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Dance: 'Foot soldier' is in a position of power

By Victor Swoboda, Special to The Gazette February 10, 2012

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Lisbeth Gruwez in Birth of Prey: seeking harmony in conflict.

Photograph by: Luc Depreteire

MONTREAL - The Flemish word “voet” translates into English as “foot,” so Voetvolk, the name of the Belgian contemporary dance group appearing in Montreal this month, means “foot people.” Dancers use their other limbs, of course, but “foot people” is a most charming way of speaking about those who dance.

A more accurate translation of Voetvolk, however, would be “infantry” or “foot soldiers.” The Voetvolk company motto, “Throw your body in the front line,” adds a further note of radical, committed action.

“Our performances are quite physical and demanding. It’s a kind of war zone, the podium as we see it,” explained Lisbeth Gruwez, the company’s choreographer, principal “foot person” and co-founder, in a telephone interview from her base in Antwerp.

In conversation, Gruwez is soft-spoken, even tender – an image far from the powerful, brashly independent female figures she has often embodied on stage for more than a decade. (Her contrasting onstage/offstage personalities recall Louise Lecavalier.)

In her Montreal solo, *Birth of Prey*, Gruwez interprets a hard-edged, nerve-racked woman who is at once stalker and prey. She alternates abruptly between relaxed and tense poses. Ultimately stalker and prey seek to find harmony, like a rider and horse.

“When they are together, it’s a power situation; they become one. And the power position changes when they stop.”

In a black body suit revealing her bare back to the waist, Gruwez performs to a rock beat played by percussionist Dave Schroyen and guitarist Maarten Van Cauwenbergh. (The latter co-founded Voetvolk with Gruwez in 2006.)

“Sometimes the music pushes me, and sometimes I push the musicians. So it’s a more subtle power relation. And then there’s the conflict in the character herself.”

Gruwez is a child of Belgium’s avant-garde, having figured in every major group that has made that country a major force in the European contemporary dance scene.

She began classical ballet studies as a child, but realizing that she would never be more than a second-cast ballerina, she turned to contemporary dance. In the late ’90s, she studied at P.A.R.T.S., the famous Brussels school directed by contemporary choreographer Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker (whose Rosas company, incidentally, returns to Montreal in late-May as part of the 2012 program announced recently by the Festival TransAmériques).

After a stint with *Ultima Vez*, Gruwez toured with Les Ballets C de la B, dancing in Montreal in 2003 in *Foi*, a work created by Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui.

Gruwez subsequently linked closely with her mentor, Jan Fabre, a choreographer whose iconoclastic and irreverent depictions of society’s hypocrisy and injustice have earned him the ire of Belgium’s conservatives.

“It’s true, he’s a very provoking artist who always hits the holy houses (churches). The right wing would rather see him disappear from our soil. But we have a saying: ‘Weeds never disappear.’ ”

In 2004, Fabre created *Quand l’uomo principate è una Donna*, a solo for Gruwez in which she slid nude for several minutes in a pool of olive oil. Last month, the video was included in the dance exhibit *Danser sa vie*, at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. The video has also become something of an erotic curiosity on the Internet.

Today, Gruwez considers the solo “like old skin, and something new has come out. But it was an important period for me.”

After the interview, she headed off to a local gallery where an exhibit was showing some of the hundreds of highly personal drawings that she makes before a performance. None were intended for public display, but their sale could help fund her company.

Birth of Prey is performed Feb. 23 to 25 at 8 p.m. at Usine C, 1345 Lalonde Ave. Tickets cost \$25.23 to \$32.29. Call 514-521-4493.

Montreal’s contemporary dance scene is mourning the loss of Ken Roy, a ubiquitous performer of the past quarter-century, who died of cancer on Jan. 28 at age 48. The Nova Scotian began with Le Groupe de la Place Royale and subsequently danced for many prominent Montreal choreographers.

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Lisbeth Gruwez in Birth of Prey: seeking harmony in conflict.

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