

By Victor Swoboda, Gazette dance critic January 11, 2013

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“People always want to put a name on what they see and it became quite political. But it was not the purpose at all,” Lisbeth Gruwez says.

Photograph by: Luc Depreitere , .

MONTREAL - Depending on the circumstances, someone on a rant can either repel or seduce. Uncle Henry ranting against big government and stabbing his finger at your dinner guests will have everyone bidding you an early good night.

But a ranting figure on a raised podium at a political rally can sometimes bring a citizenry to war. Probing into the relation between words and gestures in a rant was the starting point for *It’s Going to Get Worse and Worse and Worse, My Friend*, the latest solo by one of the most interesting dancers on the contemporary European dance scene, Lisbeth Gruwez.

Gruwez was initially intrigued by a rant that the maverick American actor and film director John Cassavetes made during a TV interview in 1978. Seated in a restaurant with actors from his movie *Opening Night*, Cassavetes — an ominous-looking man who played a satanist in *Rosemary’s Baby* — slowly begins ranting against Hollywood, his voice rising (“It’s a stupid town ... it’s lazy ... it’s corporate-owned”), his hands and arms slicing the air, his face contorting in derision.

“You can see how his body is involved with his words,” said Gruwez, 35, over the phone on the day last week when she and her long-time collaborator, musician Maarten Van Cauwenberghe, opened a tiny, rent-free office for their Belgian-based company, Voetvolk. “You can see how the rant is starting, how his body becomes more charged. For me, it was great how this transformation comes.”

With Van Cauwenberghe, Gruwez began working on a choreography that would show the power of body language when people speak. They looked at speeches by politicians Barack Obama, Winston Churchill and others. Gruwez gradually developed a gestural vocabulary for her solo but she needed an accompanying text. She found it among a friend’s vinyl collection of speeches, which included one by a well-known American televangelist noted equally for his righteous eloquence and his blubbing public confession of dalliances with prostitutes.

“The nicest voice and rant was Jimmy Swaggert’s. Not because of his political beliefs that we chose him, but because his timbre was good. We took only phrases that are universal like ‘We made advancement.’ They had nothing to do with the Bible or drugs, which was what his speech was about.”

A line from Swaggert’s speech also provided the title of the solo, which Gruwez originally wanted to call *Ranting of the Body* before Van Cauwenberghe objected as sounding “way too 1980s.”

Gruwez’s captivating solo, *Birth of Prey*, at Usine C last year showed a sensitive relation between her and her onstage musicians, guitarist Van Cauwenberghe and percussionist Dave Schroyen. Performers achieve such a close interplay only when they are all strong individuals (at one point, Gruwez was able to maintain the dramatic tension even when Van Cauwenberghe had to pause a moment to replace a broken guitar string).

The interplay is still closer in the latest solo in which Gruwez must react to recorded Swaggert phrases that Van Cauwenberghe plays at a slightly different rhythm at each performance.

“It was a hell of a job to get it together because he does it live,” Gruwez said. “Every night, he pushes the button and I have to be there. A kind of tango. We had many hours of rehearsal to get it right.”

As in a typical rant, Gruwez’s gestures during the solo take on an increasingly violent and agitated form. She seems to lose control of her body, as though gripped by the power of the words. Some observers in Europe, where the solo played widely in 2012, saw it as a warning against the rhetoric of charismatic dictators.

“People always want to put a name on what they see and it became quite political,” Gruwez said. “But it was not the purpose at all.”

Gruwez is fully aware, nevertheless, that works of art take on a life of their own once they reach the public. In Hungary, where a new right-wing president is in power, she felt that the audience thought her solo was very political.

“It’s not that I deny it, because the movements are taken from dictators. When a painter puts a painting on the wall, it’s only through the eyes of people that it starts to have a meaning. It’s also what people are living at the time that they look at it this way or another way.”

Having danced and worked earlier in her career with the big names of Belgium’s avant-garde — Wim Vandekeybus, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui Jan Fabre, Anna Teresa de Keersmaeker, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui — Gruwez has become an artistic force in her own right. Her international demand continues to grow beyond Europe and North America, with offers to perform in Singapore and Brazil. On the day of the interview, she received a request from Taiwan. She admitted that, at times, she had to pinch herself to believe in her success.

Perhaps a title change would be in order: It’s Going to Get Better and Better and Better, My Friend.

Lisbeth Gruwez/Voetvolk, Wednesday to Friday at 8 p.m. at Usine C, 1345 Lalonde Ave. Tickets: \$28, seniors \$26, under-30 \$22. Call 514-521-4493 or visit usine-c.com.

Correction: As I wrote in my recent 2013 dance preview column, The National Ballet of China comes to Montreal Feb. 21 to 24, on its first Canadian tour, but it will not be stopping at Ottawa’s National Arts Centre. The NBC’s only other Canadian stop is Vancouver.

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