

Choreographer Jan Martens at Spring: ‘My heart beats so wildly, I have to hang on to it each time.’

Jan Martens and Lukas Dhont on working on the border of manipulation and letting go.

Fransien van der Putt, *Cultuurpers*, 25 May 2016

The new show by choreographer Jan Martens, *The Common People*, can be seen this weekend in Utrecht during the Spring Festival. Dozens of voluntary performers have a blind date on the stage of the main theatre of the Stadsschouwburg. The audience can walk in and out during the show, drink a beer during one or more duets, or potter around backstage and get acquainted with the digital identity of the performers. Together with young film director Lukas Dhont, Martens stages the concreteness of everyday intimacy, as it emerges in first encounters.

While Martens’ previous major performance *The Dog Days Are Over* was touring internationally, together with Dhont he was conducting research for *The Common People* at several places across Europe. In Vienna there were still groups on stage and footage was screened of the people at home. In Tallinn from the start of the workshops it seemed to be taboo to show anything of yourself. In Düsseldorf everyone was very devoted and serious. After about a year and a half of preparatory work, Martens and Dhont now seem to have found their formula, a protocol for the workshops *and* the performances. I spoke with Martens and Dhont during the preparations for the world premiere in Tanzhaus Düsseldorf, in early May.

A show about ‘common’ people?

Jan Martens: Well yes, ‘common’ means ordinary, but also communal. In Dutch ‘gewoon’ often has a negative connotation, but in my work I want to focus on the untrained body. The question that we specifically tried to answer in this project was: can we find a shared language, even if people are so completely different?

Lukas Dhont: For me, ‘common’ means that these are people that you could bump into in your neighbourhood. And that you see how people act based on their background, on what they have experienced, at the moment that they enter into contact with someone else. It’s not about the knowledge, or whether someone can or cannot dance, but about vulnerability.

So anyone can come forward?

Martens: Yes, anyone. We don’t see the people beforehand. We do ask for a CV and a photo so as to keep an eye on diversity, so that we don’t just end up with blonde men between 20 and 30, or only with people from the social sector – who came forward a lot, for instance.

Dhont: We want the group to reflect society. Even though it doesn’t work everywhere. Here in Düsseldorf, for instance, only four people from minority groups took part.

And how do you prepare the people?

Martens: We do three sessions with them to make them aware of their own body and to teach them how to deal with the body of the other. And I also pay a lot of attention

to taking time. Time is depth. That is something we press on them in the workshops. And also in the scripts. In doing so we distance ourselves from the everyday, where everything has to happen quickly and in a hurry.

Dhont: And then we talk with them about the time they spend on the Internet and on their phones. What they share there with others. What can be found about them online and how that determines my perception of them.

After the workshops, Jan, Lukas and their team decide who is to be teamed up with whom on the first evening, in what order and following what script. On the second evening everything is repeated with a different, still unknown partner and another script, and then the carousel of blind dates is over.

The show encourages a flagrant voyeurism, but disarms it at the same time by carefully framing reactions, expectations, projections and judgements – on the basis of physical appearance or social performance. With minimal means, so typical already of all Martens' work, the show targets what is vital and breakable in the encounter between strangers.

Martens: For me it's about strategies. How do I deal with that stranger, how do I react, how does that other person's strategy influence me, do I go along with it or not? And then also, how do I deal with the audience? Some performers immerse themselves completely in the duet and forget the stage, others are thoroughly aware of the situation in the theatre. The fact that you, as a spectator, watch so many decisions being made, consciously and unconsciously, brings out the human element. Then it is soon no longer about the question as to whether someone manages to be authentic or not. It is about decisions and strategy development, and having to deviate from that strategy. Because as a participant you think to yourself beforehand: I'm going to do this and that, but then the other person doesn't seem to be what you were expecting. How do you deal with that?

The piling up of moments per duet grows with the number of duets. In Düsseldorf there were 23, in Utrecht there will be 22. But as a spectator too, you make decisions, you grow aware of how you watch and of how your fellow spectators in the theatre will react. Everyone slowly seems to become a part of a process of watching and being watched, where awareness and reflection go hand in hand. And it is also a marathon session. A long theatre evening, as in the old days, for whoever stays to the end.

