

Critical Endeavor
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Dark Innovation

(A piece I saw at OktoberDans in Bergen during the weekend, feel free to comment!)

Mathilde Monnier (FR) and La Ribot (S) manage in their performance *Gustavia* (2008) to push choreography beyond the general exploration of bodily representations that choreographers over a decade now have occupied themselves with (Xavier Le Roy, Mette Ingvartssen, Ann Liv Young.)

Like in many other choreographers' work is the object for examination, in *Gustavia*, the representation of women and their bodies; Long and slim legs entering the catwalk, a drunk women's uncontrolled body signifying the violence it "attracts" and the self-pitying ceaselessly crying woman. Rather than only conceptually copying these images of womens' bodies in a mere formal manner, do the two choreographers let them come forth from a theatrical burlesque framework, which is what makes this piece so original.

La Ribot, dressed the same as Monnier, in black panties and a vest and with high black heels on her feet, carries a black long plank on her shoulder. Covering her head only her skinny legs and upper body can be seen while she tries to march front and back on the black velvet covered floor. Monnier who – like in a Laurel and Hardy film – pretend to not see La Ribot, is being hit down by the plank down to the floor time after time. The scene starts with crying laughters from the audience. But after having been hit more than ten times by the plank and desperately trying to raise her body again, does her bodily gestures, resemble that of a maltreated woman's body and the scene ends in complete silence.

This is not a burlesque show but an exploration of the representations of women through the language of classical burlesque and its absurd humour. Like in the part when the two women compete in the most funny and absurd way who can show the most naked skin; Monnier, standing in the middle of the curtain at the back of the stage. Her posture, with her right leg sticking out more from the curtain than the other, makes the scene look like the beginning of a striptease show in a basement theatre maybe sometimes in the

1930's. With a cheeky look on her face does she pull up her right leg's black tights to the knee. Challenged by the act, La Ribot, sitting in a black leather chair at the front pulls up both of her tights to the knees, fast up and down. And so it goes on until absurdity, climbing microphones and chairs while still pulling the tights up and down. Inspired by filmmakers such as Tati and Chaplin the two choreographers succeed in criticising the narrow image of women today without falling into clichés or stereotypes. The fact that they both represent aging female bodies (both around their fifties) but in clothes, choreographies and jokes normally only inhabited by young women or men, makes the piece even stronger in its critique.

Moreover is it exiting that such an established choreographer like Monnier continue to explore the boundaries of choreography and dance, and therefore not repeats herself, as unfortunately can be said of other older and established choreographers (like Theresa Kaersmaker, Wim Vandekeybus and Alain Platel). But Gustavia is not only pushing the formal boundaries for choreography ahead. With dark humour does it remind us to never stop resisting the prevailing images of women imposed upon us everyday.

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