

The Early Work of Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker

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As she celebrated over thirty years of making and performing dances with her company Rosas, Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker reflected on her choreographic process at the 2014 Lincoln Center Festival through a weeklong series of events that was highlighted by performances of her early works created from 1982 to 1987. Wanting to know more about what fueled this artist's meteoric rise in the modern dance world, I sat down with her for a one-to-one interview.

De Keersmaecker is an interesting blend of traditionalist and iconoclast. Through rigorous exploration of classical music forms as well as geometric structures, she seeks to astonish her audiences with opportunities for wondering and questioning. Her movement vocabulary, which often incorporates human gesture, naturally lends itself to emotional interpretation. Though De Keersmaecker does not seek to convey a dramatic narrative or make an emotional statement, she does not negate its possibility. As she put it to me, she is aiming to create "a collective experience where people recognize themselves." For De Keersmaecker, that is part of the magic of human bodies performing live dance. It is also the power of her choreography, which provides the structure and space to have that experience of recognizing oneself. But you have to work at it!

Rosas opened the season with *Fase*, a nod to minimalism, and an inspired, complex response to the music of Steve Reich. The piece, which premiered in Brussels in 1982, consists of four sections, beginning with a duet entitled "Piano Phase." Two female dancers (one of them De Keersmaecker), wearing light grey, swishy dresses, white socks, and white, lace-up shoes, stand in profile upstage. A pendular arm swing initiates simple, repetitive

movement sequences which include foot pivots and half turns.

They repeat the movement phrases in unison until one of the dancers, in a subtle process, accelerates the speed of the movement so the two dancers are performing out of sync. Steve Reich calls this process "phase-shifting" and uses it in his music. Gradually the cycle completes itself and the dancers, synchronized again, perform the phrase in unison. This fascinating manipulation of timing and energy provides a visual and physical embodiment of the underlying musical structure.

At first the abstract movements appear mechanical and repetitive, but as "Piano Phase" develops, we see brief moments of stillness and suspension. A glance, a lean, a spiraling torso begin to infuse the repetition with a humanizing quality – a De Keersmaecker hallmark.

Lighting designer Remon Fromont creates a marvelous effect by lighting the dancers so that their shadows appear dancing on the white scrim behind them, thereby multiplying the cast. With another lighting cue, the dancers move farther downstage and lose their shadows. The lighting casts a warmer glow and contrasts the grey dresses with the golden skin tones, adding another humanizing element.

The constant phrase repetition continues – but with the variation of direction change. Instead of continually viewing the dancers in profile (with its sense of remove from the audience), we see them head on, moving directly downstage, then pivoting a half turn to move back upstage. An arm gesture punctuates the repetition. In a momentary break, the arms don't swing; instead they grab, hold, and shake with a crisp intensity. The dancers imperceptibly move back upstage rejoined by their dancing shadows and the cooler lighting. The section ends abruptly with a blackout.

The second section, "Come Out," danced to Reich's synthesized recordings of a spoken phrase, features the two dancers wearing slacks and button-down shirts and sitting on high stools. They perform a seated dance of

arm gestures peppered with some torso and head movements. At first the frequent change of direction accomplished by the dancers swiveling in partial turns on the stools provides the only variation in the repetitiveness of the sequence. The choreography draws interest to this changing directional relationship between the two dancers who are skewered to their seats.

Reich's repeated word phrase is distorted until the words are no longer distinguishable and the recording has transformed into industrial rhythmic sounds resembling an automated assembly line. The movements also take on a mechanized pace and feeling – occasionally contrasted by slow motion, stillness, or the attempt to stand.

The third section, "Violin Phase," had its beginnings in New York in 1981 when the twenty-year-old De Keersmaeker was attending New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. She explained to me that after the first year of attending the two-year program at Maurice Béjart's school, Mudra, she realized she was never going to become the kind of dancer (ballet or Graham) they were training her to be.

