

Choreographer Jan Martens carries out a social experiment

Blind date on stage

CHARLOTTE DE SOMVIELE, *De Standaard*, 06 June 2016

It only takes four minutes of eye contact for perfect strangers to fall in love. In *The Common People*, choreographer Jan Martens puts this hypothesis to the test: 44 city-dwellers meet for the first time on stage. A plea for physical contact.

Young makers also grow up. This is what first strikes us when we enter the rehearsal space of Het Huis in Utrecht. Jan Martens (age 31) is giving a final workshop in physical awareness to the colourful group of citizens that signed up for *The Common People*. Old, young, supple, stiff, male, female, outspoken, reserved. With their eyes closed, the choreographer has them touch each other in pairs, counterbalance one another, rub noses against one another until they are almost in each other's faces. After each exercise they change partners, in preparation for the real blind date that awaits them tomorrow on the main stage of the Schouwburg in Utrecht.

With gentle authority that flows forth from much patience and insight into human nature, Martens keeps the minds of the chattering citizens on the job, steers them where necessary. What a transformation. Only five years ago, Martens surprised us at Theater aan Zee with *A small guide on how to treat your lifetime companion*, a rough pas de deux to music by The White Stripes.

Who was this fine outsider who thought he could make it without a degree from P.A.R.T.S.? The international festivals fell as one for his work, de Singel promoted him to the rank of 'creative associate', and he also won the Charlotte Köhler Prize for young talent.

The first glimpse

Jan Martens' career follows a straight, rising line. In his work he keeps searching for the horizontal connection, for the analogue encounter between people. More than classical dance pieces, Martens in fact choreographs portraits – of exceptional performers, but also of ordinary people. He transforms 'normality' into an exception that is worth watching.

The concept of this dance marathon is as minimal as it is ambitious. What do you see when you look someone in the eye the first time? When you touch a body for the first time, without knowing how wrinkled the face is that belongs to it, how thick-skinned it is? Martens stages this 'first glimpse' or rather the first curious smile 22 times.

From the two backstages on the podium, separated by black curtains, two people are called up each time. An hour before the performance they received a script that they had to learn by heart. So they know what to do, but not with whom. The short duets vary in their levels of intimacy and proximity. Sometimes the eyes remain closed, first comes touch, then the greeting. At other times the gaze remains focused on the other, as with the uncertain macho and the Goth girl who have to dress each other after they first stripped down to their

underwear. In an unexpectedly tender gesture, he wipes her foot clean before pulling a stocking over it. She hesitates to tie his belt, but does so anyway.

Not sharp enough

Two average people, an empty stage, a confrontation. It doesn't get any less spectacular in this over-stimulated age. But the intimacy and the courage that each couple displays by revealing its vulnerability draw in the spectator. Each touch, each surrender is unique. Martens imagines something utopian: a gaze without judgement.

That profound humanist belief runs like a red thread through his work. At the same time, after three and a half hours of meetings you also see the limitations of that vision, where Martens' transparent signature loses its depth. *The Common People* misses an angle, a sharp social diagnosis against which this regained intimacy is placed as an antidote.

The installation of film-maker Lukas Dhondt at the back of the stage – in which the smartphones of the participants are displayed which the audience can root through – compels insufficient critical reflection. Is this meant as a gibe at our Facebook alter egos that lead to isolation, as a provocation for our voyeurism, as an unnecessary intensification of the 'genuineness' of the performance, or simply as a prolongation of the identity of the participants?

The Dutch audience worries little about privacy considerations, just as some participants who encourage the audience via a little note to take a selfie with their phones. It is also striking that 'the common' only gets a narrow representation. Diversity is a tricky issue, but Martens is aware of that. On both levels there thus still lurks the potential to make a sharper statement out of this disarming participatory project, which criticizes the loss of honest contact but at the same time overcomes it.