



# ANY ATTEMPT WILL END IN CRUSHED BODIES AND SHATTERED BONES

## INTERVIEW WITH JAN MARTENS

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***any attempt will end in crushed bodies and shattered bones* explores the concept of resistance through its massive cast. Is resistance a matter of numbers?**

**Jan Martens:** I don't think so. An individual can resist on his or her own. But these days, we're seeing an important rise in mass movements. And the diversity of those movements caught my attention so insistently that I decided to work on the subject. This desire takes form today with *any attempt will end in crushed bodies and shattered bones*, a show underpinned by a more personal question: how to approach a show with such a large cast? At some point, this type of question always arises in a career like mine, it's not surprising. But it's a very particular sensation, a very specific movement, to approach such a big stage, to think about a choreographic object in terms of mass, group, or distance. The proportions of the stage, the number of dancers... This project immediately brought together two things: on the one hand, inventing a massive piece, and on the other, exploring, with patience and pertinence, movements of resistance within that quantity, and through that quantity itself.

**Your approach aims to be critical. How were you able to keep a certain distance when forms with large casts can be so seductive?**

You have to put this notion of distance in perspective; in any case, the critique in this creation has to do with my desire to establish a privileged relationship with the audience. When I started working on this show, I decided to go against the idea of the spectacular. I want to show on stage an essential aspect of my work, which remains whatever the size of the piece, namely, intimacy. I want to show that each dancer carries his or her personal story, to stage a vision of humanity without intimidating the audience through sheer numbers or trying to charm them. For this show, I wanted several generations (here 17 dancers in all) to come together, recognise each other, meet each other on the stage. Resistance is at once the central theme of this choreography and the very thing that allows the dancer to share something. Both content and container, the resistance I want to explore revolves around a tension, and isn't incompatible with intensely emotional music such as Henryk Górecki's *Concerto for Harpsichord and String Orchestra*, or a song by Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln.

**Which current movements of resistance caught your attention?**

There are many: Womens' marches, the Yellow Jackets, the Youth for climate movement, Black Lives Matter, what's happening right now in Chile, what happened in Belgium after cuts to cultural funding were announced... What I'm interested in when it comes to those movements is their spontaneous nature, the way they arise, their resurgence. There is, perhaps paradoxically, on the one hand the popular nature of those movements, and on the other their popularity. With people who join a smaller group of individuals more directly concerned by something, more directly affected by a cause, and who come into contact with that group and commit to their cause, not for the object of their struggle itself but in a spirit of solidarity. They're working to promote an idea of democracy, even to implement it. Social media helps, it shines a light on a practice of democracy, on a desire for it. In Flanders, the reaction to the proposed cuts in cultural funding momentarily blocked out discussions about feminism or colonialism. Keeping all those questions together without forgetting any is a real challenge. It's unfortunately easy to lose track of them given the impulsive nature of our society, in which the world of media plays a large part.

### **What are you particularly vigilant about when working on such a choreographic form?**

First of all, I make sure not to change the way I work: making sure I listen to the dancers, so that they all feel free to express themselves in their research, their questions, their qualities. To pay attention to my preexisting vocabulary, which has grown over the course of my career, but which I want to keep evolving based on the issues and obsessions I tackle. The soundtrack of the show is telling in that sense: in addition to the music, some of which is already associated with protest movements, sounds and shouts play a part in what's happening physically onstage. I add power, that is, strength, but also a certain anchoring. And since I want to play with and act on the audience so that they welcome our vision of resistance, I have to take into account an essential element of this choreography: its immobility.

### **How did the concept of immobility become central to the show?**

Often, actions undertaken during demonstrations involve sit-ins, a way to be present in and to occupy the space. This pose/pause, this moment stuck in time is at once a demand and an obvious way to be present and to show one's opposition to something. Those actions are often striking, upsetting, and terribly effective. They make everyone understand the importance of political engagement. Transposing this notion to the stage means coming back to forms I already worked with in previous shows, like *Rule of three*, in which after physical and dynamic relationships between dancers arose moments of "do-nothing," an emptying of the bodies, which allowed each of them to go towards the other, freely, without judgment. The dancers can take the time to feel their way through those new relationships. Every time they move towards an image, the audience can see them asking each other "What does this mean, what can it mean?" I follow the same line of questioning in a different way in *any attempt will end in crushed bodies and shattered bones*. I like the obvious power of inaction. This form of immobility is never entirely immobile; it's always "switched on." It's through immobility that things can begin to change, to charge up or, conversely, to discharge...

### **You often mention your previous works. How do you see them with regard to this new creation? Is there continuity? Or a break?**

Why I talk about certain aspects of *Rule of three*, I clearly see continuity between the two. But I make sure to operate a shift in what we're thinking about, to bring the dancers into a different state of mind. For *any attempt will end in crushed bodies and shattered bones*, it's first and foremost about bringing together dancers of different ages, many of whom have already worked with me, and to patiently work on a series of trials and attempts. To explore the question of resistance can easily turn into a pamphlet. When an artist wants to work on the concept of resistance, they have to do a work of synthesis, to find the subtlety needed to keep things open. If I was never obsessed with the idea of having the dancers speak in this show, I nonetheless asked them during a workshop session to come up to the microphone one by one and to talk about a moment when they had, for one reason or another, to resist, in society or in their personal lives. I'm thinking about the show *The Common People*, which was about choreographing impulses as much as absolutely necessary moments of immobility. My shows are very different from one another; they're varied faces, though I still perceive a unity. Although... *The Bechdel Test*, one of my previous shows about feminism with young performers, disconcerted many people: there were two hours of text and only ten minutes of dance!

### **Doesn't working on such a theme call into question the relationship between creator and dancers?**

I don't see creating a shift in this show or making a synthesis of my earlier works as a forced constraint. I followed my instinct to end up with this choreography. Many things in my work are the result of intuition. Intuition here feeds on a fundamental relationship to resistance and immobility, but also on my trust in the dancers. Each of them reacts in his or her own way to my propositions. I'm not fascinated by the idea of the director or choreographer as all-powerful. I make propositions; if I sometimes insist, as it is my duty to do so, I don't like contentious relationships between on the one hand dancers, performers, actors, all the artists on the stage, and on the other a choreographer-as-god. I'd rather guide every artist to the full potential of his or her work, I'm not interested in relationships of power. Sometimes dancers have been conditioned, by their careers, by tyrannical demands, and don't know how to work otherwise. Creating a show about resistance with a large cast is an exercise in democracy. What's happening and what we're telling within that space, within that artistic work, must be echoed offstage by the same issues, the same truth.

Interview conducted by Marc Blanchet in November 2019  
and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

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