She wanted to choreograph and would need a different type of training experience. "I was exposed to the American avant garde at festivals in Europe. But I wanted to get closer to other approaches and develop my own vocabulary." She related how "Violin Phase" was a self-imposed choreography project. Already having Steve Reich's music with her when she arrived in New York, she decided to come up with a few movements she liked and organized them in time (to the music) and space. De Keersmaeker admitted, "I had admired American minimalism but it seemed like small bits of eternity." She continued, "There was no physical or emotional involvement; no dramatic rise," which felt unnatural to her.

De Keersmaeker performed the "Violin Phase" solo herself during this Lincoln Center engagement. (She actually performed in three of the four works presented at the festival.) Wearing the grey, swishy dress again,

she dances a repeated back-and-forth swivel step as she circumscribes the stage. The addition of a quirky knee-lift breaks the simple repetition, only for the dancer to return to the repetitive back-and-forth swivel step continuing the circular floor pattern. De Keersmaeker introduces a little hop, a sway into a hip, an arm circle, a *rond de jambe*, a moment of stillness, a floor slap, a spin, a carefree skirt hike – in a methodical process of accumulation. After each new movement addition she returns to the previous steps – now cutting diagonals across the circle.

Throughout the piece De Keersmaeker shows a sensuous enjoyment of the movement. The volume of the music intensifies and the dance movements seem to grow more rebellious. Suddenly the dancer looks upward, shaking her fists at the ceiling, and abruptly the section ends with a blackout.

For the final section, "Clapping Music," the two dancers once again wear pants and shirts and dance simple knee bending/arm swinging movement. In their stiff, white leather shoes, they rock up onto the toes and down/then kick a heel forward and back – keeping constant time to the clapping rhythms of Reich's composition. They repeat this foot pattern through the entire section.

The dancers begin in a rectangular pool of light upstage right, performing the section entirely in profile. Without appearing to be traveling through space, the dancers gradually dance the steps backward until they have traveled out of the rectangle of light, through the dimly lit stage, finally reaching two glowing, overhead lamps downstage left.

In *Fase* De Keersmaeker's choice of movement and her exploration of quality, timing, and spatial relationships generates endless possibilities within set limitations. What has always excited me about Steve Reich's music, and De Keersmaeker's interpretation is that because of the use of repetition and its simplicity, even the slightest new element or variation becomes a heightened event worthy of celebration. It brings awareness to the most subtle hues woven into the composition.

Dance critic Deborah Jowitt, composer Steve Reich, and choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker sat on the stage for a moderated post-performance discussion on opening night. It was quite powerful to see the teacher (Jowitt was De Keersmaecker's professor at NYU), the muse, and the student reminisce about the roots of and context surrounding *Fase*. Jowitt recounted how in 1980, while walking through campus, one of the dance students excitedly informed her that she had to see the piece Anne Teresa was showing in the gym. Jowitt chuckled as she added that back in the day, *anybody* could "show a piece" in the gym.

Steve Reich described the postmodern dance scene in the 1970s at the Judson Memorial Church, "We used to go to dance concerts where no one danced. Then we went to the after-party where everyone was dancing." When he finally saw *Fase* in 1998 he acknowledged the choreography as "emotionally accurate."

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Whereas *Fase* has the tone of a classic, *Rosas danst Rosas* feels like an all-female rock band. The latter was a collaboration with composers Thierry De Mey and Peter Vermeersch who composed the music in segments while the choreography was simultaneously created. It originally premiered in 1983 and brought international acclaim for De Keersmaecker and her dance ensemble, Rosas, which was formed the same year. The piece's title translates as "Rosas dancing Rosas" meaning, according to De Keersmaecker, "We were literally dancing about ourselves."

The dance reflects the youthful age and experience of the choreographer at that time. De Keersmaecker, other members of her company (some of whom have performed with her for over twenty years), and the choreography took the audience on the journey from the brash youthful energy of girls on the verge of womanhood to the self-assurance and acceptance that accompanies adulthood.

The movements used are pedestrian gestures and postures evoking youthful emotions

of angst, boredom, high energy, frustration. Sometimes the dancers perform with staccato purposeful intensity, at times with smooth languor, and at others with enervated resignation. Much of the opening section consists of movement on the floor in silence; De Keersmaecker spends the time varying the grouping of the dancers.

