

In an interview with Chiara Pirri for the opening of the show *Rule of Three*, the Belgian choreographer and performer Jan Martens explains his reference to the number three: there are three dancers and three key elements of performance (movement/music/light), and three protagonists or events which go to make a story more effective.

I believe that Martens succeeds in gradually incorporating the fourth element, the spectator, the one without whom, in the end, the performance would be meaningless.

Without walking out, we had no choice but to face the challenge, each of us at our own pace, kept in check, hypnotized, fearful, exhausted and ultimately stripped bare by *Rule of Three*. So, disarmed and weary, we returned home feeling as if we ourselves had just had an intensive workout session.

As the audience members enter, they are given earplugs, suggesting the power of what they are about to hear. The earplugs are needed not only for comfortable listening to the amazing live punk-noise/hip hop/avant jazz performance of the drummer NAH, but also in order to attune all the senses, gradually getting in trim for the performance. Jan Fedinger's lighting design is perfectly in sync with the insistent rhythm and the unexpected pauses, while the three bodies on stage begin their incessant, distance-eating pace.

There are two men and one woman, wearing 1980s style acetate sportswear in three primary colours. They have young, toned, shapely bodies. And they each move to the music's tempo, but following their individual pattern of steps. From the start, Martens initiates a treadmill dynamic, so that the bodies and the music can not and will not ever stop. But this perpetual motion is subject to variations, the length of brief cycles, like television attention spans. Each section needs to be just long enough to astonish, but short enough to avoid fatigue. This subtle balance gives the magic touch to this self-regenerating machine.

If, as Martens has said, the idea is to express on stage, through these various passages, the modern habit of mind, tossed continually back and forth from one topic to another, stimulated by the Internet and the media, the overall structure of the performance accustoms itself to the repeated obsessive movements, dazzling in their unchanging tempo. It gives the impression that the proprioceptive capabilities of the three bodies have been honed through resistance to the infinite. They remain in view while moving like a Newton's cradle, and you realize that even after 40 revolutions they somehow lose none of their focus, their fire or clarity. There is in fact a kind of contradiction here. As if offering the message that our minds, in the modern world, are under great strain, can lose depth/concentration/awareness, like these bodies passing from one sequence of movements to another, with no break, and with no real awareness of what this change implies. So it is true that the more their bodies resist this continuous change, the greater is their psychological clarity. To the spectator, these bodies seem to demonstrate that, as in ancient Eastern practices, they may only be stretched to the limit of resistance and repetition if they retain a very deep, mental self-awareness.

What appears on stage is, in a way, a reflection of what is asked of the spectator: concentration, firstly with the mind wandering, as when beginning a meditation exercise, then settling into contemplation of the movement: marked

by changes of direction, changes of motion and music, changes of emotion. And resisting. But the only way to resist is to go deeper: seeking one's own meaning, abandoning oneself to the motion, admiring the beauty of every gesture. In fact, fighting the very dizziness which overwhelms us, finding a path through the exercise of consciousness. And the things we see before us now are real. They are not on a screen, they are alive and sweaty. Very much so.

The jewel of the performance, along with the musician NAH, is most decidedly the dancer Courtney May Robertson, perfection in a yellow jumpsuit (perhaps a homage to Black Mamba). This other-worldly performer can only be a muse to Martens. She is a woman in miniature, perfectly suited with her ethereal complexion and enigmatic, provocative expressiveness. Her face, with its childish smile, is puzzling because it belongs to this tiny, energetic perfectionist's body. She is the pivot around which the machine on stage revolves, finally being overturned by a rousing solo of expressive, dynamic power. At that moment we become aware of the emotive range we are experiencing, reaching pure terror, all the more because it is so unexpected. The charisma of this performer is both strange and yet recognizable, and leaves us dumbfounded because in a way, we acknowledge it is so dreadfully familiar. Then comes a point when we are startled as the crescendo reaches its peak, and both movement and rhythm stop.

There remains a scarcely audible white noise, over which we hear the laboured breathing of the three dancers. These body-shaped mechanisms are defused, and remain three people.

We may not have been aware that they could be like us, but Martens explains it to us. And he makes them strip completely, while they drink from plastic bottles and try to slow their breathing down, and wipe away the sweat. It's like an X-ray of the brain, these bodies are our minds: they are exhausted, wet with sweat, they have finished their task and silence fills them. Almost surgically, each seeks the other without desire, only for love of contact. Contact between real bodies, damp, reddened where they touch, dirtied by the surfaces on which they rest. Once again, uncompromising time forces the audience to contend with this final, exhausting phase. Someone rises and leaves, others try to applaud, in order to bring to an end this imposed exercise, but the bodies calmly hold their prescribed poses. Finally, after once more donning their clothing, they accept the well-deserved applause.

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