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Anouk van Dijk on Anouk van Dijk

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1. Understanding my work

One of my first memories of a dance performance is of a dancer falling and completely losing it. The constraints of formality fell away and suddenly she became a vulnerable, militant person. The fall was unexpected and ugly, and it completely interrupted the precision of her movements. The virtuosity and control that she had demonstrated until then were made even more impressive by the fall. I suddenly noticed her red cheeks and realized that countless thoughts were racing through her mind. She was frowning and mad at herself. I also saw that actually she was tired, but had managed to conceal that fact wonderfully well before the fall. It was as though the impenetrable wall between her and the audience had vanished completely. We were startled along with her. It fascinated me immensely.

My work is always about how people manage to stand their ground. The world does not offer very much room for people to show what they are feeling. Their feelings are being continually influenced and they are in search of the literal and emotional space necessary to be able to function. I see so many 'normal' people around me who are walking a thin tightrope. Sometimes I look straight through people and feel that in actual fact somebody would like to pick up an axe and split themselves in two, or lick the underneath of the table, or keep throwing themselves backwards to see what happens, or crawl away into a hole in the wall. But nothing happens on the surface; the person just appears to be themselves. This duality in human nature is fascinating and it fuels my creativity. It is my job as a creative artist to show how the world influences us.

I find the abstract medium of dance the most beautiful way to show this dilemma. Dancers are always balancing on the edge of success and failure. This vulnerability is also a strength and, as a creator, I want to show that area of tension. In dance you are constantly battling with glamour. What you see is not usually what it feels like, and there is tension between the artificial and the natural, and the cerebral and the animal. It is all about someone who is at odds, yet in harmony, with themselves. Someone who is trying to stand their ground, both literally and figuratively. This is what makes dance, in my view, more theatrical and exciting than any other art form.

2. Creating the choreographies

For me, creation is always primarily an act of reflection, an inner urge to give shape to an intangible, all-powerful feeling. An idea for a production is always directly linked to my present concerns in life, whether they are private affairs, things happening in the world around me, or things that my dancers are going through. These things have an abstract nature, but precisely because of their purity and directness, they are strong and compelling in character.

I retain this abstraction in the theatrical rendition which, however, does not mean that the work is distant or cerebral. It is always important that the audience can interpret the piece, so that the experience can be shared. The theatrical spaces I choose for my performances, as well as the movement material and the codes of behavior between the personalities, together form an autonomous world. In this world, you see people making choices, and standing their ground. The theatrical context directs how the meaning should be placed. Often, an associative succession of images and actions will produce a particular emotion (excitement, loneliness, confusion, audacity) and you can feel where it is taking place (a warm, sultry place, or a cool, remote one). Human and recognizable traits make the dancers tangible, functioning as a guide in the abstract world. But despite the consciously chosen 'emotional locations', the interpretation of the meaning always remains abstract. In my performances, the spectator is guided in their viewing, but must always attribute their own meanings to the movements and actions. What one person experiences as human and absurd may be seen by another as serious and abstract. My work sometimes appears to be humorous at unexpected moments. It is black humor; forbidden, sick humor. If someone in the audience laughs at something, there are often others who turn away in irritation, making it clear that they saw nothing funny in it. This is exactly what I am looking for. The discomfort itches, and in some people it escapes by way of a laugh, often without them being aware of it. Others react in a more contemplative way. So my performances have a different effect on everybody. Though the performances clearly have a meaning, no single unequivocal experience is imposed on the spectator. I find it crucial that the spectator retains this freedom of personal association and interpretation of the work.

The autonomous worlds which I create put very specific demands on the dancers, both on their mental awareness and their use of their body. I have therefore found it necessary, based partly on past experience, to develop my own movement system over the past 10 years, which optimally prepares the dancers for performing my work. This has resulted in a system of movement which continues to build on the traditions of 20th-century modern dance, while adding elementary new ideas. It is important to emphasize that this general movement *system* is distinct from my movement *style*. The system is a way of thinking about the body which makes it possible to work in my movement style, but it also appears to apply well to other methods of training and styles of movement. This movement system thus represents a way of thinking which contributes to the further development of contemporary dance. The system is called the Countertechnique.

3. The principles of the Countertechnique

The Countertechnique discards the dominant opinion in the dance world that the pelvis, being the heaviest bone in the body, is the center of all movement. Working from the pelvis as a core center results in the dancer holding everything together, thereby creating a static balance. In Van Dijk's Countertechnique the dancers never hold a position from the pelvis, but keep their balance by constantly giving a counter-direction to each movement. For instance, a foot goes downward and the head goes upward, or a hand moves forward and the ribcage backward. To come to a new balance other counter-directions take over. The continuous use of opposite directions in the Countertechnique creates a very dynamic balance and gives much more freedom of movement than there is in working from the pelvis. Because it allows for extreme changes of direction at any given moment, it enables creating spectacularly large movements without the

dancers completely lurching off course.

The consequences of this only become fully clear when the dancers move through space. In the absence of a fixed center, in Countertechnique the body is always in close relationship to the space around it. In order to move through space, the Countertechnique must also be used spatially, otherwise the dancer will fall. This increases spatial awareness and the energy is spread over the whole body, making the movement lighter to perform and creating a natural way of moving big. The surrounding space is used, in effect, as a dance partner.

So the Countertechnique is a method of giving the body more room. More room *within* the body, and also more room *around* the body. On first coming into contact with the Countertechnique, dancers find it a nerve-racking experience. Because the Countertechnique does not use the pelvis as the center of movement, they lose control over the area that they were accustomed to using for 'holding on'. However, when they get used to it, it actually gives far more freedom. It enables them to recover their balance, no matter how extreme the body's movements are.

In my work in recent years, the accent has come to lie more and more on training a number of regular dancers, as the basis for all my work is increasingly formed by the Countertechnique. My recent experience has proven that dancers stand to gain a lot once they are able to use the basic theory of the Countertechnique. Dancers feel freer and work with more awareness and are thus able to occupy or devour space, and make movements explode or melt. This spatial awareness makes dancers visible in a sharply-defined way. As a spectator, you look at people who are going through something, and the dancers thus become more interesting to watch. They are no longer just moving bodies, but people who are conscious of the choices they are making. People who are vulnerable in their attempts to stand their ground. This experience is the essence of my work and is the precise point in my performances at which technique and content meet.