Finally, thirty minutes into the piece, electronic percussion begins. The dancers stand up and walk, one-by-one, over to a collection of chairs, organizing them across the stage into four groups with three chairs in each group. Each dancer sits on a chair within a separate group. The percussion changes and grows louder as the dancers perform a captivating, though simple, chair dance characterized by crossing legs, uncrossing them, running fingers through hair, slumping back in resignation, reaching out, and nodding at one another in acknowledgment. The movement sequence is then varied in a multitude of ways until the section ends with a blackout. The suggestion of emotion through the use of gestures is a signature characteristic of De Keersmaecker's choreography. And it works.

During the following section a single dancer repeats a movement in which she bares her shoulder, waits a few moments, and then replaces her shirt and covers up her naked shoulder – as if she is trying on a required feminine role. The other dancers eventually repeat this movement phrase, each revealing their own personal experience of it.

With a dramatic shift to a loud, driving, melodic, thriller-type musical theme, the dancing becomes more energetic with jumps and turns, moving through space. The music and movement take on the rhythm, passion, attack, and commitment of a tango as these girl/women transition to a more assured stage of themselves.

In 2013, to celebrate the thirty-year anniversary of *Rosas danst Rosas*, this choreographic work that put the company on the map, De Keersmaecker initiated "The fAB-ULEUS Rosas Remix Project" – the ultimate birthday gift to the dance as well as its audi-



Fase with Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker and Tale Dolven. (Photo: Stephanie Berger, Lincoln Center)

ence. In this ingenious move to mark the occasion, she launched a website in which she posted videos teaching the movements of the second section (the chair dance) so that anyone could learn and dance this iconic piece. Viewers were then invited to record themselves and upload their performances onto the website.

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Elena's Aria is a more sober look at stepping into adult shoes – literally, as the five women dance in visibly restrictive high heels and tight-fitted dresses. The ebullience of the earlier works is gone. De Keersmaecker made the deliberate choice not to dance to music. In-

stead, snippets of opera music are occasionally heard softly in the background. She introduces spoken texts describing longing and solitude that the dancers read onstage. These, along with some powerful film footage, color the tone of the piece.

The five dancers remain onstage through the entire one hour and fifty-minute piece, though much of the time they may be seated, watching the other dancers. They explore a movement motif where they hike up the tight skirts of their dresses and awkwardly bend over while pivoting around in their high heels. Then they retreat to the chairs – sprawled out, looking exhausted and de-

pressed. De Keersmaecker uses chairs (once again) to structure the space and to support the dancers – almost like a partner. This is apparent in an organically beautiful section where the women roll back and forth on the floor until the momentum tosses them up onto the chairs to continue the wave-like churning on higher planes.

The old black-and-white film clips of imploding buildings and bridges are followed by a coda. A black scrim descends; the women carry their chairs in front and sit down in a row across the stage. They perform the coda, consisting of highly suggestive gestures, in unison to a Mozart piano sonata. Afterward, the dancers stand, walk down the stage stairs into the audience, and file down the aisle to exit.

The unedited length of the piece proves to be its downfall.

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Alas, not all choreography is created equal. If *Elena's Aria* is one of her lesser ventures, perhaps it provided the space for De Keersmaecker to depart from her previous companion of minimalist music and start to explore a relationship with classical music and live musicians on stage, something we see in *Bartók/Mikrokosmos*. This was the first piece in which she used a male dancer and represented a monumental change in her artistic palette.

The first movement of *Bartók/Mikrokosmos*, set to Bartók's *Mikrokosmos, Seven Pieces for Two Pianos*, is a male/female duet that clearly explores the dynamics of a relationship. With two grand pianos set back to back across the rear of the bare stage, one male and one female dancer, Jakub Truszkowski and Johanne Saunier, enter. He wears black slacks, sweater, and black dress shoes; she wears a little black swishy dress and black ankle socks.

