

‘People fall over and get up again: what resilience!’



Anouk van Dijk: ‘Some people get bogged down in indecisiveness, whereas others actually run to meet the unknown’.

PHOTO JAN VAN BREDA

Dance and theatre meet at the point where just language or just physicality is no longer enough.

In June, Anouk van Dijk is leaving for Australia to start her new job as artistic director of dance company Chunky Move. The Dutch premiere of *Protect me* – in collaboration with theatre maker Falk Richter – will take place at the Stadsschouwburg in Amsterdam, on 23 April.

BREGTJE SCHUDEL

Anouk van Dijk is busy. Although she lives with her family in Amsterdam, she’s been staying mainly in Dusseldorf and Melbourne in recent months. In Dusseldorf, she’s been putting the finishing touches to *Rausch*, which is now the fourth piece she has created with theatre maker Falk Richter. In Melbourne, she’s been preparing to take over the post of artistic director of the dance company Chunky Move. Anoukvandijk dc, the company she founded in 1998, will be put on the back burner for a while.

‘And maybe it’s healthy to move on after thirteen years’. Anouk van Dijk, born in Velp in 1965, decided at the age of fifteen that she wanted to become a professional dancer. ‘I was also fascinated by astronomy for a long time’, she tells me in her Amsterdam kitchen – over from Dusseldorf for a couple of days. ‘But of course you have to study physics for that. And it really wasn’t my favourite subject, so that was the end of that’.

She took a variety of amateur dance classes, from classical ballet to jazz. But it only got

really serious when she saw a real professional dancer at work in a jazz class. ‘Suddenly, it was so close, so physical and so energetic. Seeing that was when I thought “I want to be a dancer!”’ Despite being relatively old, she was accepted for the preliminary course in Arnhem. When she was seventeen, she went on to the Rotterdam Dance Academy, where she graduated in 1985.

In those years, Van Dijk watched lots of dance, besides dancing a lot herself. ‘During my training I saw all sorts: the early performances by Rosas, Pina Bausch, Jiří Kylián and Hans van Manen. But I’m still a great fan of Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire. So I have a very varied palette’.

She was less drawn to classical ballet. ‘It never interested me much. Don’t misunderstand me though – I think Sylvie Guillem in *Swan Lake* is really wonderful! But the aesthetics of classical ballet have never appealed to me. I’ve always gone more for true dynamic dance; dance where you feel that something is really happening to the people on stage and they are really experiencing something. Whether it’s the musical ballets by Jiří Kylián, the minimalist pieces by Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker or the emotional works by Pina Bausch, the people take risks and we go along with them’.

Between 1985 and 1996, she danced with various companies: the Nieuwe Dansgroep in Rotterdam, the Rotterdamse Dansgroep (now Dance Works Rotterdam) and Amanda Miller’s Pretty Ugly Dance Company in Germany. She learned different things wherever she went. ‘At the Rotterdamse Dansgroep, I took my first steps as a choreographer. But I also danced a very diverse repertoire – from Cunningham to Butoh. Although it was an amazing experience, I also found that it didn’t help me to specialise in one particular discipline. Butoh was not real Butoh, and Cunningham was not real Cunningham. Amanda Miller taught me that I could learn a lot. Under her, I blossomed and got the idea that now I was becoming a real dancer’.

But one of the most important things she learnt came before that, at the Nieuwe Dansgroep. It was there that she took the first steps that would eventually lead to counter-technique. ‘Everybody taught one another there – from the veterans to the beginners’. Van Dijk subconsciously supplemented these classes with things she missed in other techniques. ‘Whenever I did a classical class, I felt stiff afterwards. But when I did a modern class, I didn’t feel as though I was on my feet properly’.

This formed the basis for developing – through trial and error – the principles of counter-technique. It isn’t very easy to explain. ‘It’s not quantum theory or anything, but you have the basic idea and then around thirty concepts that help the dancers get to grips with it’. To put it briefly, whereas nearly all other dance techniques take the pelvis as the centre of balance, Van Dijk works with the idea of direction and counter-direction.

‘There’s no central point in your body. As a dancer, you keep your balance by giving each direction a counter-direction. For example, your hands move forwards and your ribs move backwards. But because it’s all about directions, you can also change direction easily. It gives the dancer much more freedom of movement’.

Dancers searching for balance. It is not only the fundamental principle of her counter-technique, but also a line that runs through her work with regard to content. ‘My work is always about how people manage to hold their ground. People are very vulnerable, while also being very stubborn. People fall over and get up again. We have incredible resilience’.

Van Dijk started choreographing in 1989. Ten years later, she created her first performance with her new company, anoukvandijk dc. The production was *Nothing hurts*,

her first collaboration with theatre maker Falk Richter (1969). ‘Falk and I started out at the same time. He’d just graduated from the directors’ course in Hamburg and I’d just founded my own company. We knew each other because he drove the guest minibus at the festival where I was performing with Amanda Miller. We got talking straight away and haven’t stopped since!’

Their productions are an unusual symbiosis of dance and theatre, in which dancers can also talk and actors can also dance. ‘In his pieces, Falk finds that there’s always a moment where he can’t express something in language, while I get to a point where physicality alone is no longer enough. So we understand and complement one another really well in that respect’. This results in wonderful monologues and dialogues by Richter coupled with the raw, energetic, slightly absurd dance by Van Dijk. ‘It’s a sort of chain reaction. Often at the end of a project, we can’t even remember who thought up what exactly’.

There were ten years in between their first and second collaboration. But now the duo has got a taste for it. After *Trust* and *Protect me* (23 April in Amsterdam), Richter and Van Dijk are now putting the final touches to *Rausch*.

Trust was about the economic crisis and how people reacted to it. ‘The crisis had just started and we saw how people were switching back and forth between anger and weariness’. In *Protect me*, the initial shock has ebbed away a bit. But security and stability are still a long way off.

‘It’s clear now that this situation is not just going to blow over. Weariness has made way for a kind of disorientation. And now? Is there life after the crisis, or is this the end of the line? People are taking stock of things, in a private capacity too. What’s going on in my life? Where will it lead? Some people get bogged down in indecisiveness, whereas others actually run to meet the unknown’.

The latter case will apply to Van Dijk this summer, when she is leaving for Australia to take up her new position as artistic director of Chunky Move, the modern dance company in Melbourne.

‘Chunky Move is a renowned dance company that’s very active internationally. It’s also a bit bigger than my own company; the size of a municipal company’. According to Van Dijk, the time was ripe. ‘I’m gaining momentum, both creatively and internationally. I don’t know to what extent I can continue on that course in the current climate in the Netherlands. And in the past I’ve really enjoyed creating pieces abroad. Such confrontations with other cultures force you to take different decisions. In your own context, you don’t always see what you really have to offer’.

However, Van Dijk will not disappear from the Dutch dance scene completely. ‘*Protect me* is going on tour now. And hopefully *Rausch* will follow later this year. We’re busy organising a new teachers’ training course in counter-technique – with people mainly from outside the company for the first time. And I’m definitely going to try and bring Chunky Move to Holland!’

Van Dijk doesn’t want to look too far into the future yet. ‘We’ll see. I don’t know how things will develop. And that’s a good thing, too. Actually, it’s just like a dance performance. You go on stage and think “So, here we go!”’

Protect me. 23 April in the Stadsschouwburg (Dutch premiere). Further performances in Groningen (24/4) and Breda (26/4).