

A DANGEROUS WONDER

The Lover, a solo by the Icelandic dancer and choreographer Bára Sigfúsdóttir (graduated from the Brussels dance school P.A.R.T.S. in 2011) exists in two versions. The original version for the black box included an impressive scenography by design studio 88888, with photographs by French artist Noémie Goudal, from whose series *Les Amants* Sigfúsdóttir borrowed the title of her performance. For practical reasons, this photographic installation could however not be rebuilt and included in the location version Sigfúsdóttir created in 2015 for the Ostend theatre festival Theater Aan Zee. Those who feared that the performance would lose expressiveness because of this were wrong: the necessarily pared-down location version stimulated the imagination at least as much, if not more, than the theatre version.

She focused the attention even more on the fascinating language of movement which Sigfúsdóttir uses to talk about life – not the humdrum human life with its anecdotal problems, but the biological development of human existence and how it affects the much older geological given. The 'lovers' in Sigfúsdóttir's performance are not exactly in a romantic mood; the choreography portrays the relationship between nature and man in a possessive-aggressive sense: the point at which human culture overpowers nature to suck it empty, a love that is so great it becomes destructive.

The short solo consists of two parts, in which one might recognize the rise and decline of a species. The first half is imbued with growth and potency, the second with decay and destruction. In the theatre version, the otherwise empty scene is bordered to the rear by a huge picture by Goudal displaying a vault with columns, a picture full of surreal mysticism reminiscent of M.C. Escher. On location in the abandoned warehouse in Ostend, the bare concrete pillars are made of stone. Between these pillars there sits, hunched – in the evoked, respectively, real space – a creature. It could be a prehistoric animal, but just as well a plant species or a single cell: the fact is that it is not an individual being, but an organism, a species, that is emerging.

This emergence begins with the vibration of a muscle in the arm, the outward turning of the arm, followed by the slow, outward folding of the body, like a lotus flower. Starting with a writhing of toes, an attempt to get upright, to grow, is made – but the 'limbs' of the creature seem not well attuned to each other, the joints fail to do their work and the feet, hands, fingers and arms flail about autonomously like the limbs of a starfish, unhindered by a central, or authoritative guiding consciousness. We witness a process of trial and error: nature evolves by rewarding that which accidentally becomes the most adapted to its environment. At times the growth process comes to a halt, only to, with a sudden shock – a growth surge – start again.

For a long time, the body remains humbly stuck to the ground; it is only at the end of the first part that it manages to more or less adopt a vertical position as it comes ever closer to the public; yes, now it is unmistakably human, looking back at the path of development he has

travelled that spans millions of years. It is only in this wonderful moment of first eye contact that this man finds his equal in the audience that sits before him. At the same time, it is this glance of recognition that disrupts the harmony and symbiosis between him and the environment that produced him and he now comes to dominate the surroundings. The second part of *The Lover* starts more energetically, initially happier and more playful than the first part: man is now aware that he exists; he tests his abilities, moves self-consciously through his world. But this boldness is short-lived.

In parallel with the dramatic shedding of the scenography (in the theatre version), desperation starts to permeate the movements: a long stuck-out tongue now desperately gasps for air, or perhaps for missing food, since moments later a voracious mouth will gnaw off the own arm. The light atmospheric soundtrack of the Icelandic composer Borko has given way to the thunder of a swelling stream, a deafening flood that announces nothing less than an apocalypse. The then occurring changes in the photographic installation of the theatre version leave little doubt as to the disastrous effect of the appearance of this species on the landscape – after his own gradual transformation into master of the universe, man is the cause of a major transformation in his surroundings. Even in the location version without scenography, the roaring soundscape and the silence that follows the sudden disappearance of the noise are telling.

The magic of *The Lover* lies in the way in which Sigfúsdóttir constructs an allegory for an ancient process of creation, rather than an anecdotal history: it is not a birth, but life itself that emerges, in jerky stages. The unelaborate and concentrated language of movement opens the floodgates of the imagination. And paradoxically enough, this impersonal approach has something spiritual to it as well: despite all the convincing biological explanations, the contemplation of origin and transience – even in a performative context – remains a ‘miracle’. A dangerous miracle, definitely, but the way Bára Sigfúsdóttir makes palpable this disaster is also of great beauty.