

L’Écho

NACERA BELAZA

The fluctuating texture of water at night



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Together with lauded French actor Valérie Dréville, Nacera Belaza, the Algerian-born choreographer who has lived in France since early childhood, draws us in ‘L’Écho’ into a metaphysical twilight zone where incremental movement, non-vocal language and ambient sound invite us to ‘listen to images within’. (Nog te zien 24-25 oktober in DeSingel, Antwerpen)

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Sitting in the warm auditorium, our eyes straining to see beyond the darkness, we can barely just discern the outline of a figure. A white halo of hair and pale hands help pinpoint its extremities though we can’t fathom whether it’s arching backwards or bending forward, if it’s on its knees or standing. But we do notice that the forms shift, if almost imperceptibly: we see a vulture perched on a mountain ledge, a skateboarder gracefully gliding, arms outstretched in perilous balance. Seeing is difficult in the persistent penumbra, but our other senses are heightened. I can hear the sound of the sea, feet crunching on gravel, wind. I even fancy I can smell a faint fragrance of soap.

As the light changes, the central figure, Dréville, is absorbed back into the shadows, and other zones, empty ones, take our focus. We hear a rustle on one side of the stage and notice the movement of another figure, Belaza herself, swirling in and out of the pools of darkness. Each fleeting appearance creates a quiver of intrigue and reminds me of a recent midnight woodland walk to spot the ever-rarer fireflies: a both magical and melancholic experience.

‘L’Écho’, Belaza’s latest piece extends a body of work through which she has, since 1995 continued to deepen her rigorous use of unflinching, minimalistic movement that, in order to have resonance she claims, must emanate outward from the performers’ interior depths. For Belaza, the body serves to amplify and reverberate an inner language.

If my memory serves me right, the two figures never meet, touch, or speak. Belaza’s hypnotic rotations fill the still dark space like a whisk slowly stirring

molasses. Dréville's enigmatic form seems perpetually suspended, almost motionless.

On stage, smoke hovers and shapes the emptiness, conjuring still more images in our mind's eye.

From reedy whistles to taught strings, mournful moans, and birdsong, Marco Parenti's soundscape also helps us on this journey through our own dreamlike states. Some trigger distant memories: I recall waking up before dawn as a child and the feeling of irrepressible excitement about the approaching day. On stage, smoke hovers and shapes the emptiness, conjuring still more images in our mind's eye. It's like peering at the negative of an old photo, squinting to make out the picture.

Watching 'L'Écho' is a uniquely personal and intimate experience yet it remains elusive, like the fluctuating texture of water at night.

During the post-performance discussion, it emerged that the two women—whose collaboration had been suggested by theatre director Hortense Archambault—were delighted to have discovered a similar radicality in their approach to creation. Alongside her work with renowned artists such as Claude Régy and Antoine Vitez, Dréville has also collaborated with the likes of Romeo Castellucci and Jérôme Bel but insists her experience working on 'L'Écho' and entering Belaza's world had been the most deeply cleansing and rich, demanding unprecedented attention to the way movement mirrors inner states.

And yet, I found myself wondering why two eminent, seasoned artists—one of words and one of movement—have clearly chosen in 'L'Écho' to stay in the dark and hardly speak or move at all. Unlike the magic spell the performance seemed to cast, their collaboration came across as solemn, severe even, and their preoccupation with darkness suddenly a tad sad. I guess here that old cliché rings undeniably true: you can't see the light without the darkness.