

## **LANGUAGE**

Bassano del Grappa, April 12<sup>th</sup> | closing conference Performing Gender

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**Theaterfestival Boulevard 's-Hertogenbosch | The Netherlands**

“Our Dutch contribution is about language. We want to share our experiences on the role of language. Dance is often considered as a perfect research object for the international context because of the lack of language. Dance: performance with no words. Working in the context of a European dance project, you soon realise that reality is different on this point.

I don't speak my native language now. And my English is translated into Italian simultaneously. Language and translation issues are very present. However, I don't want to talk about our Slovenian, Italian, Spanish, English or Dutch.

My colleague Heleen from DansBrabant will talk about language as an important tool in the artistic process and especially in the dialoguing role of the dramaturge. I want to start about the importance of language in communication with audiences.

In my city, 's-Hertogenbosch, in the South of the Netherlands, the training week was immersed in a major international festival, Theaterfestival Boulevard with 60 performances, 140.000 visitors. The week offered an abundance of meetings, approaches, conversations, workshops and performances. Throughout the whole program attention was paid to the theme of gender and first impressions and the audience was guided in thought, language and imagination around identity and in particular gender identity.

The dance makers had the opportunity to work with festival artists and to meet and work with audiences. A few times they were asked to talk about their work and themes in public, for instance in a talk show. It wasn't self-evident an easy job for them. Searching for words to describe artistic practices for involved people could be tough. Finding words to talk about dance with non-informed audiences is even more difficult. How can words stimulate reflection?

To practice these skills, it is informative to hear the audiences react. In the after talks, members of the audience reflected very articulate and personal to the presentations. Not only on topics like movement or rhythm, nor with judgments like 'nice' or 'interesting'. Like for example at Liz Aggiss' show. Liz is a fabulous female British performer in her sixties. A woman in the audience figured out: “Before coming to this performance I was afraid of getting older, and now I'm not so scared anymore”. Part of the audience nodded. This was also how they had felt.

It showed us how communal reflection can influence how we experience the work, and how we look back, how we preserve it in our minds. Words like these offer access to the memory of the experience.

At the end of the training week, the final sharing took place. There was a mixed audience of about 60 people: colleagues from dance, representatives of concerned organizations and

regular visitors of the festival. The dance makers showed themselves courageous and generous. The after talk with the audience was not an easy one. People found it hard to express impressions and associations. They asked questions about the work in progress and the research questions of the dance makers in a direct, sometimes even unpleasant, way. Questions that often could not be answered, because the work was still in progress. As if naming it would cause the fluidity to solidify.

We also had beautiful reactions to what was being shown. But from the point of view of the organizers, we wondered if we could have been sharing a bit more openly, by creating a space that was more safe for 'stuttering' for both parties. How to do this? Is there a 'recipe' for a good audience-conversation? What format, what questions can benefit an after talk of a work-in-progress? What kind of communication is helpful, and what doesn't work? We learned that it has to do with a better framing on forehand, a more articulate laying bare of the 'rules' of the conversation by the moderator and a solid preparation by the artists.

We learned this, for example, in our visit to the Leeds workshop week. Wieke Eringa, CEO and artistic director Yorkshire Dance, found a way to tackle the uncomfortable side of an after talk. She explained something about the project and then told the audience that the artists were not looking for feedback on the material, as it was not being developed further into a work, so: Don't talk about what you literally saw. She stated this quite firmly. She started then with the dancers who shared their experiences from the week. Then Wieke asked the audience about their gender experiences and the way they were thinking about it during the performance. It worked out very well. Questions about the quality of the performance itself (no performance, only a sharing) weren't raised.

To conclude, the project taught us about how the use of words and language alternates and creates responses, memories and expectations in the communication between audiences and artists."

### **Heleen Volman | DansBrabant Tilburg | The Netherlands**

"What I am going to tell is also about the power of words, or rather about the shift in power that the interaction between movement and language can bring. Usually, you capture something with words, but you can also set something in motion with it. We were able to witness this in the eight-day workshop at the end of October 2018 in Tilburg. In this workshop choreographer Roberta Racis collaborated with dramaturg Nina Aalders and the 10 dancers: Anna Heuer Hansen, Annemijn Rijk, Eleni Ploumi, Fernando Ger, Hannah Mahler, Konstantina Georgiadou, Lilly Bendl, Martina Gunkel, Nadine Wijshoff and Reinier van Harten.

If we define activism as "striving for or fighting for change," then the workshop of Roberta can be called an activist workshop. Nina as a dramaturge played an important role in this and the interaction between movement and language was a vital element as well. Roberta set the tone for activism with her approach. She gave her workshop the title "Love Rituals," and she gave each individual day its own love-related name. That was very inspiring and she chose her words wisely. When you call a 'turn-on-the-ass' a "love-rotation", something happens. Not only with the movement but also with the dancers

and the intention with which they approach the movement. Something shifts. Roberta's words inspired the dancers every day to not just carry out the movement technically, but to also look for its deeper quality and find oneself in it. With Roberta's approach, a group filled with warmth and confidence emerged in no time.

Turning and spinning were important elements in the workshop and in the movement material. For dramaturg Nina, who has a background in theater and performance art, it was a mind-blowing experience that on the first day everyone was already on the floor after ten minutes, that there was music and movement and that everyone, without the use of too many words, dived fully into the material. In the conversation we had later on, Nina said: 'People spoke with their bodies. They rotated circles on their buttocks. What could I contribute?' Later on she discovered that it is quite difficult for dancers in rehearsal to step out of the physical practice of jumping, turning, moving, creating force or speed and to reflect on what the movement causes to the viewer. She discovered there was a need for conversation.

From that moment on, she gave back words on what she saw happening and felt the freedom to appoint and associate, to pass on her observations, thoughts and feelings. What she discovered is that when she looks at dance and when she tries to capture in words what she sees, she immediately creates a much more flexible vocabulary than when she looks at theatre. So, seeing moving bodies influenced her language deeply. For Roberta and for the dancers it brought a 'wow-feeling'. The confirmation that what they had put in, was somehow visible for the audience. Words started to mingle up with dance, feeding the poetry of the process.

Parallel to the negotiation between individuals and the group that Roberta was looking for, a negotiation between words and movement arose. They created a new language together. A language in which the poetry of movement stimulates associations and poetry in words and the poetry that develops in these words in return feed the movement. A language that easily embraces the diversity of bodies and the personal relationship the dancers had with Roberta's material. During the presentation there were ten individuals on the stage, as well as a group, and together they showed us how you, as an individual with everything you are and carry, can find a place in a group. Society?

What I always feel and know, became so concrete and clear in the Performing Gender workshop with Roberta, Nina and the ten dancers that I can't help but open this door completely: If looking at dance can teach us to look at the world and at each other with a more poetic eye and makes our language less rigid, if looking at dance can so deeply influence the language we face the world with, then we would have to practice the exercise of interacting movement and language as often as possible and find ways to do this more and more, also with our audience to be able to fully embrace the complexity of who we are. Let's stutter... and weave our movements and findings together..."