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"The Sea Within": riding a fine choreographic wavefront – with Sound, too [by Tracy Danison]



The wave is the primary choreographic trope of Lisbeth Gruwez's exciting new dance piece. Photo©dannywillems18

THE SEA WITHIN • Lisbeth Gruwez, choreographer • Maarten Van Cauwenberghe, sound creation, with Elko Blijweert & Bjorn Eriksson • company Voetvolk vzw • Belgium Ω Performers, New Théâtre de Montreuil, May 2018: Ariadna Gironès Mata, Charlotte Petersen, Cherish Menzo, Dani Escarleth Pozo, Francesca Chiodi Latini, Jennifer Dubreuil, Liadain Herriott, Natalia Pieczuro, Sarah Klenes, Sophia Mage, Wei-Wei Lee / Lighting: Harry Cole / Scenography: Marie Szersnovicz / Costumes: Alexandra Sebbag [Artist performance calendar](#)

From the sustained applause and the large number of folk lingering in the foyer to get a look at the Voetvolk troupe, it's safe to say Lisbeth Gruwez's *The Sea Within* is a public success. Sea, which premiered at the Nouveau théâtre de Montreuil as part of the Rencontres chorégraphiques internationales festival, is the Belgian choreographer's first piece in which she doesn't herself figure as performer, and remarkable for an especially intimate, sustained interplay of sound and choreography – an interplay for which her pieces are always notable.

For Sea, Gruwez challenges herself to transmit through, essentially, words and looks, a very personal – very corporal – sense-vision without benefit of body. For me, thinking here in particular of It's going to get worse and worse my friends, Gruwez is always reaching to use dance to transmit sense, a seamless mix of mind and body. So as Sea challenges Gruwez to get her sense-vision across by, as it were, talking and flailing her arms a lot, the 11 performers (10 women and Maarten Van Cauwenberghe's Sound) are challenged to dance sense: force and passion enough, but also moral conviction enough, to deny the mind-body split.

This is only a slight exaggeration. Gruwez is systematic as well as abstract in her thinking. In her note on *The Sea Within*, for instance, she writes that she is expressing the “tribal individual” – a concept borne out of her experience of zooming in on the pure individual in her recent *Penelope* piece (which she says has her turning round and round for 20 minutes), which then determined her to work on “human-scapes” rather than individuals. As I understand it, the “tribal individual” is a sort of e-pluribus unum psychic structure within each person and within which each person lives with others, a “tribality of being”, if you will.

To put her sense-vision in motion, Gruwez's choreography launches a pulse... something like a Fibonacci series which shapes as it swells along the course of the performance. The 10 performers in casual, individualizing postures and spread in the shadows around the three sides of the stage mat represent the condition in which a “prime mover” “just moves”. This “just movement” is visually tagged by the performer being the only person in a cast of strongly-built, expressive women to enjoy a milk-chocolate skin, a striking contrast that also suggests a distinctive warmth and sensuality; black is the color of the unknown unexplorable. Her movement – at first tentative, without reference – is the precursor (not “leader”) at the origin of the wave of becoming that is the primary choreographic trope of *The Sea Within*. The movement is accompanied by an equally non-referencing sound that focuses attention on what's happening on stage.

Since the generative quality of a wave dynamic excludes crystallizing hierarchies, in *The Sea Within*, “prime mover” cannot not mean “principal dancer”: a duo or any grouping must be understood as momentary transiting of flow; shapes and forms must appear just long enough to make it clear that pairings and groupings are no such thing. Within Gruwez's choreography, as I read it, the interactions of the “tribal individual” are expressed as “cross-over of flows” rather than as “links between” as the performers dance the rhythmic breath of living, the troubling whisper of self-consciousness or the pugnacity of self-awareness as it moves forward towards what she calls a “festive parade”. So also, evoking “a tribal individual” as a wave means that the dance/ers, whatever the trope – and there are maenads and romantic heroines, there is folkloric high-step and urban break, there are group-gropes and a geometrical diagonal line-up of arm-and-leg triangles that files in my mind in the narrow specimen drawer labeled “crystal” – draws attention to the complementarity of a/their movement to the whole, rather than to the individual dance/er.

Gruwez says that women have the “power of liaison” between the physical and symbolic worlds, that they are, in effect, natural interpreters between mind and body/body and mind. Their femininity also makes the choreographic wave personal and organic: liquid, “blood”: the different themes are played out in forms of dance that develop in a wave: the women swirl, lap and mix, gather and swell, slip off, eddy... and are joined by an 11th performer: Maarten Van Cauwenberghe's Sound.

Van Cauwenberghe's Sound at first might be heard as “sound”, birdsong, clicking switches or “music”, purling waters of crazy wisdom, referencing echoes of Charles Ives or John Cage: the necessary sound-off of dance, a vague roar or an absence that pretends stillness, a vibration that is there, not far, that points and prods the movement, helps the spectator see the “dance” in it.

But something exceptional happens in *The Sea Within*: an alchemical transmutation of pulse, blood, mind, performance experience and personal intimacy makes Sound herself a performer. I mean this literally: my mind's eye saw Sound as it saw the other performers. As Papuan English would rightly speak it, Sound byemby braid as the others braid her, she is byemby undone as the others are undone, byemby caresses, is caressed, byemby pursuing, byemby pursued and byemby becomes flesh like their flesh.

This transmutation to Sound was amazing to me, the realization of the hope I always have in watching live performance, for me, the reason live performance persists and will persist.

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