make a one-minute-long movement sentence with dazzling rapidity, I don’t. I wanted to keep the movement in *Fase* very close to me. So I took my own physical perception as a reference point for the design of the vocabulary as such. First, I put together the genetic code of the performance in the solo *Piano Phase*. Then, when Jennifer Everhard joined for *Come Out*, my rehearsal time with her remained highly limited. I had to carefully consider, ahead of time, what I wanted to do in the hour of studio time I had available. I had to come up with a certain rationale and process to turn the music into dance, since there simply wasn’t any time available for experimental try-outs. I worked with what felt good and what looked good. And that which felt good, was fairly minimal. Of course that followed naturally from my choice for minimalist music, which is indicative of what the French like to label *réduction de moyens*. The music is a process with small, gradual shifts and without an abundance of diverse material. So I didn’t need to come up with five hundred different movements as a choreographic answer to such musical statement. A rather baroque plurality of input-points would have been quite inappropriate.”

**A Slice of Eternity**

Ultimately, Steve Reich only came to see *Fase* in 1998. This was more than fifteen years after De Keersmaeker began work on the solo based on recordings of *Violin Phase* in New York. “I wanted to have recordings of *Piano Phase* and *Clapping Music*”, she states, “and I wrote Steve a letter. He didn’t answer at the time, but I did get in touch with Nurit Tilles and Edmund Niemann (*two pianists who had formed the Double Edge ensemble and were both renowned Reich performers,* Ed.). They had recorded the pieces. Incidentally, I was intensely familiar with Steve Reich’s music. I still remember the cover of *Drumming*, with the yellow label of Deutsche Grammophon and that black trunk with the marimba bars. Later, I also discovered *Violin Phase* through Thierry De Mey, and it seemed a perfect piece to compose a dance to after leaving for New York. Reich’s very first pieces like *Come Out* were more electronic. Then he took the step to acoustic instruments in *Piano Phase*. *Violin Phase* went a step further because it is a combination of tape and instruments, making variations on the recorded patterns.

His music has a kind of horizontal fluidity to it. It is very much like a slice of eternity, but it also contains a direct invitation to dance. There is something klezmer-like about it; somebody in the village grabs a violin and people start dancing their rondo. The question was: which movements are suitable for that kind of pulse and that form of repetition? What was the process by which Reich came to organize his material, and how was one to come up with a choreographic answer to that? This led to that endless process of phase shifting, accumulation and repetitive patterning.

Yet the resultant choreography is very distinct from American minimalism. Unlike the musical score, my dance is not a mere slice of eternity. There is a clear beginning, a middle, and an end, with plenty points of tension in between. It is not a display of Eastern meditation. The dance is not like a rippling sea: there is storm on the rise, which subsequently dies down. This was the great difference with everything we knew here of American minimalism at the time. What was already present in *Fase* and would later be pushed to the extreme in *Rosas danst Rosas* was this notion of ‘expenditure,’ the act of giving without even thinking about the risk of self-destruction. The dance of *Violin Phase* is danced on the edge of exhaustion. The music that Maximalists Thierry De Mey, Peter Vermeersch, Walter Hus and Eric Sleichim were to write for *Rosas danst Rosas* after that is music that clearly constitutes a reaction to the non-involvement so typical to the minimalist composer. It drew its energy from what The Sex Pistols, TC Matic, Nina Hagen or Talking Heads were doing in the pop-scene.”

**Squared Circles**

*Piano Phase* and *Come Out* were conceived by De Keersmaeker as a resident in New York. *Fase* was subsequently completed in Brussels with *Violin Phase* and *Clapping Music*. This time around, Michèle Anne De Mey decided to join in, who became the regular dance partner in *Fase*. “I knew Michèle Anne from Mudra”, De Keersmaeker explain. “A certain bond and trust was necessary to be able to embody these musical structures. The unison in which we dance, side by side whilst taking turns, required a certain type of coordination. This also explains our habit of directing our gazes away and towards each other. People are sometimes impressed with how our capacity to remember the choreography, but of course it is written using very logical principles. It is not a simply haphazard succession of movements.”

*Fase* saw a reprisal for the first time in 1992 and has – with some pauses – remained on the repertoire ever since. In the meantime Michèle Anne De Mey left the company, and Tale Dolven became De Keersmaeker’s dance partner. De Keersmaeker will continue to dance *Fase* – especially *Violin Phase* – in the future, but for the first time, she is handing over full control for the four parts of this retake.

Of course, this is not the first time that a repertoire piece is interpreted by a new generation of dancers. De Keersmaeker refuses to resign herself to the notion that dance is an ephemeral phenomenon, and that choreographies somehow cease to exist when the choreographer or the original interpreter leaves the stage. Rosas’s repertoire has been carefully passed on for some time already; with the expertise of dancers from the original cast and witnesses from the early days, with the help of video footage and archive materials also published in the *Choreographer’s Scores*. But in the case of *Fase*, which remains inextricably linked to the young creator in her early days, the question of the sovereignty of the choreographic score and its ability to exist without certain performers appears rather more pressing. De Keersmaeker: “The pieces from *Fase* – rigorous yet at the same time always in need of a new aspiration, of a new investment of physical emotionality or intensity – are a perpetual challenge to a performer. It requires extreme precision and emotional engagement. That is not a simple matter. I have never relinquished my solo, chiefly because I also happen to enjoy dancing it. That solo has a stubbornness that may very well be part of my dance code. Somebody once referred to the performance, the patterns, the manner of moving in *Fase* as ‘squared circles’. That has a lot of appeal. Maybe that’s a personal feat – the tendency to combine the ternary with the binary. The fluid and the angular. The hard and the soft. To desire to make it happen and to let it happen again. That might simply a character trait of mine, a feature inherent to my personality.”

*Michaël Bellon*