

'RULE OF THREE: Martens stages the *now*', Rosa Lambert, *Etcetera*, 11 October 2017.



Rule of Three – Jan Martens with NAH / Grip

Rule of Three: Martens stages the now

REVIEW 11.10.2017

Reading time 4–7 minutes

Rosa Lambert

With *Rule of Three*, Jan Martens convinces festively, but dead seriously. His latest creation manages to express our contemporary *condition humaine* – often described as superficial or sensational – in the language of dance without any value judgement.

The eagerness with which we jump today from one news channel to the next means that we only glance superficially at what we come across. What's more, it has visibly made our concentration span shrink. We register, but don't really observe. One sequence in

particular from *Rule of Three* demonstrates this very clearly. The three dancers move their heads mechanically from left to right as they look out at the audience. They seem to scan the audience, like machines, but you can feel that they're not really perceiving anything. Their bodies are inhabited by the ubiquity of fleeting information. This is directly visible in their movements. No matter how diverse they often are – now elegant, now stiff and mechanical – they all seem to portray a kind of seeking.

Therefore, from a formal perspective, it is therefore difficult to give an unequivocal description of this show. Martens aligns very diverse sequences in succession, which in terms of content have little connection to one another either. So one moment the dancers are joyfully carrying out a kind of gym routine in brightly coloured costumes, while the next the phenomenal Courtney May Robertson performs a demon dance in semi-darkness on the stage. With a blackout and costume change between the different fragments, the choreography becomes a kind of montage that draws clear lines of fracture.

The title concisely expresses the central force of this choreography. The rule of three we learned in our maths class rests on the importance of a third element in some calculations. If you see at the grocery store that 35 tomatoes cost 10 € and want to know how much 8 tomatoes cost, you will need an intermediate stage where you first calculate how much a single tomato costs (by dividing 10 € by 35) and then multiplying that number by 8. Triplcity also seems to be of crucial importance in *Rule of Three*. The momentum that emerges between the three dancers is nuanced and incredibly balanced, precisely because there are three of them and because as a result they stand in a specific relation to one another. Because each figure within the tripartite constellation maintains and even deploys directly his/her own distinctness and isolation, a new kind of togetherness emerges. Nowadays solitude namely seems to go hand in hand with a new form of community, the 'being alone together' in the virtual world that surrounds us. One dancer moves very differently from the other, but together they nevertheless form a harmonious whole because their different movements reinforce one another. During much of the show, they dance on a triangle of light that is projected onto the stage, each dancer positioned on a tip. That geometric figure powerfully externalizes the relation between the dancers: not opposite one another, not beside one another, but independent from one another and yet still in balance.

'Because each figure within the tripartite constellation maintains and even deploys directly his/her own distinctness and isolation, a new kind of togetherness emerges.'

The very last sequence continues to resonate because it contrasts even more with the rest of the show. The music stops abruptly. The amplifiers literally continue to resonate from the preceding battering sound. In silence the dancers undress and then seek different ways of getting close to one another. They hardly dance any more. They each walk to another place on the stage where they remain standing (or sitting, or lying down) long enough in this new constellation before seeking out a new one. For the first time, the stage is fully lit up. The physical intimacy of the concluding part is very moving and is at right angles to the fragmentary, abrupt style of what came before. That this is not quite consistent with the 'being alone together' of the first part does not have to be problematic or contradictory. Namely, this scene, in which a coming together really does occur, does not read as an attack on individualism within the idiom of the performance. Martens' decision to be highly eclectic in terms of both style and content has to do rather with an attempt to tie his show in with the information climate of the day. In an interview with Rudi Meulemans in the show's programme, he explains it as follows: '*today you can read on standaard.be about Flemish celebs adopting children or about Selena Gomez's new kidney*'. Or: '*You could compare it to a Facebook wall or news websites which today feature entertainment and funny videos alongside major news items or even scientific articles*'.

The way in which music and movement blend together in *Rule of Three* is astounding. Martens worked for this project with the American producer and drummer NAH, who performs live. The soundscape is as eclectic as the choreography. We get to hear all sorts of styles and influences, from hip-hop to noise and even jazz. The music thus steers the dance, and vice versa. In that same interview with Rudi Meulemans, Martens also indicates that both elements were created together, that one did not exist before the other therefore. This means that the choreography, despite the strange movements, nevertheless feels very natural and logical. In addition, fragments from the work of writer Lydia Davis are sporadically projected. They appear to be rather random and disconnected, but as such tie in with the way in which today we are inundated with different kinds of information. However, the text is too far removed from what is taking place on stage, as a result of which it leads to nothing. On one occasion the text is not projected on the screen but mixed through the music. The words come through better when they are blended in with the overwhelming dynamics of sound and movement.

Martens was inspired by the contemporary tendency to report or gather information superficially, fleetingly and haphazardly. He holds up a mirror to us in all honesty. The question as to whether that habit is a good or bad one is not even on the agenda. So Martens does not fall into the trap of moralizing. He notices and makes a neutral observation of what we are like as beings eager for information. This work gives us one reason at least for not being all too concerned about how fast, fleetingly and sometimes superficially we acquire information. After all, it seems to contain an aesthetic potential that Martens has mobilized powerfully in *Rule of Three*: the wonderful vitality of 'being together alone'.