**Falling backwards into the future**

This text is written amid the tumult – the storm, you could say – that is every creative process. That is especially true when making something together and in dialogue with thirteen dancers, not to mention in dialogue with an oeuvre that now comprises sixty performances. In dialogue, too, with an era that is itself turbulent, literally and figuratively. The tumultuous chaos of such a process is, however, one that is largely created intentionally. By consciously bringing together or creating tension between sources for movement that at first glance appear difficult to combine. To give some random examples: the roots of the blues and the language of Shakespeare, blues and beats, the fragile acoustics of the human voice – in this case, that of Meskerem Mees – and the layered tracks produced by master producer Jean-Marie Aerts. Then there’s the field of tension, as is always the case with De Keersmaeker, between pure form and meaning, between dance as a pure form (as visible music) and dance as an unspoken message, between a striving for a modernist-universalist timelessness (or supertemporality) and something that is very much of this era. Which is, of course, what dance always is: an integral part of its time.

**Walking towards catastrophe**

Let’s start at the beginning. This was supposed to an ABBA show – i.e. pop. This became a plunge into the roots of pop: the blues. In terms of the language of movement, too, De Keersmaeker retraces her footsteps to the beginning of movement: walking. The two – blues and walking – come together in ‘Walkin’ Blues’, written in 1930 by Son House, but perhaps best known from the blues legend Robert Johnson.

But first, the walking: a movement that is simultaneously totally mundane and metaphysical, according to the formula of De Keersmaeker herself: ‘the horizontal relocation of our verticality, the spine, our antenna between heaven and earth’. Let’s consider this basic movement for a moment: we stand still, then we shift our weight forward, and to avoid falling over we put a foot out, find a new temporary point of equilibrium, before again tilting our centre of gravity forwards. Then repeat, and again, and since then – around a hundred thousand years ago – we have never stopped. Thanks to this progress – which has been called that since the 19th century – we are where we are now: at a point of no return, rapidly heading towards catastrophe, into the storm. But I’m getting ahead of myself.   
  
The motion of walking takes us, step by step, back to what you could call our ‘own’ tempo, the rhythm to which people moved themselves a hundred thousand years ago, over steppes, tundra, mountain ranges, towns, frontiers, river beds and ring roads. It takes us back to one of the basic rhythms of our bodies: next to our heartbeat, respiration, and pace. The American essayist Rebecca Solnit wrote: ‘I suspect that the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles an hour. If this is so, then modern life is moving faster than the speed of thought, or thoughtfulness.’[[1]](#footnote-1)  The human mind thinks step by step, and everything that goes faster is therefore faster than we can think, or at any rate think thoughtfully.

Walking has its own music, a cadence of striding, skipping, sometimes halting or trotting metrical feet. It’s no coincidence that romantic poets composed their verse while walking.

**Raving to Shakespeare**

De Keersmaeker creates depth in her work by placing sources under tension; often sources that open up a historical perspective and allow the lines of time to run, far beyond the duration of the performance, back into our history. It means looking behind us and falling backwards into the future. In EXIT ABOVE she found that historic-rhythmic offbeat in one of her regular companions, the inexhaustible Shakespeare. Shakespeare is to poetry what Bach is to music: never entirely fathomable, a body of work that one never exhausts, and therefore a new invitation to interpretation for every era.

The advantage of having a body of work is that you begin to adopt various time frames. That of the performance – an evening – and that of all of your performances together, a lifetime of choreography, that together can take on the appearance of a meta-composition with a beginning, a middle and an end. Then performances begin to form counterpoints to each other: from the introverted ecstasy in Biber’s ‘Mystery Sonatas’ to live blues songs and beats that flirt with the affects of rave and dance. Performances transmit motives and meanings. For example, De Keersmaeker’s most recent major performance ended with the almost-screamed recitation of a text by Leonardo Da Vinci in which he describes how to paint a shipwreck in a storm in language that immediately evokes vibrant, grimly recognisable images of calamity and its aestheticisation. That storm in *Forêt* (2022) drifted across to EXIT ABOVE, in a variety of forms.

In the first place there is Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, which functions as the ‘iceberg’ in the performance – that which you can’t see as an observer, and don’t need to see, but simultaneously gives the performance a centre of gravity that is situated deep beneath the surface while also keeping that structure afloat. An invisible map that gives structure, relief and complexity to the zone that is the dancefloor.

*The Tempest* is one of the last works that Shakespeare wrote alone, in which the main character Prospero serves as a recognisable alter ego of Shakespeare as a playwright – a sorcerer who uses every theatrical trick in the book to put his plot together. *The Tempest* might also function as a showcase to demonstrate the mechanics of theatre. The directorial instruction ‘exit above’ suggests that characters might make a vertical exit with the aid of cranes – into thin air.

