

Review of the piece *SOLO...?* by Pieter T'Jonck.

I saw 'The 3 duets' of the Spanish performer and choreographer Aitana Cordero during the 'Something Raw Festival 2008' and was quite intrigued by the almost masochistic way in which Cordero let herself be dragged, pushed and thrown about by three other performers. These actions were real enough. It was performed at such a close distance from the public that you could almost reach the performers. Because of that also, you noted with growing amazement that there were absolutely no tricks involved to make the action look worse than it was. It was a really painful, harsh treatment Cordero went through. Because of that, this became the kind of piece that needs no explanation at all. It was the intensity of the action itself that communicated a crazy desire to be loved and used and rejected all at once. For sure, it made me curious what Cordero would present in a solo.

A solo with a question, 'Solo...?' it became. At first, no violent explosions of energy are at hand in this work. It opens even in a rather ponderous way, with a text projected on the back wall of the space. It is a list of possible lists one could draw up, such as 'a list of things you are ashamed of', or 'a list of people that are really good friends' or 'a list of things you wanted to say to your former lover'. I'm improvising a bit, the actual text probably read differently, but on the whole you could certainly understand it as an attempt to make up a state of things, to sum up the good and bad points in ones life and/or former relationships.

Then Cordero enters the stage and in passing puts an end to the projection with the remote control. She now starts building up the empty stage. At least, that's what you think when she brings in electrical cables that she lays out on the floor in a more or less orderly manner. While she's busy at this, the first of a very long series of songs is to be heard. It is a croon sung by a woman about a romantic trip to Venice. Not before long however, you realize that the greater part of these croons have a rather bitter taste: they deal with lost loves, with solitude, with expectations betrayed. None of these songs seem to impress Cordero however. All the time she is busy, with bustling energy, bringing on stuff. Whenever she leaves the stage to get new items, she almost always takes a hazy, but concerned look over her shoulder as if to verify that the work is going on in the right way. But once she brings in other stuff than electrical cables such as brooms, a sweater, a snow shovel, shorts, you start to wonder what she is really up to, not in the least because she still seems to take no notice at all of the public, as if she was still but preparing the stage for a performance, i.e. for an expression of something. The confusion is getting even higher when again she brings in theatrical gear such as spotlights and data cables. But what do a stack of dustbins do here?

Suddenly, Cordero abruptly reveals that what she was up to until now was not a preparation for a performance, but the actual performance itself. She comes in with a box of clothes-pegs and in a sudden fit of anger she just throws them about. All that happened before in one second gacquiens a different meaning: she was representing a person who is collecting the remains of a former life, still wondering what to do about it and what can come next.

Nothing much really, judging by the destructive actions that now follow in ever more rapid order. A record player that is deliberately hauled on the floor, a keyboard of a Mac that is swayed around like a lasso to be studiously crashed on the floor. A voluminous book she tears whole chapters out of, stacks of paper she neatly lays out along one of the electrical cables that are still awaiting the apparatus that is never to show up in its original state. This action is exemplary of what is happening here. There is destruction, and a great deal of it, but it is executed in a careful, premeditated manner. Cordero brings on this impression with a very accurate sense of timing and intensity. Pure fits of aggression are always counterbalanced by a weird kind of rational premeditation. 'La vengeance, c'est un plat qui se mange froid' (Vengeance is a dish to be eaten cold).

'What do you get when you fall in love ? I will never fall in love again' is the song underscoring this resolution to put an end to things, not however without carefully studying them before proceeding to the domestic holocaust. (It is as in the song: you cannot for one minute believe the singer really never wants to fall in love again, but you can perfectly well understand that her grief is so huge that she is trying to ward it off with this promise to herself. This will never happen to me again! I'm on top of things again, or so I would like to think it to be!) Sometimes, Cordero goes into almost comical thoroughness in her systematic destruction of the past. At one moment, she establishes a keen line of bright orange plastic cups, only to shatter them with her feet afterwards. All except one, which she attacks in an almost loving way with a hammer. The same treatment is reserved for one speaker: studiously, she sits in front of it to take out one screw from it.

The longer the piece lasts, the less crooner music you get, the less old-fashioned the songs are. You even get 'This is not a love song' by Public Image Limited or 'I miss you, like the desert misses the rain' by Everything but the girl. By now, Cordero is ready to draw up her final list of plusses and minuses. She pushes all the scattered debris together to obtain a huge pile of rubbish, a heap of obsolete rubbish, ready to be set on fire as if it was a victory flame.

There is no victory to be had here, however. There is nothing but bitter disappointment, which comes out as a brutal denigration of whoever Cordero is breaking up with. At her own expense, probably. A song by Janis Joplin, the suicidal sixties diva, says it all. 'Don't you know you're nothing more than a one night stand' she howls. At this point Cordero rounds up things. At one side of the rubbish-heap, she draws a neat white line with tape. With some tissues, she cleans up the water that was spilt on the floor here and there.

After this, the performance starts to show some flaws. If until now it showed a merciless, but totally impeccable sequence of events, now it is clear that Cordero is struggling to put an end to this performance. She starts running around the totemic construction she made a few times, and then suddenly gets a fit of completely hysteric convulsions. It is the first moment you feel she is acting, making us believe something. Before this moment, the real action did the work, now however the action becomes metaphorical. After this however, Cordero finds back the original strength of the piece. On hands and feet, as if she was completely exhausted and maybe also a bit terrified, she approaches slowly, sneakily the pile of rubbish. There is no more music to be heard now. On reaching it, she cautiously puts aside objects and slowly disappears into the fragile construction. Again, this is a moment full of suspense, because the action is quite dangerous, unstable and full of sharp objects the construction is.

To my taste, the performance could have stopped here. This is a moment that sums up all paradoxes present in the songs and the actions. Cordero however felt the need to add a conclusion, a flicker of light in this very dark, but brilliant piece. Slowly but surely, she starts pushing aside objects from within the pile. Finally she ends sitting in the middle of a circle of broken, shattered objects, looking around in a bland way. Or should we simply say she is bewildered to a state of numbness? I think that this scene, however relevant it can be, is stretching the suspense of the piece beyond its limit. This suspense was up until now the result of the sheer fact that everything that happened, happened in real time and for real. At this point however, her action becomes a metaphor for someone trying to come to terms with an insupportable experience. But alas, any metaphor comes to stand for the reality of the event itself and as such obliterates the impact of it. It becomes theater. You can like that, but the specific quality of what came before was that it was on the thin line between theater and reality, but verging towards the latter.

Pieter T'Jonck