

Repeat, change, repeat

***A glimpse into the creative process of ZOO and Platform K by Amber Maes,
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It is late October when Thomas Hauert opens up a rehearsal space to show a work in progress: in a few months, it will be time for the premiere of *Where is everybody?* the performance he is making with three dancers from his own company ZOO and three dancers from Platform K. Sarah, Samantha, Mat and Thomas meet Anthony, Oskar and Anna. I meet six incredible dancers and a dancer-choreographer who may well have found the best method for making miracles happen.

It's time to ... OFF BALANCE

'What you're going to see is improvisation', says Thomas Hauert. Few elements have been fixed, even though there are a number of underlying instructions that he and the other six dancers are relying on. Panic grips me. I'm here to try and write a text about a performance that's not yet finished. A dance performance. A dance performance that prioritizes freedom and improvisation over a set choreography, a dance performance that doesn't follow an underlying narrative. The main framework consists in instructions called, among others, *off balance*, *unisono* and *one line*. The dancers communicate these initially cryptic names to each other as they move across the floor. 'It's time to one line', someone shouts or whispers.

Or 'It's time to backpack'. Sometimes it sounds like an order. Sometimes like a question. Sometimes you hear nothing, someone sets something in motion using movement alone and I don't know what I've just seen begin.

As I watch, I realize the huge share of a performance that I often immediately translate into language. Here, there is no language. Again, panic grips me. I can ask questions later, that's true. But if dancers were talkers, they probably wouldn't be dancers. It feels strange, being here, because language, my usual gateway to the world, is stuck. I feel strange, off balance, among people who speak at a different frequency than I do. I suspect there's something here for me to learn. I want to write about this creative process, and I think the most honest way to do that is to impose a similar framework on myself, to try and write in a way that matches how these seven people dance. To feel myself go off balance and to try and let something new emerge from that.

It's time to ... UNISONO

Anna explains how relieved she was this morning when she saw that the instructions had been put on paper. The *unisono* exercise, for example, features three stick figures moving their arms and legs in the exact same way. She found it difficult to know what was expected of her, what she was allowed to do or not, which movements could or couldn't be given a place in the improvisation. (Granted: I can sometimes be freer within a framework than outside one.)

As a trained dancer (as a trained writer), certain ways of moving are deeply ingrained in your body (a certain way of writing is ingrained in my system, as a result of which I sometimes forget how many other ways there are, how things can be different). It's good to let go of what you've tried to learn for years. You could call it naive dancing, dancing that unlearns (writing that unlearns), that remembers, rediscovers what it used to do – in a childhood stored in our bones.

In *Performing Remains*, Rebecca Schneider puts it this way: 'all bodily practice is, like language itself, always already composed in repetition'. The way we do things, whether we're professional

dancers or awkward authors trying to hammer out a text, is often ingrained in our habits, our fingers, our legs, the curves of our backs.

And yet – Schneider again – repetition is, paradoxically, what creates both identity and difference. It is only when six dancers perform the same movement that you see how many ways there are to perform that movement.

The ZOO dancers have been using these technical tools as a method of unlearning since the company was founded in the late 1990s. Throughout the 30 years they've now been active, more and more tools have been added, more and more ways to let the body move freely. For the Platform K dancers, the situation is more confusing, because their training, like almost all training programmes, is based on the idea of firmly establishing something; creating a choreography that can be perfected and repeated. That's not going to happen here. (My training isn't focused on perfecting and repeating, but on searching for a story. I have to uncover something – an idea, an opinion – and capture it in language, lasso what I've uncovered. It's difficult to let go. But I want to try, I want to try and follow the rules of these dancers.)

It's time to ... TWO POINTS

Oskar explains the *two points* exercise to me: You touch a point on the other's body, and the other touches a point on your body. And then those two points stick together. Or move away from each other.

Oskar is very physical. Before the start of a rehearsal, he hugs everyone, 'by way of good luck'.

Anna has no problem with the proximity of other women's bodies. Being close to men is sometimes a bit more complicated. When I ask her how she feels about working with Thomas Hauert as a choreographer, she says: 'Good! I'm always looking for new and exciting things to do.'

Oskar says: 'At first, I found working with Thomas new. Afterwards, I found it OK.' Oskar's 'new' and Anna's 'new' are two very different words. For him, 'new' means 'not quite my thing', for her it means 'exciting in a nice way'.

Yet it's Anna who often comes across as the most cautious when she dances. Her intense gaze, heightened by the bright blue bolts of lightning she has drawn next to her eyes as fine battle colours, the time she takes to decide whether she wants to participate in a particular instruction, her tall stature, all contribute to her charisma.

