

WE'RE PRETTY FUCKIN' FAR FROM OKAY

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We're pretty fuckin' far from okay explores our fears and anxieties. By choosing to have the audience face two dancers caught in a simple set-up—a man, a woman, two chairs, corridors of light...—Lisbeth Gruwez does not intend to talk about couples but about the individual, about his or her emotional, psychological, and physical reactions when he or she experiences fear. Through a gesture language made up of our natural and everyday reflexes, the choreographer invites every one of us to see ourselves in and identify with the dancers. The starting point of the show: Alfred Hitchcock's horror films, and in particular *The Birds*, because "the fear it is about is irrational. It is a phobia, a paranoia. It resonates strongly with what's happening in our world." Through a progressive rise in the intensity of the movements, through the well-known feeling of needing the other more and more, through layers of sound that are adjusted in real time, and through this shared act that is breathing, the show offers an immersive experience. Fear has the power to put the body in a state of trance, to obstruct the mind, and to disconnect it from "the will and the doing," which makes it a fertile playground for the dancers. The third step in a research about the body in a state of ecstasy, *We're pretty fuckin' far from okay* is a duo that echoes the solo *It's going to get worse and worse and worse, my friend* (2012) and the collective show *AH/HA* (2014). As we're trying today to control what can't be controlled, does it remain true that when thought loses itself, so does the body?

LISBETH GRUWEZ

Lisbeth Gruwez starting learning ballet when she was 6, before studying contemporary dance at the PARTS school. In 1999, she started working with Jan Fabre within the company Troubleyn, where she met musician and composer Maarten Van Cauwenberghe. Together, they founded the company Voetvolk, with which they presented their first creation, *Forever Overhead*, in 2007, before beginning a research mixing dance and music composition, with an aesthetics inspired by street style. Anarchy and control are the keywords of their research. Voetvolk has so far produced seven shows, from solos to collective plays, including *Birth of Prey* (2008), *HeroNeroZero* (2010), or *L'Origine (The Origin)*, (2011) and *It's going to get worse and worse and worse, my friend*, which is still touring. In 2014, they created the collective piece *AH/HA*, which was followed by the solo Lisbeth Gruwez dances *Bob Dylan* (2015). "Dance as a simple method is no longer enough for creation. Contemporary dance cannot be separated from performance, in the largest sense of the word. We think that in order to reach what has to be said, every single aspect of our physical practice has to be considered." Lisbeth Gruwez and Maarten Van Cauwenberghe are artists-in-residency at Jan Fabre's Troubleyn/Laboratorium, in Antwerp.

INTERVIEW WITH LISBETH GRUWEZ

You talk of anxiety and fear, in other words of emotions; what form does that take on the stage? What's the origin of this show?

Lisbeth Gruwez: The starting point of *We're pretty fuckin' far from okay* is a relationship to space. Picture two chairs, side by side, on a stage, and already you have a situation: the chairs are separated and two different worlds exist right next to each other without meeting. There's a separation, but their meeting is imminent, and obviously unavoidable. This set-up forces the audience's gaze to constantly be moving from the man to the woman and back, like in a game of ping pong. I chose a duo with a man and a woman who remain separated as long as possible by the space around them but also by two corridors of light that separates their bodies and movements. The contact between them comes later. At first, it's not about a couple, there's no relationship crisis. Then when they meet, they start needing each other completely. If one's not there, the other falls. I chose a man and a woman because their breathing and energies are different and complement each other. A duo is made up of "you" and "me," it's not exactly a couple. It's about the other, who's a stranger without being completely different. The choreographic language is then founded on natural reflexes, on gestures we do every day. We based our research on the movements used in Alfred Hitchcock's horror films, whose gestural alphabet is based on words like "suspicion" or "fear." What regulates fear is first and foremost our breathing, but sitting down on a chair—a gesture that came to me intuitively—lets us control all movement. For the audience, a recognisable situation appears, maybe even the beginning of a story. I work on the abstract, but only up to a point. As for the dancers, their movements start with caresses only to end in frenzy, to show their unease and discomfort. This evolution tells us of the world in which we live, a world that requires us to be forever vigilant and wary. The effect is heightened by the soundtrack, made up of live sound and pre-recorded sound, which is then multiplied and dispersed throughout the theatre. The sound is like a spiral that captivates the audience. It's the concept of "Little sisters," after "Big brother." Everything you do is seen and recorded in an online database. The "Little sisters" effect, it's a little as if 1,000 people were simultaneously breathing down your neck. It's about the modern man who feels like he must constantly be watching what's going on around him, in spite of his impulses. There is indeed a latent atmosphere of mistrust, and the media don't really help with understanding others, even your neighbour. You watch the news and you hear words like "terror" or "fear," they're like a mantra. Television and the internet hypnotise you. Shows often serve to reveal what we're going through. I don't own a television because I threw it away, so I looked for fear within me. I asked myself why I smoked so much. Out of anxiety? Fear? That led me to breathing. It was like a seed, the starting point of my work. Often, things begin with something personal to which you apply a poetic filter in order to give the show universal significance.

Since you mentioned the idea of a larger experience, was *We're pretty fuckin' far from okay* conceived as a collective experience that would physically include the audience? By changing their breathing, for instance? Or their understanding of their everyday lives?

