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Dance: Lisbeth Gruwez's Ah Ha moment

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The Gazette

"Laugh, and the world laughs with you," wrote the poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox, a phrase that might serve as the underlying theme of Ah Ha, a new group piece by the agreeably provocative Belgian choreographer, Lisbeth Gruwez.

As a soloist in two works seen here in the past few years — Birth of Prey and It's Going to Get Worse and Worse and Worse, My Friend — Gruwez showed a rare mix of earnestness and quirkiness. In Ah Ha next week at Usine C, she and her four dancers show their laughter moves, how laughter shakes bodies and how people who laugh together often stay together.

Source

Investigating the mechanics of laughter in the studio was, shall we say, no laughing matter. Gruwez felt she needed some help. By chance, on holiday she met some yoga practitioners who told her about a "laughter yoga coach" in Vienna. After an exchange of emails, the yoga coach arrived at Brussels railway station for what turned into an amusing first encounter.

"I was on the up escalator and she was going down and we started to laugh," related Gruwez in an interview from Brussels. "At that instant, I knew it had to be her."

Working in the Brussels studio of Gruwez's friend Jan Fabre — another iconoclastic Belgian choreographer — the yoga coach put the group through their laughter paces.

"We started with superficial, stupid exercises — because they're so stupid and you do them in a group, genuine laughter comes. You fake it until you make it," related Gruwez. "It was so exciting, I asked her to work with us for a week. She gave us exercises so we could practise. We did them every day for three months, so laughter came more and more easy."

The dancers filmed each other so they could examine their movements.

"We saw that the movements are universal. Things come back — slapping, peeing in your pants, rolling on the floor, running away, hiding. We had a whole vocabulary that turned into a dance language."



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Gruwez insisted that they were not trying to be clowns or to make funny gestures.

“(The goal) was not what makes us laugh, but to discover how do we laugh, and how do we relate to each other when we laugh.”

Above all, Ah Ha deals with how laughter helps to overcome feelings of solitude. Hearing others laughing around you resonates in the soul more deeply than laughing alone. Gruwez’s small group of dancers found proof of that during their time together.

They were strangers when they came to audition, drawn by the work’s unusual premise and by the reputation of Gruwez’s company, Voetvolk. Groups of 15 to 20 people came to audition — musicians and actors and other non-dancers as well as outright amateurs. Many came from out of town and crashed for the night on mattresses on the floor of Gruwez’s studio. They cooked meals together. The social experience was so enjoyable that Gruwez wants to repeat the process for a future work.

She retained four candidates “who really wanted to do it and kept calling me” — Mercedes Dassy, Anne-Charlotte Bisoux, Vicente Arlandis Recuerda, Lucius Romeo-Fromm. Although some of them had no dance experience, each shows a distinct personality on stage, according to Gruwez. Laughter gives them a personal way of moving.

“(We) start the (choreography) with shaking because it’s the basic

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group becomes more and more one.

By definition, a performer’s laughter is fake.

“I never believe it when people do it on stage,” Gruwez admitted.

To avoid giving fake impressions, the group came upon what she considered a genius idea — performing laughter movements without the sound.

“That makes the movements very abstract, but at the same time, they tell much more.”

Without the laughing sound as a clue, the movements can be interpreted in ways unrelated to laughter at all.

“When people laugh without sound, they could be in a war zone or having an orgasm or be in pain or agony.”

To Gruwez’s mind, the show’s final scene — played in slow motion — has the ambiguous pain-in-ecstasy atmosphere seen in the faces of the religious paintings by the 16th century German painter, Matthias Grünewald most noted for the Isenheim Altarpiece.

Only the spare sounds of Gruwez’s long-time musical collaborator, Maarten Van Cauwenberghe, accompany the dancers.

Ah Ha has sparked some wide-ranging audience reactions, Gruwez said. In Germany, where the program notes neglected to speak about her intent, audiences broke out in laughter. In places where the notes give a bit of background to the work, people more readily understand that the work is a reflection of themselves.

Any form of laughter might do Belgium some good coming after Belgian police killed two suspected terrorists and arrested more than a dozen other suspects this month. Although no links were made between those arrests and the deadly terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo in Paris, Belgium’s arts community has mounted what Gruwez called a “big movement” to defend its freedom of expression. Its principal antagonist is not Islamic extremism, but the country’s right-wing

The Good Girl in an even darker, more daring role in the drama "Cake," in which she plays a drug-addicted woman in chronic physical and emotional pain. Source

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government, which has taken issue with some of the more provocative stunts staged by artists like Jan Fabre. Late last year, the government made a substantial cut in its arts support.

"Until now, (Belgium) was a good country as far as possibilities and subsidies for the arts. (Arts were) well supported. Now a big cut. For me and small companies, it's a disaster, but our budget is smaller so the percentage taken off is OK. But 10 per cent less for a big company is a lot. Young people with big companies could lose their jobs. New talent is a bit strangled and bigger companies like Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, Jan Faber and Wim Vandekeybus won't have the means to continue what they're doing."

The government explained the cuts as a result of economics, but for Gruwez, the right-wing government was simply trying to rein in its artists. The topic of her next work is fear.

Ah Ha, Jan. 28-30 at 8 p.m. in Usine C, 1345 Lalonde. Tickets, \$28-80-\$38.40. 514-521-4493 or www.usine-c.com

Dance note: Celebrating the 25th anniversary of his company, Montreal choreographer Sylvain Émard presents his 2013 work for seven male dancers, *Ce n'est pas la fin du monde*, at Agora de la Danse, 840 Cherrier St., Jan. 28-30 at 8 p.m. and Jan. 31 at 4 p.m. Tickets, \$28, students, \$20, seniors, \$22. Some of Émard's whimsy can be seen at his cool website, www.sylvainemard.com



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