Oskar is a generator. Small, but broad. He is often the one who moves the most, with the most enthusiasm. I see how the other five sometimes spontaneously get swept up in his whirlwind. At other times, I see them consciously providing a counterweight, dancing more quietly. Here, too, there is something of unlearning at play: we're used to adopting the mood of others – dancers and players often feed off the energy of their fellow dancers and players – but what happens when you go in the opposite direction?

I ask Oskar how they know what to do at *two points*, whether to stick close together or move away from the other? 'You just know', he says, 'we feel it'.

It's time to ... ONE LINE

Thomas Hauert articulates his vision of dance as follows: 'To explore and maximize the creative possibilities of the body in movement and in interaction – with other bodies, with inner and outer

forces, with music – and to go beyond the habits inscribed in it.’ In other words, to embrace the creativity of every dancer. Yet his work doesn’t consist solely of improvisation, and certainly not of doing whatever you feel like doing. I notice this once more when I see how the dancers watch the recording of their rehearsal together. In a mix of Dutch, French, laughing, nodding, silence and English, they share their findings: It’s wonderful how close they dare to get to the audience. It’s good to see that everyone dares to take the initiative to start a new exercise.

They can do *one line* even better in the future. They did it now in threes, with their arms hooked together, but it would be even better with six in a row. With six in a row, very different bodies searching for a single rhythm. Searching for a single rhythm in which they can move with their bodies that are sometimes so familiar to each other that it seems as if they’re being put together into a single body. Put together into a single body that surges, heaves, flows, until it stalls and falls apart, and the gears start to move against each other.

Specially for me, the dancers are willing to practise something else, even though they’re clearly tired. They lie down in a circle, their heads facing each other. Oskar recites one of his poems from memory. What follows is a chain of trilingual words that hook into each other, are laid on top of each other in the same way that their arms and hands brush against each other. Anna has already gone home, but as her colleagues tell me, she knows sign language. Four languages, then.

It’s time to ... BACKPACK

How do you rehearse for a performance that will consist mainly of improvisation? I think by embracing the fact that all the time you spend together will ultimately shape the performance, much more than any choreography. According to the Van Dale dictionary, rehearsing means practising, repeating. But if we’re to believe Rebecca Schneider, repeating is also what makes differences possible. It is – for now – specific to live performances that no two performances are exactly the same. If only because the audience in the theatre is different every night. The more I think about this, the better I understand that Hauert’s performances aren’t so different from what I know: everything we do is improvisation, and our life unfolds in-between that improvisation: repeating, changing, repeating, changing, repeating.

Many of the exercises the dancers perform involve an interplay between supporting and being supported. *Backpack*, for example, is an exercise in which you lean against the other’s body. Or you are the body being leaned against, of course. What do you prefer, I ask Oskar. ‘Support’, he says at first. And a little later: ‘Both. I like doing both.’

Anthony puts his arm on Sarah’s, leads her arm up, backwards. It’s an intimate kind of movement, one that comes when you’ve been close to one another long enough. Thomas pushes back when Anthony wants to stretch his long, muscular legs against his stomach. The way the dancers touch each other on and off the floor reminds me of how, when I sometimes feel like I’m flying away from the world, I ask my partner to press his entire weight onto my body; the feeling that the pressure of his body keeps my body on the ground. It’s about holding each other: holding each other with care, attention, reciprocity.

The way the dancers hold each other also reveals itself to me in another way. Their creative process arises mainly from experience, from the time they spend together. And that time also includes all the previous, other dancers with whom each of them spent a lot of time. They all bring so many others with them. When you touch another body, you’re actually touching so many bodies, so many lives at once, that the stage, the entire auditorium even, is filled with people who have all touched others, in both senses of the term. It is the amazing trick that allows the whole of humanity to fit

into a single auditorium. The creative process of this performance is essentially about the time you spend together and how this slowly reduces the distance between bodies.

It's time to *backpack*. For me, that would roughly take the form of a very long sentence in which I try to put into words how *new* it is – in both Oskar and Anna's sense of the word – to let go of control, although within the framework of exercises, to model my sentences on the movements of dancers and base my theories on their searching method of unlearning, of repetition and difference, and how much importance I actually attach to a creative process, because that process is the space in which care and time become synonymous. In fact, it would be a sentence touched by seven new lives – seven incredible dancers who together make miracles happen – that will remain stuck to mine, and how grateful I am for that.

Amber Maes studied philosophy as well as theatre, film and literature. She writes about the performing arts for Etcetera. Besides that, she is essentially active in the literary sector.

Translation: Patrick Lennon

Source: Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains* (Routledge, 2011)