

Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, the Passionate Formalist

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By Roslyn Sulcas

25 September 2018



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PARIS — Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker turned as she spoke, creating curving marks on the floor with her feet. “I have been dancing this dance for 37 years,” she said, referring to “Violin Phase,” a solo she created to a Steve Reich score in 1981 in New York.

But Ms. De Keersmaeker, who fell off a horse and injured her right arm a few months ago, hadn’t danced the solo that night, at the performance that marked the beginning of her company’s season at the Festival d’Automne here. Instead, one of her dancers had performed it for the first time in the solo’s history. But unable to refrain from inhabiting the solo, Ms. De Keersmaeker swirled and twisted in a muted version of the dance as she gave a post-performance talk at Lafayette Anticipations, a new performance and exhibition space.

Although today Ms. De Keersmaeker is a celebrated choreographer, she still thinks of herself as a dancer, and her impulse to choreograph is deeply grounded in this simple desire for physical expression.

“I really like to dance,” she said in an interview in Berlin, two days after the Sept. 12 premiere of her new “The Six Brandenburg Concertos.” “I like the physical intensity and what it creates as both a physical and mental process. You could call me a workaholic in that way, but it’s also a pleasure.”

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Ms. De Keersmaecker is a maker of cerebral, formally rigorous dances. She is also a maker of ecstatic, freewheeling dances. She is a purist who has never worried about challenging audiences with difficult music and grueling physical repetition, and she is an entertainer who has thrilled with spectacle, rhythm, color and light.

And these days she is everywhere. “The Six Brandenburg Concertos” is coming to the Park Avenue Armory in Manhattan on Oct. 1. And through Dec. 31 she is the artist in focus at the Festival d’Automne. Perhaps most startling, her choreography will be on Broadway next year in a new Ivo van Hove production of “West Side Story.”

Image□

Ms. De Keersmaecker, 58, has been a force in international dance since her 20s.CreditHugo Glendinning

“Brandenburg Concertos,” rapturously received in Berlin, follows two recent pieces using Bach scores: “Partita No. 2” (2013, which she danced with the French choreographer Boris Charmatz) and “Bach Cello Suites” last year. (She has done two other works to Bach, “Toccata” in 1993 and “Zeitung” in 2008.) Ms. De Keersmaecker said that when she was creating “Violin Phase” in 1981, she would play the Brandenburg Concertos and Mr. Reich’s music in turn. “But Brandenburg quickly disappeared as a possibility,” she said. “It was too complicated for me.”

Almost four decades later, she said, she felt better equipped to tackle the Brandenburgs, in part because of the “huge learning moment” of directing and choreographing Mozart’s “Così Fan Tutte” for the Paris Opera last year. The Brandenburgs are “a high point in the history of Bach, and very much embodied abstraction, moving architecture,” Ms. De Keersmaecker said. “Bach shows us extreme articulated clarity in large structure and small details. This is the challenge.”

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A sensuous pleasure in movement alongside an almost obsessional formalism is evident in the early works that quickly won Ms. De Keersmaecker, 58, an international reputation in her early 20s. She emerged as a notable voice amid a sudden explosion of Belgian dance talent that included Wim Vandekeybus, Alain Platel and Jan Fabre (now in the spotlight after accusations of sexual harassment).

In early works like “Fase” (1982) — developed from “Violin Phase” — and “Rosas danst Rosas” (1983), Ms. De Keersmaecker showed both an interest in composition (repetition, pattern, counterpoint, synchronicity) and idiosyncratic, naturalistic action (shoulders shrugging, hair brushed away, bodies slumping). Her dancers — all women in the early years — were sexualized and sexy in their short, flared skirts and tough ankle boots, yet powerful and uncompromising too, uninterested in charming the audience, dancing for themselves and one another.

“You saw the talent straight away,” Alistair Spalding, the artistic director of Sadler’s Wells theater in London, said. “It wasn’t like someone promising, or a developing talent; it was all

there.”

Where did it come from? Ms. De Keersmaecker grew up, the third of five children, on her parents’ farm outside Brussels. When she asked for dance lessons, her mother found a dance teacher and equipped a studio. “We did ballet, jazz, improvisations, we made performances,” Ms. De Keersmaecker recounted. Later she studied ballet more intensively, at Mudra, Maurice Béjart’s school in Brussels.

She knew early on, she said, that she wanted to make her own dances, creating a solo, ‘Asch (I’m tired)’ while still at Mudra. In 1981, she went to the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University for a vital year. She was exposed to artists like Molissa Fenley, Karole Armitage, John Zorn, Laurie Anderson and the Wooster Group, and she met some of Steve Reich’s musicians, leading to the creation of “Violin Phase.”

Image

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“The Six Brandenburg Concertos” is coming to New York after its recent premiere in Berlin.CreditAnne Van Aerschot

She also saw a lot of Broadway musicals. “I loved them,” she said. “Here suddenly was this incredibly vibrant form I had never seen.”

Early on, she said, all the movement emanated from her own body, and she made an important decision “not to worry about how the movement looked, but how it felt.” When she started to choreograph for men, notably in “Achterland” (1992), she found she had to look at the movement from the outside. “That was a very important step,” she said. “I found it hard to write a gender neutral vocabulary of the kind I have now in ‘Brandenburg.’”

Over the years Ms. De Keersmaecker has hugely expanded her craft and her range, tackling an eclectic variety of music, including Beethoven, Ligeti, Gérard Grisey, classical Indian, Joan Baez and John Coltrane. While in the early years she sometimes created pieces (“Elena’s Aria,” “Stella”) that were closer to experimental theater than dance, her work of the last decade has been focused on movement and what she described as “the raw building blocks of performance: light, time, space, the moving body.”

“Every one of her productions is an experiment,” said Pierre Audi, the artistic director of the Armory, who was in Berlin for the “Brandenburg” premiere. “She is both consistent and continually reinventing herself.”

With “West Side Story,” another reinvention awaits Ms. De Keersmaecker, whose segue from serious concert dance to canonical American musical seems rather unlikely. (“When I heard it, I thought, ‘that can’t be,’” Mr. Spalding said.) But she has known Mr. van Hove since the early 1980s and has always wanted to work with him.

“When he called me, I thought, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” she said, citing her admiration for Leonard Bernstein, and the show’s original choreographer, Jerome Robbins.

Her only doubts, she said, were related to keeping her company going. “But I doubted “Cosi” for a long time too, and I enjoyed it so much because it combined dancing and singing and music and theater,” she said. “And so does this.”

Ms. De Keersmaecker said she had always been interested in American dance idioms and traditions. “The history of modern dance has been mainly written by Americans, and musical theater, like jazz, is at the core of the culture,” she said. She laughed. “Let’s make America great again — with dance!”

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