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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

What the Body Does Not Remember

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What the Body Does Not Remember remains, nearly four decades after its premiere, a shock to the system—a work whose virtuoso chaos and razor-sharp design still feel more urgent than most things created yesterday. Wim Vandekeybus' debut detonated in 1987 like a choreographic thunderclap, and in this new casting and staging the piece continues to prove why it became a key work of European contemporary dance.

It is action distilled to its most perilous, exhilarating edge. The performance is built on a simple but merciless logic: extreme precision at extreme speed. Dancers hurtle through space, hurling and catching bodies and objects with a timing so unforgiving that the slightest lapse would mean real collision. Vandekeybus stages this risk not as spectacle for its own sake, but as a dramaturgical condition. We watch people repeatedly arriving at the brink—the instant before an accident, the breath before love crashes down, the split second in which a life could change—and then see them pulled back, re-routed, or pushed further. Every throw, jump, run and skid carries suspense; each successful catch feels like a tiny reprieve from catastrophe.

What makes the work endure is how it fuses this kinetic danger with playful, almost mischievous intelligence. The “virtuous chaos” is meticulously composed: patterns of pursuit and evasion, games of attack and defence, and rhythms of obedience and rebellion weave through the piece like invisible scoring. Dancers swap roles—hunter becomes hunted, aggressor becomes vulnerable, victim becomes clown—so that no position is fixed. The result is an ecosystem of bodies constantly negotiating, testing one another, daring each other to go one step further. The “played aggression” is never sadistic; it is closer to a pack of highly skilled creatures trying to find out what their bodies, and their relationships, can withstand.

The famous use of everyday objects—blocks, surfaces, trajectories that suggest concrete and asphalt more than cushioned studio floors—anchors the piece in a world recognisably physical and urban. Vandekeybus' choreography seems to arise from an intuition that contemporary life is full of micro-collisions and near-misses: trains caught at the last second, arguments that almost erupt into fights, desires that almost break through. The stage becomes a condensed version of that world, where the stakes are visibly raised: choices have immediate physical consequences, and forgetting—even for a moment—what the body knows can be fatal.

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In its “ImPulsTanz Classic” revival, What the Body Does Not Remember gains an additional layer: time. Seeing a new generation of dancers inhabit a piece created when Vandekeybus was just 24 underscores how profoundly it anticipated later trends in dance theatre—its hybrid of acrobatic risk, emotional tension and game-like structures. Yet the work does not feel like a museum piece. The speed, the danger, the sheer audacity of its physical propositions still jolt the audience into a kind of hyper-present: you find yourself leaning forward, breath held, as if your own nervous system were being drafted into the choreography.

Crucially, Vandekeybus never lets the virtuosity become empty display. Beneath the sprinting, sliding and flying, the piece keeps returning to fundamental questions: How do bodies respond when pushed to their limit? What kinds of trust are required to keep such a world from tearing itself apart? And how thin is the line between aggression as game and aggression as wound? It is in exploring these edges that What the Body Does Not Remember continues to matter. It shows, with thrilling clarity, that contemporary dance can be both physically uncompromising and emotionally acute—mapping the moment before impact so vividly that we are forced to feel how close we all live to that edge.

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