

Andros Zins-Browne
Second Life

Interview with Andros Zins-Browne
By Steven De Belder, November 2008

How did you come to combine the utopian ideas of two different generations?

The impulse behind my pieces is always socio-political, but when I started to think about this one, I found that was no longer a challenge. So I started looking for spaces where socio-political issues have a noticeable presence, and ended up with cruises, gated communities and Club Med. These things turned out to attract mainly older people looking for a highly regulated and enclosed life. Which is why these places appear very unreal, almost virtual. That took me to the online game 'Second Life', which is also a utopian space where anything political is entirely superfluous. It is after all literally boundless, and you can do anything you like there. Ultimately, even the notion of 'identity' is replaced by an avatar whose appearance and character you can adapt as you like. And that's how these two themes started merging into one another: the hyperreality of the one and the virtuality of the other. I wanted to make a piece with several elderly avatars, but that itself soon turned out to be an impossible utopia.

Was it such a difficult process, then?

The logistical side was extremely difficult. I looked for performers through adverts, workshops and so on. And when I had found the people it soon turned out that I would have to adapt my work tempo. Not only did these pensioners have incredibly full schedules, but the work itself was not simple either. Only two of them had sufficient stage experience, and although they all had experience of such physical practices as yoga, tai chi or gymnastics, teaching them to handle their body in a different way was a very slow process. As a dancer I am accustomed to letting different parts of my body function more or less independently of each other, but it is not a rapid process to unlearn habits that have been in your system for more than 70 years. After all, you can't just ask an 84-year-old lady to lie down on her back and move her hips rapidly up and down without some sort of run up – you need time to build up the confidence that will enable them to reach that point.



Why do the professional dancers and the elderly performers remain apart during the show?

Initially it wasn't even the intention for the dancers to be on stage with them, but the material I created with the dancers was sufficiently interesting to continue developing it. Apart from that, it would have taken me at least an extra year to make a full-length show with only the elderly performers. Of course, during the preliminary stages we often worked with the two groups together and learnt a lot from each other. But I didn't want to combine them on stage. When you see amateurs and professionals on stage together it soon starts looking like a humanist pamphlet – you watch above all in terms of diversity, humanness and delight. There's nothing wrong with that, of course, but I was looking for the specific physical potential of the older people, and I also wanted to accentuate a vocabulary of movement that is no longer entirely human but somewhere between natural and animated. They are not puppets with no will of their own, manipulated by a puppeteer, but there is a clear distinction between the moment of decision, control over oneself, and the execution of this scenario, just as one has to type in explicit instructions for every action in 'Second Life'.

There is not much sign of interaction between the performers, is there?

The performers' actions and movements are all related to an invisible screen or an 'experience machine', and interaction only takes place through the media on which they are focused. Groups of teenagers hanging around in a shopping centre are in most cases actually listening to their mp3 player or using their mobile. How much excitement and stimulation can you get without touching? How will it age, this generation that mainly interacts through media? I have fantasies about the old people's home where, instead of sitting staring blankly, everyone is linked up to virtual reality machines and is given new sensory opportunities.



So do you adopt a specific point of view in that regard?

What I really want to do is get to the bottom of this phenomenon and examine its physical aspect. There is no story or development in this piece that ultimately results in greater naturalness or a triumph over artificiality; it shows a horizontal landscape. Every utopia produces absurd results, and disappointment and failure are inherent to them, but all these promises also contain a huge amount of excitement and virtuosity. These utopias set so many things in motion and that continues to fascinate me.

Concept: Andros Zins-Browne

In collaboration with Agnieszka Dmochowska, Béatrice Balcou, Jaime Llopis

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Sound design: Peter Lenaerts

Costume: Ada Rajszyś

Lighting and technique: Luc Schaltin

Production: wpZimmer

Assistance: Femke Gyselincx

co-production: BUDA kunstencentrum (Kortrijk), PACT/Zollverein (Essen), kunstencentrum Vooruit (Gent), Kaaitheater (Brussel)

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