Fear is present in the air you breathe in and out. So yes, I hope to be able to influence the audience's breathing within the show itself. I don't see the audience as this rising tide. We had the same experience with *AH/HA* (2014), our previous show, in which we could see the audience move in time with us. I like to begin a play in a rather cold and conceptual way, only to end up going down from the head to the gut (and through the lungs). With *We're pretty fuckin' far from okay*, I want the audience to be aware of their breathing when they leave the room. Because breathing is what influences our emotional state. One breath is enough for it to catch on fire or settle down. Breathing is an incredible weapon, each of us having

our own rhythm. Furthermore, in my relationship to the audience and to people in general, I love to watch them and stick to movements they can recognise. But the point is to do it in a way that makes it become dance. It's through repetition and concentration that those movements end up becoming abstract. Abstract, but human. That's what I like in Tisha Brown's work, those simple movements, close to what we know. What I add to it is a real contact with the audience, through music for instance, something that make them join us, that captivates them. Maarten Van Cauwenberghe and I also create a lot live during the show itself. It gives us a certain freedom, makes the show seem more alive. It is my belief that that tension between the technical aspect of things and the stage allows us to include the audience, to bring them into the show. A choreography always begins with a very concrete gesture and slowly becomes dance. *We're pretty fuckin' far from okay* is part of a triptych about the body in a state of ecstasy, along with the solo *It's going to get worse and worse and worse, my friend* (2012), and the collective piece *AH/HA* (2014). A body in a state of fear is a form of ecstasy. A body in a state of ecstasy is a body that's out of control, it's a loss of consciousness, which we try to control through movement. The point is to control what cannot be controlled. Because if thought is lost, the body falls. They're very closely related in this exercise. Which is why the cycle about the ecstatic body doesn't use sophisticated, complex movements, but relies more directly on instinct. When you're in a state of ecstasy, you can't think. That's why nothing is fixed, we create an alphabet and recreate everything every night. You no longer think, you do. We're not a political collective, but a political aspect always arises from the show. *AH/HA*, for instance, is about laughter experienced collectively, and how the group can exclude an individual. It's a pretty violent situation. It's about a group dynamic, a society, in which loneliness inexorably appears. We're together, but always alone.

Do you see this show as cathartic?

My personal goal with this show was to stop smoking, because it's tied to my anxiety. It's about looking fear and anxiety in the eye to lessen their impact. There's of course a journey from the personal to the universal. The movements we're dancing come from our collective memory, the choreographic language is therefore faithful to the gestures that make up our daily routines, simple gestures to talk about fear. People can identify with it. Those gestures aren't withdrawn from life. As artists, we are virtuosos in our precision, not in the form our dancing takes. Watching those gestures become repetitive can awaken something in the audience, even make them move. We do think about a certain catharsis, but I'd want it to happen throughout the show, not only at the end. I'm still fairly radical, and faithful to those "Hitchcockian movements," to our work on breathing, and to that concept of discomfort. Without going all philosophical on you, I start by using active words that translate into movements. Thought comes later. The goal is to touch people individually. Meaning comes from the gaze of the audience. Some may think of what they lived through in Paris in 2015, to events that have to do with fear. What you have to say must be clear but remain open to interpretation. All I do is create a skeleton, take away all I can, and let the audience imagine the rest. That's why I use very simple sets and almost no technical effects. Dance offers a direct language that allows you to communicate while leaving it open to a broad spectrum of interpretations. Suggestion is everything, just like in Hitchcock's movies. *The Birds* is the film that most influenced the show because the fear it is about is irrational, it's a phobia, paranoia even, it can't be controlled. It's something that we can relate to, given what's going on in the world. The stress of fear gives you tunnel vision, nothing can save you from that state except our breathing, in other words yourself. You are your own saviour or saboteur. There's hope in this show, but we don't know yet to what extent it is a dark show, or a hopeful one.

Interview conducted by Moïra Dalant

AND...

THE NAVE OF IMAGES

L'Origine (2011), *It's going to get worse and worse and worse, my friend* (2012) and *AH/HA* (2014), choreographies by Lisbeth Gruwez
Quando l'uomo principale è una donna, choreography by Jan Fabre (2004),
July 24 at 11:00, église des Célestins

TOUR DATES OF *WE'RE PRETTY FUCKIN' FAR FROM OKAY* AFTER THE FESTIVAL

- August 30 and 31, 2016 at Weimar Kunstfest (Germany)
- September 3 and 4 at La Bâtie Festival in Genève (Switzerland)
- September 28 to 30 at l'Usine C in Montreal (Canada)
- February 9 and 10, 2017 at KVS Brussels (Belgium)
- February 14 to 16 février at Kunstencentrum NONA in Malines (Belgium)
- March 7 at Centre culturel de Bruges (Belgium)
- March 9 to 11 at Brigittines in Brussels (Belgium)
- March 15 to 17 at Campo Kunsten centrum in Gand (Belgium)
- March 22 at Centre culturel de Werft in Geel (Belgium)
- March 23 at Centre culturel de Spil in Roulers (Belgium)
- March 24 at Centre culturel de Velinx in Tongres (Belgium)
- March 27 at Espaces Pluriels de Pau
- March 29 at Stuk Kunstencentrum de Louvain (Belgium)
- March 31 at Centre culturel De Grote Post in Ostende (Belgium)
- April 21 et 22 at Teatro Central de Séville (Spain)
- May 20 at Toneelhuis in Anvers

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