

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Herman Sorgeloos

Re: Rosas*

by Carolyn Merritt

It's not often that an evening of contemporary dance feels like a rock concert, but [Rosas danst Rosas](#) did. By 6:40, the lobby of FringeArts was packed for the 7pm engagement of [Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker](#)'s seminal piece. This was only appropriate, given FringeArts' email to ticketholders 24 hours earlier, warning of the show's length, lack of intermission and sold-out status, and offering a tax-deductible donation receipt for tickets relinquished to the waiting list. The crowd spilled out the doors toward La Peg, the most recent addition to Philadelphia's newfound love affair with beer gardens. Members of the waiting list loitered around the ticket takers, if not scoping out scalpers, anxiously awaiting the head count. Inside, white lights projected the work's title onto the center of the black marley below, the audience buzzed, the music pulsed, and eventually the four dancers entered the space, forming a line upstage right, their backs to us.

Tribute

What to say about an experimental dance work still very much in demand 30 years after its creation? One so beloved as to have been paid homage by the likes of Beyoncé Knowles in her *Countdown* video.^[1] One learned and performed (in excerpt), then recorded and uploaded to De Keersmaeker's company site by 287 groups (and counting) from around the world, in response to her invitation (see [Re: Rosas!](#)).

I might begin—like Roslyn Sulcas—with the lava-like pace and buildup of the opening section, so full of repetition, unison and stillness that the moments of canon, counterpoint and the differences that inevitably emerge among four individuals are like shots in the dark: *[A]fter a long motionless moment, the women topple backward to the floor. There they begin a slow, synchronized rolling sequence, occasionally raising themselves onto elbows, putting faces in hands, or lifting heads alertly as if they've just heard something. There are long moments of inertia and silence; then the rolling begins again. The women look sleepy, trancelike. Slowly we realize that there's no point waiting for anything else to happen: this is it.*^[2]

Or I might open in quick PR blurb fashion—as on a website summary—highlighting the work’s structure, its pedestrian gestures, the brilliant tension that evolves between mechanization and emotion: *Rosas danst Rosas consists of four dancers in rapport with one another and five chapters full of intense physical energy. The drive in this body machine is tempered by a series of ‘very familiar, everyday movements’: the abstraction then changes into a series of small, concrete emotional narratives which the spectator recognises and is moved by.*^[3]

Then again, the second section is undoubtedly the most famous—the unison, pedestrian gestures lending themselves quite nicely to interpretive musing and admiration, as Sulcas (again) demonstrates: *The contrast between the quotidian gestures (I’m bored, I’m despairing, I’m flirting, I’m cool, I’m angry) and their relentless repetition is extraordinarily compelling.*^[4]

Or I might go straight to the work’s significance, although any search for meaning is surely confounded by De Keersmaeker’s brilliant dissimulation of meaning itself. And this is confounded in turn by the “realness” of the dancers’ exertion, as Luke Jennings marvels: *Most choreography is a conscious uniting of movement and meaning, but De Keersmaeker succeeds in casting doubt over the whole process, and it’s the resulting tension that holds you in your seat. You realise that you can’t trust your own reactions; that nothing can be taken at face value. At the same time the Rosas performers, in a kind of triple bluff, are busy assuring you of the authenticity of what you’re watching by parading their fatigue, their sweat and all the other byproducts of effort that dancers usually try to conceal.*^[5]

The Influence of Ecstasy

What to add? Perhaps that *Rosas danst Rosas* heightens the senses, moving us beyond mere visual perception to something closer to shared experience. This requires work, on the part of audience and dancers alike. One of the dancers remarked in the post-show Q&A that they have to hold back, to deliberately pace themselves in the slow, silent first section. Agonizing as this may be, the journey won’t happen otherwise. Another expressed the joy of sensing the audience lean in, listen and watch acutely, “Come closer.” I’m not sure there is a better description of good performance. *Rosas* is a trial of endurance, sure, but like any great challenge with substance at its core, it rewards: you emerge changed.

All of this speaks to the singularity of live performance, to the porousness of things—us included—to the residue left behind by everything that touches us, physically and otherwise.^[6]

Appropriation in the Age of Open Source

If the maxim “great artists steal” sounds at once blasé and naive, it is because the idea is too old and the examples far too many.^[7] Yet the desire to claim ownership, to protect one’s creative output is so compelling. And if untangling the distinction between influence and borrowing/ appropriation/theft wasn’t a thorny enough business, it’s worth noting that the decorative-magnet adage disturbs fewer sensibilities when credited to Picasso than to Beyoncé. Perceived genius comes with privileges. Whether this distinction—between the artistic credentials, financial wherewithal, and corporate status of the thief vs. the sampler—is legitimate hardly matters. Repercussions are likely negligible for billion dollar pop stars and fast food chains.^[8] One wonders, of course, how Beyoncé’s lawyers define copyright infringement of her product.

