

Manual Focus

METTE INGVARTSEN / GREAT INVESTMENT

Timeless distortions



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Maybe 2003 was a simpler time. No one batted an eyelid as the great romantic film of the year saw 52-year-old Bill Murray star against a 17-year-old Scarlett Johanson in ‘Lost in Translation’. A second-year college kid hacked Harvard’s security network to copy student ID images for a new website called ‘Facemash’, where his mates could vote on who was ‘hot’ or ‘not’. And the US invaded Iraq. Two decades later, it seems 2003 refuses to fade away. Luckily, it’s not all bad. 2003 was also the year Mette Ingvartsen made her debut with ‘Manual Focus’ in Frankfurt, Germany, and this month the performance resurfaces at STUK in Belgium, with Kaya Kolodziejczyk stepping into Ingvartsen’s shoes alongside the original performers Manon Santkin and Kajsa Sandström.

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Before the audience has time to gather themselves, three nude female performers walk on stage, turn away from the audience, and put on simple latex masks of elderly white men, placed backwards on their heads. As the three figures with their backs turned gaze emptily towards us, we’re engrossed in an alluring visual paradox. In this fusion, an illusion is born—an archetypal androgynous or hermaphroditic figure takes shape before our eyes, destabilizing notions of the ‘known’. When ‘Manual Focus’ first premiered, conversations surrounding gender fluidity and queerness were already gaining momentum, yet the piece remains as relevant today as it was then. Despite decades passing, watching this performance now, there’s an unsettling sense that progress has not only stalled but is perhaps even regressed. The questions posed by the work feel as urgent and unresolved as ever.

The performance is short, but incredibly efficient in its stark and quiet simplicity. In the vein of non-dance and expanded choreography, what unfolds on stage defies traditional expectations of movement. The bodies keep their backs towards us, but the facemasks keep their motionless non-gaze. Rather than fluid or expressive gestures, the performers hold rigid, statue-like poses, they crawl backwards, jump, bend their arms and backs, or at times remain completely still. The stage is stripped down to its bare essentials—no props, no dramatic lighting, no music save for the sound of flesh rubbing against the floor as the performers shift positions, the occasional heavy breathing, and the muffled sounds of supressed nervous laughter from the audience.

The raw bodies and the pure corporeal effects, together with the unsettling emptiness behind the hollow-eyed masks are intensified through the restrictive minimalism of the staging and movements. In a sense, since the 'real' performers keep their back to us, the masks become our only interlocutor, the main agents of the work. The perspective of the performers remains unknown to us, as the masks' stares do not align with the true positions of their heads. The audience is drawn into an intense exchange of gazes, yet since the performers are oblivious to our gaze we sense a dizzying sense of disorientation.

'Manual Focus' creates intricate, silent dynamics between the performers' gazes and the audience

The typical verticality and fluid range of motions of an 'able body' disintegrates as the bodies are limited to backwards motions and are pressed to the ground by the forces of the gravity. At first, they appear as a single, surreal creature—six hands, three heads—a strange fusion of bodies. Gradually, they separate, becoming individuals, yet their movements and interactions remain equally odd and unpredictable: they touch each other with their 'buts', crawl one under another, forming ambiguous shapes. They evoke many things at the same time: headless beings, disabled bodies, queer forms. At one moment, as the bodies lie in a heap of still, disjointed limbs and the empty eyes of the ash-coloured latex heads stare back at us, I realize that the topical is still here. In 2024, I cannot avoid associations to the stream of horror-aesthetics filling our news feed: the lifeless bodies mutilated by the terrors of war.

In a 2005 interview with Mette Ingvartsen, interviewer Ivana Ivković notes a 'distinct feeling of joy' among the audience during the performance. Fast forward to 2024, and that same sense of lightness, punctuated by occasional laughter, still fills the theatre. Turning the 'other' into an 'abject'—both repulsive and fascinating, as described by Julia Kristeva—the creatures on stage take on a humorous, almost endearing quality, with an air of familiarity. They remain both relatable and alien, existing on the same plane as the audience yet distinctly separate.

The performance ends as it begins. The performers rise and remove their masks, before walking out of the room as if nothing happened. This re-enactment breathes new life into a work that feels as relevant today as in 2003. Deconstructing and de-stabilizing our automatized perceptions of (or focus on) the human body, 'Manual Focus' creates intricate, silent dynamics between the performers' gazes and the audience embedding the performance with a vibrant and unpredictable emotional texture. Its enduring brilliance lies in its simplicity and its capacity to provoke diverse interpretations. It might be from 2003, but

like Facebook or war in the Middle East, it's truly timeless.