

In other words

INGRID BERGER MYHRE

Semiotic pirouettes



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Gezien op 15 oktober 2024
STUK, Leuven

‘In other words’ , Ingrid Berger Myhre’s intelligent piece picks apart the fundamental mechanisms of language-creation and dance choreography. She reveals that our minds and bodies are not really worlds apart, regardless of the fact that Descartes’ concept of a strict separation between mind and matter, or *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, had a hold on our imagination for centuries. It’s a true gem not to be missed.

23 OKTOBER 2024

Over the course of the performance, the audience gradually realizes not only that the movements on the stage are connected to what is said simultaneously, but that the language in itself triggers imaginative movements in our minds. Words spark off choreography, and we find ourselves oscillating freely between the abstract realm of language and the embodied now of a body moving through space. With serene joyfulness, alongside her fellow co-performers Pablo Esbert Lilienfeld, Chloe Chignell and Thomas Bîrzan, Berger Myhre refreshes the contemporary dance stage with a simple but witty performance where words dance, and bodies articulate our imagination.

Let’s be real—it wasn’t exactly a walk in the park at first. Four dancers step forward to the edge of the stage and observe the audience. We’re not many, only a few rows deep, and the approach of the dancers creates an intimate atmosphere, as if the dancers are about to impart to us an anxiously kept secret. They are dressed casually, in shirts, sneakers, and pants, and they nonchalantly present themselves: they tell us their names and depict in broad strokes what they aim to do over the next hour. It’s all very meta at this point, and like the uncured Cartesian I am, I’m quite wary: self-conscious and self-referential intelligence is all well in theory, but in practice it’s a difficult act to land without sucking all the sap out of our bodily enthusiasm.

They kick off their exploration, quite literally, aiming to unveil the parallels between words and dance—or, rather to ‘translate’ between these two tongues

that are so foreign. After the initial spoken explanations, suddenly Esbert Lilienfeld cuts himself off mid-sentence, to finish his point through a dance sequence. Chignell chimes in with another phrase - with time we realise that they will mainly speak in verbs or transitional idioms like ‘as opposed to’, ‘on the contrary’ and so forth… - and again, interrupts his flow of thought to finish with a movement. The third dancer simply dances in silence.

By now, I must admit I am quite lost. In a (not completely unprecedented) bout of mid-piece panic, I start mentally drafting a message to my editor about how I don’t understand what’s going on and how I can’t possibly write about this without making a fool of myself. But like with any book or language, it takes a bit of patience to get to grips with the new world as it unveils before your eyes. After some minutes of blank confusion and mild panic, I am in. In other words, my mind joins in the dance of semiotic pirouettes to the rhythm of epistemological wordplays.

We’re engrossed in the embodied stream of consciousness happening before our eyes.

The next 45 minutes proceeds in a whirlpool of surreal images constructed in the bizarrely apt, yet utterly disjointed symbiosis of words and movements. The dancers jump and talk, they give voice to a walk, they run through space, they move their hands across time, they accelerate and slow down, and while our bodies are locked in a moment, we explore the whole space of our imagination. The repertoire is endless: *res cogitans* and *res extensa* are given free reign. ‘In other words’, ‘however’, ‘in particular’, ‘opposed to’, ‘and’, ‘generally speaking’ and so it goes. As they say, it’s all logic.

Yet the task of the translator is, as we know, not to equalise differences to the lowest common denominator but to find a true, original meaning in the untranslatable cracks and crevices. Moving from the spoken word to the body and back does not mean finding the gestures that perfectly corresponds to the word, but the movement that communicates itself. Sometimes their bodies are like calligraphy, and they write the words, sometimes their bodies become the letters and while positioned one behind another they form a body-sentence. In the back of the scene a wrinkled whitish paper hangs on, emphasizing that we are starting from tabula rasa, but in a collaborative way we are also co-creating the piece together with the performers. The bodies unfold oxymorons, to metaphors and other figurative speech.

Muffled chuckles are a constant companion throughout the performance. At times, some members of the audience can’t help themselves, and break out in laughter. We’re engrossed in the embodied stream of consciousness happening before our eyes. They push the research in the realm of the possible/impossible from particular to multitude; from macro to micro that fits in a palm of their hand. In the middle of the piece, they start ‘from the beginning’, but this time their names are different. In the realm of words, they can be anything, anytime, anywhere. Or the opposite. Esber Lilienfeld, at one point declares that ‘this didn’t happen’. Embodied on the stage, it become a ‘truth’. That’s the performative magic of words, of bodies, and of existing in a moment, in a world that might just be somewhere else.