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Jan Martens' Passing the Bechdel Test. Photo © Clara Hermans



By Marie Pons (<https://springbackmagazine.com/author/mariepons/>)

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Jan Martens' choreography is a canvas that interweaves the action and speech of teenage performers with an impressive array of feminist texts, figures and thoughts

In Jan Martens (<https://www.grip.house/en/maker/jan-martens/>), *Passing the Bechdel Test*, the title is an action plan. If author Alison Bechdel coined her test ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bechdel\\_test](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bechdel_test)), in the 1980s to point out narrative sexism, the



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Belgian choreographer's new piece is produced in a time where the whole of patriarchal society needs to be observed through giant Bechdel test glasses.

Thirteen youngsters between 14 and 19 years old are in charge. They handle the lighting desk, sound controls and take it upon themselves to deliver two-hours' worth of feminism in action. They are here to speak out about gender, sexuality, consent and intersectionality while growing up in a post #metoo era. One by one, they sit on a chair facing us and state what they are or are not, what they like or dislike. Except we rapidly sense that their surnames are interchangeable, and the words might be borrowed from others. The choreography resides in the finely woven canvas of many voices, past and present: the words of Virginia Woolf (<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref.odnb/37018>), Toni Morrison (<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/magazine/the-radical-vision-of-toni-morrison.html>), or Monique Wittig ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monique\\_Wittig](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monique_Wittig)), Ellen Page (<https://www.theguardian.com/global/2019/jan/20/ellen-page-im-not-afraid-to-say-the-truth-interview-coming-out>) or Ellen DeGeneres, ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ellen\\_DeGeneres](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ellen_DeGeneres)), as well as the performers' own.

Martens' previous pieces pushed at the physical limits of performance (*The dog days are over* (<https://www.grip.house/en/productie/the-dog-days-are-over-2014/>), *Rule of three* (<https://www.grip.house/en/productie/rule-of-three-2017/>)), but here the physical action focuses on sitting, rearranging, walking to the front or standing aside to let someone else speak. The minimal amount of movement opens a clear space for us to *listen* and let copious amounts of information sink in.

The results is a choral speech, mixed from literary excerpts, slogans and anecdotes, that creates a shared knowledge which beautifully supports the performers' right to exist as queer, lesbians, intersex, transgender, females. *Passing...* opens up a safe space and a place of resistance at the same time, that we can only hope will overflow the theatre space. The performative action of collecting, learning, embodying and delivering those words is a statement in itself. Taking two hours to talk the talk *and* walk that walk, the piece allows spectators to grasp that bigger picture. The thirteen performers are extremely good. They have the floor, the light, the knowledge. Time's definitely up.

[u=https://springmartens-passing-the-bechdel-test/&t=JanMartens:PassingtheBechdelTest/](https://springmartens-passing-the-bechdel-test/&t=JanMartens:PassingtheBechdelTest/)



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