

Dust

JUDITH DHONDT &
URTĖ GROBLYTĖ

The horror of love



Marina Srnka
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BUDA, Kortrijk, in the frame of the Almost Summer Festival

Sometimes what remains after a performance is not the memory of specific scenes or images, but a kind of lingering physical tension that refuses to settle back into language — one might say that the words turn to dust in your mouth. ‘Dust,’ the fruit of a collaboration between P.A.R.T.S. alumni Judith Dhondt and Urte Groblyte, premiered during the ‘Almost Summer Festival’ at BUDA Kortrijk. Despite the dry mouth, the performers work through this idiosyncratic love-horror of all-consuming desire with a voracious appetite. (NL: zie aparte tegel op de website)

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The curtains remain closed once the audience is seated. With the entire stage hidden behind the dark fabric, the performance begins with language. A text is projected on the curtain, almost like the intertitles of a silent film. Before encountering any bodies, we are offered fragments of a story: “this is just ‘an ordinary story’ of ‘a mouth’” it says. A mouth that gets “stuck” and “stumbles” as it dries up. A bodiless mouth is undeniably eerie, a hole without edges producing words without meaning. I think about Samuel Beckett’s ‘Not I’ – a 15-minute close zoom in on a stuttering and yelling mouth that floats in the darkness.

Horror movies

This mouth, an entity for itself, will keep returning through the performance’s three chapters, in the titles now projected on the back wall. The unsettling image is paired with a soundtrack by Luis Ramirez Muñoz that replicates the textures of old horror-films, including the screeching of violins. Even before the action really begins, the atmosphere is set, and we brace ourselves for what’s to come. Then the curtain falls. And the story begins.

A beam of yellow light cuts a path toward a second curtain at the back wall. There, a body lies motionless inside a circle, folded into itself like a rock or, perhaps, a dead dung beetle mounted shell down on a collector’s pin. Dimmed lights outline the stage scenography: a muted palette shifting between grey and cyan tones, a large dead tree trunk stretches across the stage horizontally in a single long, tortuous branch. The leafless trunk displays no signs of life (or so it seems). In the back curtain there is a small hole, a door of sorts. Beyond it lies an impenetrable black void. The dark absence seems to channel the space around it, and ultimately, the two performers will – abruptly – be sucked into this void at the end of the evening. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

The curled up body is not left alone for long. I’m only just beginning to get used to the logic of this world when I perceive two figures emerging, moving like weird, Boschian creatures, as if displaced from another realm of excessive forms and distorted anatomies. The two dancers are soon entangled in a choreography of touch and sweat, their bodies slowly merging into one as they roll across the floor, limbs extending and retracting, refusing any stable contour. I lose track of front and back. At times they resemble worms, or slugs, or creatures pulled from a different taxonomy altogether. One is partially covered, another wrapped in netted fabric that blends with skin and movement. We soon realise that in this aesthetic of synthesis, nothing is left pure and uncontaminated.

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From this unstable foundation, a choreography based on attachment emerges. Even when the two performers temporarily glide apart, they remain oriented toward one another, and are soon pulled back into contact. Fingertips meet hesitatingly before the bodies merge, carrying each other’s bodyweight, sitting on each other, folding into a shared mass. Watching them, I found myself wondering whether intimacy is ever really a meeting between two bodies, or whether it always contains the fantasy of losing yourself in the another. What appears as intimacy, here, is a continuous redistribution of agency across surfaces and proximities; attachment here is a fluctuating condition of embodiment, a negotiation that is never settled or stable. It is a sort of

horizontal movement vocabulary, based on floor-work, rolls, and embraces. All the while, they try to express words and sounds. Instead, there are grimaces, as the mouth is stuck in silent screams.

Explicit consummation

Chapter two is called *'Mouth bites its tongue'*. The title already suggests a turn inward, language folding back onto itself. Behind the curtain in the back, bodies reappear in a more amorphous configuration. It veers into a frantic physical exchange — breathing, pressing, rhythmic thrusting, gestures that oscillate between intimacy and aggression. The boundary between sensuality and violence is increasingly obscure. Sweat, breath, and sound accumulate until the bodies collapse on the floor. Still, the hands remain active, fingertips still searching, lingering on surfaces of skin.

Horror demarks the moment when the body becomes unstable under its own intensity.

Now the idea of consummation becomes explicit. There is biting, slurping, the voices invoke the metallic taste of a bloody devoured 'heart'. The heart becomes the object of extraction, of desire, of impossible preservation. 'I want all of you,' one voice exclaims. The desire is now all-consuming, and the elements of horror suggested by the soundtrack, intertitles, and décor, ultimately prove to be more than just an atmosphere. Horror is a physical reaction. In 'Dust,' it demarks the moment when the body becomes unstable under its own intensity. What is more horrifying than the slippiness of bodily boundaries themselves? The idea that you are maybe not alone in your body? What happens when the desire for intimacy becomes the desire to devour the other entirely?

In the final chapter, 'The heart falls and becomes dust' ,the light shifts rapidly though soft strobe effects, producing a storm-like atmosphere where shadows flicker in and out of recognition. The stage becomes a field of interruptions: flashes, partial bodies, fragments of movement collide. In this shifting light the tree with its long branch casts fractured silhouettes across the space. At moments it seems almost animated. The sense of place begins to dissolve. It is no longer clear whether the action takes place above ground or beneath it, in a theatre space or somewhere deeper, more subterranean — after all, that would be the natural place for such a process of decay.

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In the end, the bodies are absorbed into the black hole at the back wall. Bodies, minds, and the performance itself are drawn back toward the same point zero. The obsessive desire depicted here is a fatal love culminating in annihilation. Yet, as the stage darkens, there remains something inexplicable, a residue of a thought that escapes clear articulation. Like the dust that settles in every nook and cranny of our world, the feeling remains.