

## Simple, direct and highly effective

Francine van der Wiel, *NRC Handelsblad*, 30 May 2016

‘Can I take off your left shoe?’ What an original conversation opener. This is how one of the participants in *The Common People* breaks the ice with a woman. She in turn immediately suggests taking off the right shoe. Her pants and his four layers of shirts follow, after which they each lay their head on the other’s shoulder and, in an inverted V, lean against one another. Once back solidly on their feet, they open their eyes: ‘Hello!’

This is how 44 ordinary Utrecht residents encounter one another in 22 ‘duets’ on stage, following eight basic scripts by Flemish choreographer Jan Martens. Like blind people they are led into position with their eyes closed by two assistants. Then they begin.

With this series of live first-time meetings, Martens wants to make a statement against the digitization of human contact. He lets his performers crawl towards one another terribly slowly, describe the other, touch one another or roll across the floor in an intimate embrace. Unembellished, just as they are.

It can hardly be simpler, more direct, but the effect is not diminished. With minimal means – two people, an assignment – Martens conjures powerful empathy. Hilarity when the two strangers, cautious and full of mutual respect, try to bring their collaboration to a happy conclusion. Poignancy upon seeing the smile that breaks through at the first glimpse of the other.

That intimacy contrasts sharply with the cool installation on stage, where the smartphones of several participants rest on columns as white as sheets. But these digital alter egos, which the audience can browse through freely, have of course been somewhat redacted beforehand – our online open-heartedness is pliable. Martens here once more underlines his point.

*The Common People* is the very opposite of spectacular, but it is a solidly worked-out concept which, besides being a statement, comes across as a plea for respectful interaction with one another, for attention, authenticity and simplicity in theatre. Heart-warming.