**The Tempest**  
The tale is slight, the background archetypical. Ten years before the piece begins, Prospero was the Duke of Milan. Instead of governing, he immersed himself in the arts, which in the early seventeenth century could refer simultaneously to art and science but also magic and alchemy. A classical fraternal struggle ensued: betrayed by his brother, he was forced to flee with his daughter Miranda, sailing by night on a decrepit sloop bearing only his hastily-gathered books. Prospero and Miranda washed up on an island in the Bermuda triangle, where Prospero enslaved a local (Caliban, a thin anagram of 'cannibal'), and freed the ghost Ariel who became his servant. Then, ten years later, the titular event begins: the tempest, a storm Prospero summons to smash his brother’s ship, which is coincidentally passing by, to smithereens – or so it appears, as Prospero is not only a sorcerer but also a master of theatrical special effects. The sailors are stranded on the island in separate groups. Throughout the piece, Prospero acts as director – or choreographer – who sets out the movement patterns of the castaways through magical manipulation (or directorial instructions) so that they ultimately end up together in a circle he has drawn. In the meantime, he sets up an elaborate plot, as befits a stage manager, with Ariel as his stagehand. There is a romantic subplot – his daughter falls in love with a prince – and forgiveness, reconciliation and a romantic union ensue. At the closing of his ‘spectacle’, Prospero lets Ariel go, tosses his magic books into the sea and breaks his staff. He renounces his magic while at the same time breaking the theatrical illusion: ‘these our actors, as I foretold you, were all spirits and / Are melted into air, into thin air.’

Afterwards, he addresses the audience directly to request that they liberate him too – Prospero, the actor, the writer, Shakespeare – by applauding (one attractive explanation of why we do indeed applaud a performance takes us back to pre-modern times, when we would ward off evil spirits, or representations of them, by imitating the sound of thunder with our hands; we imitate that which causes us fear and, in doing so, banish our fear. We depict the storm in order to vanquish it).

**What we leave behind**

The character of Prospero is of interest for a number of reasons: he embodies both the magic of art and the modern human’s will to control man and nature. Both what our era seems to need – art – and also why we currently find ourselves in a storm. He is the artists drawing a magic circle in the sand, creating a place – the theatre – that at its best can serve as a refuge, but also as a place for collective reflection, collective empathy (grieving, for example), for the exploration and evocation of complex affects that may be essential in our time if we are to move through the storm in a way that is worthy and human. Affects that may also help to temper the storm.

When you see the thirteen dancers move, you see purposeful purposelessness, pure pleasure that is not quite hedonism – it takes effort; dancing certainly, but watching also demands your attention. This ‘investment’ of so much talent, time, concentration and, indeed, money, in thirteen dancing bodies attuned to each other is not aimed so much at pleasure but hopes to have a healing effect. ‘Healing’ ultimately means making whole that which is broken – although De Keersmaeker does also always show the beauty of brokenness, of the shattered shards lying on the ground in beautiful patterns.

So Prospero is a circle-drawer, an artist. But he is also a scientist, a modern man, a manipulator of people and their environment, someone who controls nature and the elements (*The Tempest* actually starts with what we would now call ‘geo-engineering’: summoning a storm and therefore controlling the weather; some optimists of progress still hold that such examples of technological intervention in nature can pilot us safely through the storm. Others, however, see in these attempts a form of hubris that for centuries has brought the storm to us). Prospero is equally the prototype European colonist claiming to bring civilisation but who instead enslaves the native population, even though he renounces the latter. In the end he is the only one who is not free, defined by his attributes: the staff, his books.   
When, at the end of *The Tempest,* Prospero renounces his Art – magic, science, art – he does something that we may be inclined to think is something that we should also now do. In any case, doing what a crisis invites us to: thinking about what to take with you, what you have to change, and what you must discard by throwing it five fathoms deep into the sea.

But in the performance, all that – The Tempest, the story, the characters – situates itself under the surface, as a hidden score, as the underwater part of an iceberg. Hints rise to the surface in the lyrics by Meskerem Mees. The iconography of the characters in the art form a source for the physical rhetoric, poses and phrases that each dancer translates individually into their own body language. Some scenes are physically ‘told’, but here too the telling is not important; what is is how certain tensions between characters lead to relationships in movement, in the lack of space, in potentially contrasting physical qualities.

**Falling backwards into the future**

Alongside Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, a second storm rages in the performance, both smaller and larger. It was described by the German cultural philosopher Walter Benjamin in his short text ‘Angelus Novus’ (one of the 18 ‘Über den Begriff der Geschichte’ theses of 1940). Considering a Paul Klee painting, Benjamin describes an angel – the angel of history – that falls backwards with outstretched wings into the future, its face turned to paradise but not with the option of turning back, ‘because a storm blows from Paradise’– *ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her*. Where we see a chain of events – history – the angel sees a catastrophe that scatters the fragments, remnants of destruction and ruins before his feet. And then the phlegmatic closing sentence: ‘*Das, was wir den Fortschritt nennen, ist dieser Sturm*.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

That which we call progress is this storm.

