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Tanz im August: Solos in doubles

by Summer Banks

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Photo by Andre Scioblowksi

A woman stands at the back of the stage. A light hits her shoulders, creating the illusion of a white starched ruff. A figure from the history books that moves into the present as the light gradually comes up to reveal a character clothed in business casual: gray slacks, black shiny shoes – a man of the modern machine.

Belgian choreographer and dancer Lisbeth Gruwez's solo (although the music from Maarten Van Cauwenberghe is such a significant part of the piece that it feels more like a duet) is a finely tuned study of the human body's relationship to conformity. Her movements are measured and mechanical, even the more fluid moments are conducted in a rigid two-dimensional plane. It's easy to imagine that she is one of thousands, millions, put through the same calisthenics everyday in some all-too-real fascist dystopia.

American televangelist Jimmy Swaggart's recorded speech is an essential part of the work, but the words are introduced gradually, syllable-by-syllable, making their sound more important than their meaning. The narrative drive behind the piece is created by the tension between the rules dictated by the choreography and music, and the body's individual character. The incorporation of the rhythms and melodies of words intended to seduce and convert the swaying masses further underlines the frightening attraction of an all-powerful, uniform society.

Disruptions in the pounding pace of the piece mostly serve as a welcome break in the intense 50-minute work, but some leave an artificial aftertaste. The costume modification at the halfway point creates more visual interest, shifting the silhouette from masculine to feminine, but confuses the narrative, especially when the corset-like piece begins to slide. The power dynamic between performer and music is also unclear: is she leading or being led? Or maybe it's both at the same time -- as puppet governments throughout history have proven, leaders are sometimes the most dedicated followers.

Interpretations of meaning aside, Gruwez's formidable stage presence – she could fill a much larger stage – and impeccable physical control make her a fascinating performer. This attention to detail extends to her face, her gaze arrests the audience and refuses to release, even in the shadows.

The second piece of this double feature comes from Berlin-based Israeli choreographer and performer Lee Meir, whose 15-minute *Translation Included* is a pleasant chaser for the more substantial first act. What the piece may lack in depth, it makes up for in even composition, rhythm and humour. An artist at the beginning of her career, Meir has a natural voice – the phrase “It’s working between us” is repeated and remixed throughout the work – and relaxed, slightly petulant, attitude that are a sign of good things to come.

Overall, this balanced programme of solos proves that dance doesn't need to have a budget of tens of thousands of euros and involve dozens of performers to provide thought-provoking commentary and complex, entertaining work.

It's going to get worse and worse and worse, my friend and Translation Included, Aug 15, 22:00 | Podewil Saal, Klosterstraße 70, Mitte, U-Bhf Klosterstraße

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