The dancers begin by each taking turns upstaging the other. This pedestrian action is developed until the movement becomes danced with spins, leaps, and jumps. They engage with each other, sometimes tenderly and trusting, sometimes playfully, sometimes seductively,

sometimes with cruel roughness. Between each new section of the music the dancers take a time-out onstage, like two boxers waiting for the next round to begin. The section ends as Saunier jumps up and Truszkowski catches her in an embrace.

The second section of the piece is undanced. The two pianists simply play the music, György Ligeti's *Monument* for two pianos. During a public discussion with De Keersmaecker and dance critic Anna Kisselgoff, the choreographer shared that they used to announce this to the audience to prepare them. When we spoke earlier, I asked what gave her the idea to integrate musicians into the choreography. She explained, "I like to watch the music and to hear dance. I like to watch musicians and I like to share the experience."

The third section of *Bartók/Mikrokosmos* has a string quartet seated upstage center playing Bartók's String Quartet No. 4, Sz. 91. De Keersmaecker stressed, "The most basic relationship between dance and music is where someone plays live music and people dance to it." In the newly released book, *A Choreographer's Score: Fase, Rosas danst Rosas, Elena's Aria, Bartók* by Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker and Bojana Cvejić, De Keersmaecker explains that she chose this piece of music because "I wanted to challenge my choreographic capacity with a piece of music that I considered a sophisticated and strong piece of musical writing." She found this Bartók quartet appealing because of its dissonant and dramatic qualities as well as the folkloric rhythms and tunes that begged to be danced.

In black skirts, tops, and black ankle boots, the four female dancers perform folksy hops, skips, and jumps moving over the floor with a girlish sense of impish delight. Much of the choreography is danced in unison, with the dance steps used to articulate rhythms, as is common in folk dance. The boots provide a percussive element, making the rhythms distinctly audible. The playful steps and the dancers' performance make the notion of kicking up your heels to some Bartók quite an inviting proposition.

De Keersmaecker has received numerous distinguished awards and honors, including a fifteen-year residency (1992-2007) at Le Théâtre de la Monnaie, the Belgian national opera house. When I inquired about the opportunities the residency afforded the company, she recounted, "We could undertake several things. First of all, we could make new pieces with live music. It gave me the opportunity to collaborate with very good musicians. Second, we not only wanted to make new pieces, but we built out the repertoire. That's when we first restaged pieces we had made before. And third, we started to work on education."

Transmission has been a driving objective for De Keersmaecker. In 1995 she established the Performing Arts Research and Training Studios (P.A.R.T.S.) in cooperation with Théâtre de la Monnaie. When I asked what the impetus was to start a school, De Keersmaecker replied, "It came because of a certain notion of responsibility toward the larger community. The school urges you to think beyond your own work. I try to bring together my experiences as a dancer, choreographer, and spectator to create a place where young dancers and choreographers can share an extremely intense experience of physical and theoretical training over a three-year period. They work together as a cohesive group of thirty people, having come from all over the world."

De Keersmaecker identifies strongly as a dancer and performs in many of her works. She is joined by dancers from her original company along with others who, often having

trained at P.A.R.T.S., share a long history with Rosas. One of the most telling statements De Keersmaecker offered with regard to her dancers was, "They have to have similar ideas about what dance can be. They are people who have a certain technical capability, but who really have given dance a place in their lives – who are interested in being involved in the searching process."

At the age of fifty-one, Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker received the Samuel H. Scripps American Dance Festival Award for lifetime achievement in 2011. And the list of honors goes on. She carries the mantle of these awards and this recognition with a genuine sense of responsibility toward future generations. For example, she expressed concern as to whether young people could afford Lincoln Center ticket prices to see Rosas.

This New York City season closed a three-year company tour of De Keersmaecker's seminal early works that presented a developmental arc from the first glimmer of genius, through turbulent struggles with identity and relationships encountered in one's twenties, to the embrace of the challenge of choreographing to modern classical music of the twentieth century. Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker has rendered her personal journey in strongly felt early repertory. These works reveal glimpses of the bountiful choreographic intelligence that would yet evolve. But she must return and share more of her oeuvre – including her choreographic intersections with Bach, Mozart, and all the wonderful music that sets her imagination on fire.