

Opera Ballet Vlaanderen Tempus Fugit / FUTUR PROCHE

An interview with Johan Inger and Jan Martens

Time and time again

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Opera Ballet Vlaanderen invited choreographers Johan Inger and Jan Martens for an exceptional double bill. *Tempus Fugit* and *FUTUR PROCHE* both have time as their theme, but it is hard to imagine a bigger contrast. Where Inger looks back, Martens takes an activist look forward.

Music has a special role in the programme. With Inger, pianist Albina Skvirskaya plays parts of an interpretation of Bach's *Partita for Violin no. 2*, while Martens deploys no less than six contemporary harpsichord pieces, played by Goska Isphording from the centre of the stage. Skvirskaya, on the other hand, plays a grand piano positioned just beyond the edge of the stage. *Tempus Fugit* is a moody, almost melancholic piece, in shades of deep red, purple and blue, while *FUTUR PROCHE* is 90 minutes of power play. Yet despite the radical differences between these two works in terms of ideas, execution and aesthetics, they go together very well. Certainly if you take the time to let the experience of both pieces settle in your soul, so to speak. We asked Johan Inger and Jan Martens how this remarkable programme came to be.

Inger: 'Opera Ballet Vlaanderen is working to change its course. With Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui as artistic director, it already embarked on a fundamental change, and this programme is a further step. Initially, the idea was that I would do *Peer Gynt*, which is a very theatrical work and which would reflect my personal development as a dancer. But the new artistic director Jan Vandenhouwe and the ballet manager Stephan Laks proposed doing *Tempus Fugit* instead, also with a view to the live music. The piece is ten years old, and I reworked certain parts of it, especially the chaconne, which is the middle part. I wanted to intensify the relationship with the music and added a large circle as a symbolic representation of life, of how time passes by, and how we experience that. It's about the fleeting moments of intimacy, about love and loss, which you remember and which you try to hold on to. Bach wrote the chaconne just after his wife had died. It is a very powerful piece, which I experience as an exposé of emotion and memory. It's also about youth and old age, about looking after each other. It isn't a story, but is all about transient moments, like miniatures.'

Quote "Programmes with pieces that fit together too smoothly are dull." - Johan Ingers

Are you happy with the programme as a whole?

Inger: 'Programmes with pieces that fit together too smoothly are dull, predictable. The strength of double or triple bills is that there are real contrasts. And that certainly applies for this programme. The only issue might be the difference in terms of length. The programme could also divide the audience: people who love one piece might detest the other piece.'

But the audience will still see both pieces. Which in itself is quite valuable, I think.

Inger: 'It is a bold and courageous decision. It also really shows what the dancers and the company is capable of.'

Quote "Good enough doesn't exist, we need to go beyond that" - Jan Martens

FUTUR PROCHE is the second piece that Jan Martens makes with a very large group of dancers. While these were all freelancers in *Any attempt will end in crushed bodies and shattered bones*, now he has at his disposal a ballet company.

What's it like to work with such a renowned company?

Martens: 'I was very happy to overcome my prejudices regarding a ballet company while working with Opera Ballet Vlaanderen. It was not at all a homogenous group. Obviously Sidi Larbi already brought a lot of change. I was truly surprised to find how open the dancers are, how willing to take risks and to truly give themselves, and how respectful they were towards me as well, even though I don't work in the classic idiom. Working with a large group also means working less with individuals, the focus is immediately on the company as a whole. For *Dog Days* I had deliberately chosen to work with eight dancers, because that seems to me to be the maximum number of dancers an audience can get acquainted with. Of course I try to preserve that with a group of seventeen dancers or more, but in fact it's not possible. So then you need to have an overarching theme, a structure, things that have been settled beforehand, rather than working with things that emerge from the process of working with each dancer individually. You need to have reached a further stage conceptually by the time you enter the studio. *Any attempt* is about protest and determination. FUTUR PROCHE is about changing the future. A forgotten instrument, the harpsichord, is reinvented, which symbolises how humanity needs to reinvent itself.'

What's your approach?

Martens: 'I like doing things the other way round. For *Any attempt* I created a ballet company that wasn't a ballet company, and for FUTUR PROCHE I try instead to amplify the diversity of the group, making a ballet company look like a bunch of freelancers. It's very much a matter of listening closely to all the individuals, respecting what they are proud of and at the same time forcing them to do things they aren't used to doing. That's when the diversity of the group really helps. The fact that children are among the performers means that there is care on the dance floor, that everyone is mindful of them. It also deflates any kind of diva behaviour, immediately. But a diverse group, where there is no basic uniformity, also really stimulates each dancer's personal quest. Everyone understands that we need to work towards some kind of uniformity. Good enough doesn't exist, we need to go beyond that.'

Part of the dance disappears behind the huge bench at the centre of the stage. Why do you do that?

Martens: 'I wanted to put something very massive at the centre, something no one can deny. Right now, we are denying the direction we're headed in. The elephant in the room is always forced to the side. I wanted to have something that stands in the way and cannot be denied, such as climate change.'

The opening scene stands out for the gentle quality of the dancers, in contrast to the sometimes rather shrill music.

Martens: 'I wanted there to be a gentle, softly despairing quality, while the dancers translate the music as literally as possible at the same time. The opening of FUTUR PROCHE is actually a follow-up to the finale of *Any attempt*. That piece ends with a climax, everyone together, full of hope. FUTUR PROCHE contains more ambiguity, divisions, emptiness. It's a kind of dying process, to then arise anew.'

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