The performance is a negotiation with this storm – with progress, with the storm in *The Tempest*, a negotiation also with the idea of catastrophe, with the idea that the storm is something that befalls us, and with the insight that we – people in the West particularly – *are* the storm.

What can dance mean against this ominous backdrop? That could be the principal question of the performance. So, to begin: retracing our footsteps, in the full awareness that it is impossible. Learning to take our first steps again.

As has been said, walking is an ongoing negotiation with instability. Instability as a stimulus to movement, by temporarily restoring stability. We move our centre of gravity in such a way that we start to fall, a fall that we break by putting our other leg forward, as a counterweight, and continuing that process of temporary equilibrium and its disruption. This leg and foot activity– footwork– is often the basic movement of folk dance, from Irish step dancing to flamenco to urbandancing. It is accelerated, kept stationary and in place, geometrically enlarged, synchronised in a group, syncopated. You can slow walking down – a slow walk – or speed it up, when it becomes running. BPM is everything – Beats Per Minute. From *andante* – literally, at walking pace – to the tempo of a *courante* – stride – in a Bach cello suite for example, or the scuffling of a breakdance shuffle.

As always, De Keersmaeker creates complexity out of simplicity. Or perhaps she allows those entropic forces that are always at the core of simple movements free rein in a controlled manner. Stillness always contains the dormant possibility of an explosive sprint; stillness becomes a step, the step becomes walking, walking becomes running, lines become circles, circles become spirals, spirals become ellipses, dancers orbit like planets with the constant possibility of becoming free radicals, falling out of orbit, commencing relationships, clustering, organising themselves into something resembling a counterproposition. A way in which to simultaneously mourn the storm, to stand up in revolt, yet joyfully.

**‘High water blues’**

What I have just described is one of the characteristic affects of blues music. Blues is folk art *par excellence*, a medium for storytelling, for expressing pain, in which the music is itself the healing (again, making whole) of what the lyrics refer to as broken. The recordings of historical blues artists give the impression that blues is a solitary art, but what we know about its original context suggests the opposite: collective, loud due to the many people in the background, hence the need to howl, to play the guitar hard, to stamp on a wooden stage to amplify the beat naturally. Both solitary and collective, it is not a medium for depression – dull, solitary, desperate – but for mourning: mourning focuses on recovery, on the future, and it is something you can do collectively.

The roots of the blues are in a musical-spiritual tradition that evolved during the structural violence - and the ensuing national trauma – of slavery. Blues played a role in the collective processing of trauma in the wake of historical disasters such as ‘The Great Mississippi Flood’, the devastating flooding of the Mississippi in 1927 (and also in 1916), in which almost a million people – many poor and black – lost their homes, families or lives. These catastrophes were sung of in blues songs such as ‘When The Levee Broke’, ‘High Water Blues’, ‘Backwater Blues’, ‘Mississippi Heavy Water Blues’ and many others. They form a collective archive - a record– of how individuals experienced these disasters collectively and overcame them; a tradition of ‘disaster songs’. It provides an example of how music - and by extension, art – helps us to survive catastrophes, not in a strictly physical sense, but spiritually and mentally: how we overcome a disaster, how we resurface, individually and collectively.

**Rays from another world**

Echoes from this blues archive are performed live acoustically by dancer guitarist Carlos Garbin and Meskerem Mees. This is the global architecture, the musical dramaturgy: live blues, the shared intimacy of live music, real acoustics – the sound source can be traced. And, in contrast, the heavy beats of Jean-Marie Aerts booming from speakers, *high on technology,* rousing and fiery. They elicit affects that bring to mind what the sadly deceased cultural critic Mark Fisher wrote on rave culture in his short essay, ‘Baroque Sunbursts’. He considers the political meaning of rave, and does so with the help of the great theoretician Frederic Jameson: ‘From time to time’, Frederic Jameson wrote, ‘like a diseased eyeball in which disturbing flashes of light are perceived or like those baroque sunbursts in which rays from another world suddenly break into this one, we are reminded that Utopia exists and that other systems, other spaces are still possible.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

Fisher, theoretician and raver, experienced those ‘flashes from another world’ during the illegal raves of the early nineties in the UK. Young people would dance through the night, between desperation and ecstasy. This was the short-circuiting of the system we now call neo-liberalism – Thatcher’s “there is no alternative” was danced into short-circuiting, making glimpses of an alternative, a utopia, visible.

How do you dance in a way that lets us remember that? The alternative, utopia.

Can you dance, as a group, in a way that the dance becomes a model itself – no, more an invitation – for collective self-organisation, simultaneously joyful and combative?

Wannes Gyselinck

15 April 2023

Translation: ISO Translation

1. Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, Verso, London, 2000, p.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Walter Benjamin, „Über den Begriff der Geschichte“, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1974. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mark Fisher, “Baroque Sunbursts”, *Rave: Rave and its Influence on Art and Culture*, ed. Nav Haq, Black Dog Publishing, London, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)