That De Keersmaeker took the high road^[9] when her work was sampled by the pop star known as Queen Bey is unsurprising given the Goliath she would face in a legal standoff. More interesting to me is her subsequent release of a lengthy excerpt of the choreography. Her open invitation for anyone to learn the chair section and share the performance on the company website promises: “...it becomes your dance.”^[10]

Considering the Urn

When the bow lights came up, the packed theater erupted. The audience hooted and hollered and applauded the dancers back on for an encore bow. The Q&A drew a healthy crowd too, and it could have gone on longer than it did. None of this is necessarily the norm at contemporary dance concerts. So the skeptic in me couldn't help but wonder how many found their way to the show by way of Beyoncé, or FringeArts' unabashed use of the scandal to promote the show.^[11] (Though Rosas General Director Kees Eijrond promptly squashed discussion of the Beyoncé affair when the question arose, insisting that there is no lawsuit and that he didn't want to talk about it.)

Whatever we think of Beyoncé, we can thank her—for securing each of us the right to dance our own *Rosas danst Rosas*, yes, but also for exposing the paucity of the copy. In her breezy homage, she reveals the depth of the original, which lives now in the company's replication, danced to life by modern day dervishes in Henley shirts and bowling shoes. Their labored breath feeds the space. Their whirling, unrelenting permutations compel our attention, our presence. Their exhaustion, their ecstasy—also ours. Therein lies the aura of the real thing.

**The title and subsequent subtitles refer to other works and events. "Re: Rosas" is the title of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's open invitation to learn a section of Rosas danst Rosas, record the performance, and upload the recording to her company website. "Tribute" plays on Beyoncé Knowles' statement that she was "paying tribute" to several sources in her Countdown video, including Rosas danst Rosas (<http://www.interaksyon.com/entertainment/beyonce-sued-for-plagiarism-admits-inspired-belgian-dance-moves/>), by quoting previously published reviews of the work. "The Influence of Ecstasy" is a reordering of the title words of "The Ecstasy of Influence," Jonathan Lethem's consummate essay on plagiarism—the essay itself nearly entirely a collection of excerpts borrowed from other sources (and cited in a closing note) in a technique he attributes to influences including David Shields (<http://harpers.org/archive/2007/02/the-ecstasy-of-influence/>). "Appropriation in the Age of Open Source" nods to Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and "Considering the Urn" to Ai Weiwei's "Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn," in which he shatters the sanctity of the original.*

Rosas danst Rosas, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker/Rosas, FringeArts, October 4-5.

[1] Agence France-Presse, <http://www.interaksyon.com/entertainment/beyonce-sued-for-plagiarism-admits-inspired-belgian-dance-moves/>.

[2] Roslyn Sulcas, *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/15/arts/dance/reviving-de-keersmaekers-rosas-danst-rosas-dance-review.html?_r=0.

[3] Rosas Company Website, <http://www.rosas.be/en/production/rosas-danst-rosas>.

[4] Ibid 2.

[5] Luke Jennings, *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/sep/13/de-keersmaeker-rosas-sadlers-wells>.

[6] Inspired by KC Chun-Manning's *Residue* (choreographic research project, 2005).

[7] There is perhaps no beginning and end to this list. Jonathan Jones suggests as much in a recent *Guardian* piece, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/30/contemporary-art-isnt-original-marina-abramovic-row> that opens by outing Picasso's debt to Oscar Wilde ("talent borrows, genius steals"). Jonathan Lethem brilliantly employs remixing to examine the tension between originality and influence, <http://harpers.org/archive/2007/02/the-ecstasy-of-influence/>. Other recent discussions of influence, appropriation, remixing and more in the arts include, (but are certainly not limited to): Claudia LaRocco, *ArtForum*, <http://artforum.com/slant/id=45891>; Andy Horwitz, *Culturebot*, <http://www.culturebot.org/2011/10/11496/anne-teresa-de-keersmaeker-vs-beyonce/>; Public Square # 38, *thINKingDANCE*, <http://thinkingdance.net/articles/2014/05/11/P.S.-38-Copyright-and-Choreography>.

[8] Comedian Billy Eichner recently accused Burger King of stealing his "Billy on the Street" shtick, though Eichner himself was inspired by numerous forebears, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/eichner-from-billy-on-the-street-takes-on-burger-king-on-twitter-for-copying-his-comedy/>. Horwitz (Ibid 7) makes an impassioned argument in favor of copyrighting dance and performance.

[9] Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, quoted in La Rocco, *The Performance Club*, <http://theperformanceclub.org/2011/10/anne-teresa-de-keersmaeker-responds-to-beyonce-video/>.

[10] Re: Rosas, <http://www.rosasdanstrosas.be/en-home/>.

[11] “The original dance that inspired Beyoncé’s music video, ‘Countdown’” (front) and “Fun fact: Beyoncé drew heavily from Rosas danst Rosas for her ‘Countdown’ music video” (back), *FringeArts PR mailer*, September 2014.

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