

A Finger on the Pulse

The Choreographer Meg Stuart

The American choreographer Meg Stuart illustrates the openness of contemporary dance in Flanders better than anyone. After training as a dancer at the renowned Tisch School of the Arts in New York, in 1991 she was noticed by Tine Van Aerschot, a talent scout for the cutting-edge Klapstukfestival in Leuven, while Stuart was working at 'The Kitchen', an interdisciplinary melting pot for the arts. The immediate outcome was an invitation to a six-week residence in Flanders.

Both the audience and critics in Leuven were unerring in judging the importance of what was her first full-length production. This was not self-evident, because in this piece – *Disfigure Study* – Stuart found what she was looking for: a break with the postmodern idiom of American dance as practised by Trisha Brown and Lucinda Childs. It was precisely

these two who had helped define the style of the early works by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, one of the figureheads of the innovative trends in Flemish dance in the early 1980s. Ten years after the first Flemish Wave, Meg Stuart ushered in a second wave of renewal, all on her own in Leuven. Now, after thirty productions and a series of site-specific and improvisation projects, she is still one of the most innovative and influential choreographers in Flemish and international dance.

In *Disfigure Study*, Stuart showed fragmented and distorted dancing bodies, driftwood left by the ruthless machinery of progress. She refers to Francis Bacon as a source of inspiration: 'I would look at his paintings and see how he pulled the bodies apart, and I wondered how far I could go in that direction.' At the same time she wanted to show the dancer as a human being. 'I didn't just want to impose stories on my body, but instead show those stories that live in the body.' Disconnection, failure



Meg Stuart © Chris Van der Burght

and vulnerability are still current themes in Stuart's work, though now in more complex contexts than in the past.

Encouraged by her positive reception, Stuart opted for Flanders as a base for her nomadic projects. In 1994 she set up her own company in Brussels, *Damaged Goods*, a name inspired by a review of *Disfigure Study*. In *The Village Voice*, Burt Supree wrote that 'everyone is shown as damaged goods'. The Flemish authorities awarded Stuart an operating subsidy; she was the first foreign choreographer to receive one. Although her office is still in Brussels, Meg Stuart has for some time been living in Berlin, where she has been collaborating closely with the Volksbühne am Alexanderplatz for the last six years. But her latest piece was produced under the wing of the Münchner Kammerspiele.

This absence from home is not so odd when you consider that Stuart has played a pioneering role in stimulating collective projects and interaction between arts disciplines – in inverse proportion to the 'disconnection' she shows on stage. As early as 1994 she presented a 'dance installation' amidst works by Louise Bourgeois, Luc Tuymans and others in *This is the Show and the Show is Many Things* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent (SMAK). Between 1996 and 1999, in various cities including Lisbon and Moscow, she put on six versions of her *Crash Landing* improvisation project, with the assistance of Steve Paxton, one of the founders of dance improvisation. *Highway 101* (2000-2001), a 'blending & merging' site-specific project in five European cities, was considered by critics to be just about the most interesting work of that period, worldwide. With a variable team of performers and artists, Stuart followed a route through a variety of dance spaces, in each case prompting the audience to view the space in a new way. For example, in the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the dancers hid amongst the audience and stared at the spectators as they waited for the performers to appear.

In the meantime, Meg Stuart continues more than anyone to keep her finger on the pulse of artistic and societal trends. In *Blessed* (2007) an

ecological apocalypse takes shape in a cardboard set, around a man (performed by Francisco Camacho, one of Stuart's original company) who is out of balance with himself and his surroundings. With agonisingly slow inevitability his world degenerates into a shapeless mess of pulp. Stuart thereby delivered an all but political message, but without preaching. A year later she was awarded the prize of the French critics for this compelling work. In 2012 she also won the German Konrad Wolf Prize for the same production, and the set designer Doris Dzierzk received a New York Dance and Performance Award (aka a 'Bessie') for what was described as a 'brilliant technical achievement that perfectly matched the artistic intent of the work'. In 2008 the choreographer herself also received a Bessie Award for her entire oeuvre, and in the same year she was awarded the Flemish Culture Prize for the Performing Arts.

In her most recent piece, *Built to Last* (2012), Meg Stuart establishes a link with history for the first time in her career and also uses existing musical scores for the first time. She questions the impact of music on Western utopias and ideals, on the basis of works by such great composers as Beethoven, Schoenberg, Xenakis and Monk.

Meg Stuart has developed her own special dance idiom in Flanders, but her impact also extends much further: flexible multidisciplinary joint ventures, research-oriented work, an interest in work processes, and social engagement have all become self-evident concepts for young choreographers. This is largely due to Stuart's indefatigable drive to keep on expanding her horizons.

LIEVE DIERCKX

Translated by Gregory Ball

www.damagedgoods.be

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