Martens: The repetitiveness invites you to focus again. You observe, 'OK, this is it', and then there comes the question: am I going to invest in this or not? And if I invest in it, how so and what am I then going to come across? I am also really looking forward to the large theatre in Utrecht. I now know that a grand setting, a genuine theatre context is good for the show. The simplicity of that one encounter is then put on an equal footing with that whole theatre machine. You're going to ask yourself where we are looking for the spectacle nowadays. The fact that two people, who don't know each other, carry it to a harmonious conclusion or manage to approach one another: isn't that a lot more spectacular than an incredible light show or, for my part, eight actors shouting on stage? It is about vulnerability and how everyone deals with that. As in everyday life: what if you say hello to someone and they say nothing in return? What is violent about that? Everyone lives with the fear of failing. That brings the performance into focus, but it also opposes it.

The Common People lasts three hours and takes place in an extremely minimalist setting. Only Jan Fedinger's subtle light design gives the space the quality of a landscape, which somewhat softens the proverbial bareness of the performances. The duets last between 4 and 10 minutes, depending on the interaction. Different temporal experiences overlap: the duets themselves are extremely concentrated and relatively slow, while there is something fleeting about the evening due to the many short moments that follow one another and blend in one's memory.

Why duets?

Martens: Duets are by definition intimate, but they also help me allocate a lot of responsibility. Being only two on stage, the performers are not only relatively vulnerable, but together also terribly strong. A blind date means that you do not know everything and that you therefore can't prepare in advance for everything. I also know that that can partly trigger sensual associations, that people suddenly realize how close they are. But it is also important that people themselves determine within the script how far they go. That is precisely the beauty of it, that I don't define that as the choreographer. I find it significant that you see some people doubt and others immerse themselves to the fullest.

There is also the risk that the performance becomes a feel-good bath. How do you deal with that?

Martens: Well, yes, the bare setting, the formality and the repetition contradict in part the softness. In my previous shows, the manipulation was always a part of the language. As a spectator you felt that the work was throwing you off. I left that out of *The Common People*. But something still happens of course because of the succession. The manipulation, what you could call the signature, is a lot subtler. I haven't withdrawn as author, but I have almost made myself invisible. That means that another kind of process emerges, something that regulates itself more. I really have to let go a lot here. Initially the scripts were more detailed, there were also fewer duets, and Lukas had shot some footage at the people's homes. This resulted in too much emphasis on every duet and we also made participants responsible for a specific outcome or content. It was no longer about the meeting in itself. It all had to appear a lot more ordinary so that, both as a spectator and as a participant, you got the impression that the series of meetings was chosen at random.

You write that the performance is an answer to making contact online. Is there something wrong with our use of smartphone and the many hours that we spend on social media? I mean, you do it too, don't you?

Martens: I am indeed often to be found online. But rather than take a stand it is about the possibility of creating awareness. All the opportunities offered by technology are fantastic, we share knowledge, we make contact very easily, but I sometimes also ask myself whether at one point we must put a stop to it. Studies clearly show how using the Internet has fragmented our attention, that it is accompanied by difficulties in concentrating. We are always distracted. But there is also the fact that because of the Internet you have to make a lot less contact in real life. You order your groceries online, so you no longer have to visit a shop. The physicality of contact disappears. Dhont: That you catch yourself reaching for your smartphone whenever there is a blank, but also the pressure you feel to be everywhere, and not only here, at this moment. Always being reachable or available for your friends.

Martens: I'm a lot more aware of that now. I leave my phone at home if I go into town for a couple of hours, so that I can really relax, for instance.

Dhont: You also see that people feel the pressure to only show the best of themselves, to make an impression. The reality and how people appear online can be miles apart. And that is, I find, a real danger, that people are no longer busy with reality, but with an apparent reality.

And why the installation on stage?

Dhont: I find it important that people have to cross the stage. And that they are to be seen in that other space. It is a very different way of viewing. The digital information that you can find about participants in the installation is in fact terribly private and personal. As a result the audience wanders between many different viewing attitudes in the performance. It goes from 'oh, is that all?' to a very intensive viewing, and from 'we can move, so we shall' to 'what am I actually looking at and why am I doing this?' The installation is ultimately about touching.

Martens: It is also important that the audience can choose where it goes if that process of awareness is to be set motion. These are different forms of intimacy. And the attitude towards that changes per location.

Is *The Common People* a therapeutic performance?

Martens: Perhaps because people become aware of how they watch, or what they are doing with their smartphones. We judge people a lot at first sight. The performance gently breaks through that. If you let people thaw out a little, then you realize that most people are quite alright. But at the same time it is certainly not just about a feel-good vibe. It can also chafe. Because we only register it to a certain extent, have only given it a strict format, there emerges a sort of natural dramaturgy, which we could never have determined beforehand. My heart beats so wildly, I have to hang on to it each time, with regard to people. I don't determine the tension in that. And that's both risky and exciting.