

MICHEL VANDEVELDE & fABULEUS

Paradise Now (1968-2018)

KAAI
THEATER

25/10 20:30 | KAAITHEATER

DANCE / PERFORMANCE | 80 MIN | IN DUTCH, FRENCH, AND ENGLISH

in English

July 1968. The legendary *Paradise Now* by The Living Theatre premieres in Avignon. The actors attempt to incite a revolution by putting the audience in a state of readiness. It is an ecstatic trip that is intended to lead to a new form of living together. Their revolution is not only political but also spiritual, with sources of inspiration such as the *I Ching*, Chassidism and Kabbala. The central focus is the relationship between the collective and the individual.

May 2018. Michiel Vandeveldel goes in search of traces of the legacy of May '68, along with a new generation of young performers. Will they open new perspectives on the future when they research half a century of history in a wild choreography of iconic images?

- Artist-in-residence Michiel Vandeveldel works as a choreographer and as a curator, and has presented almost all of his work at Kaaitheater. The main leitmotif in his productions is political and artistic activism. Last season, he curated *CITY:LAND* and *The Alternative Election Show*. This season, he is also presenting *Goldberg Variations* and *Human Landscapes 1 & 2*. *Paradise Now (1968-2018)* was first performed in Brussels in May 2018, was selected for the TheaterFestival 2019, and is now returning after a European tour.

fABULEUS is a unique production house for dance and theatre. It focuses mainly on helping talented young artists grow through interaction and collaboration with more experienced makers. fABULEUS provides a framework to help youngsters and young professionals develop themselves as actors, dancers or makers. Its pioneering role is also internationally acknowledged. The performances of fABULEUS reach diverse audiences, with a special focus on adolescents and children. fABULEUS is based at the Openbaar Entrepot voor de Kunsten (OPEK) and is officially recognized as one of Leuven's city theatre companies. As part of its Young Audience programme, it is also a cherished partner of STUK, in Leuven. In 2016 fABULEUS was awarded the Ultima for the Performing Arts, a culture prize awarded by the Flemish Community.

PARADISE NOW (1968-2018) AN APPOINTMENT WITH TIME

essay by Kristof Van Baarle.

*Tell me, child,
is your heart as heavy as
mine is, year after year
a pebble bank raised by the waves
of the sea all the way to the North,
every stone a dead soul
and this sky so grey,
so unremittingly grey
and so low
as no sky
I have ever seen before.*
— W.G. Sebald¹

This year, 2018, we 'celebrate' the 50th anniversary of 'May '68', the culmination point of a counterculture that wanted to liberate itself from the yoke and violence of the state, Christian morality and money. Such a celebration often takes the form of a recuperation or a mediagenic event. The real question, however, is what has actually happened in the past fifty years, and whether the potential of that period was fully realised. In *Paradise Now (1968-2018)*, Michiel Vandeveldel returns with those questions to the now legendary *Paradise Now* show of the American The Living Theater, which premiered at the Avignon Festival in 1968.

The Catwalk of History

The image of 1968, for which *Paradise Now* can be called emblematic, coincides with the urge and hope for change. According to Geert Buelens, who wrote the book *The Sixties*, it is precisely this hope that fundamentally differentiates this period from today. Many of the battlegrounds and political positions have remained the same, but hope has vanished.² Activist and media philosopher Franco 'Bifo' Berardi also sees our time as a time of despair. Berardi writes that we have lost our ability to seek and be sensitive to other possibilities in the present.³ It seems that, in these desperate times, we have lost our ability to think the future, our futurability to paraphrase the title of Berardi's book. The Living Theater's hope for change focused on young people, whom they regarded as still flexible enough to change their lives. Can they still

dream of another world today?

When we look at the history of the past fifty years, there is indeed little reason to hope that the future will be better. War after war, unsuccessful protest after unsuccessful protest, leader after leader succeed each other, while the entertainment industry keeps the public occupied: the disappointing thing about history is precisely that it repeats itself – first as tragedy, then as farce, as Marx already knew. And sometimes the farce is worse than the tragedy. The more recent movements that promised change, Occupy, Indignados, Syriza, Obama, ... turned out to be a disappointment or were openly thwarted.⁴ Faced with a violent history that keeps repeating itself and which we seem unable to get a grip on, a growing feeling emerges which documentary maker Adam Curtis describes as ‘*Oh dearism: it’s like living in the mind of a depressed hippie*’.⁵

In this time, which some describe as ‘posthistorical’, it seems as if we cannot do anything else but look stupefied at events that continue to succeed each other. Posthistory does not mean that history ceases to exist, but that human history has given way to an automated evolution, where power has fallen into the hands of complex systems and a few individuals. The Anthropocene also shows that we (definitely in the West) are inevitably guilty of destroying our own living environment. This does not only apply to the ecological crisis, but also to the current economic and political malaise. Remarkably, this is not consistent with the dominant feeling that we as citizens are not able to take responsibility. Berardi thus concludes that this is why we live in an age of impotence. But this is not the same as an age of impossibility.

Yet we can still decide to hang on to history, and not to let go and flow with the mainstream and wallow in nostalgia for something that never was, or reinvent hot water. The task then is to live radically in the present, to be temporal: loaded but not burdened by history. According to the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, ‘The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness’. The contemporary is that person ‘who perceives the dark ness of his time as something that concerns him, as something that never ceases to engage him’.⁶ In order to live in the present, to be with time in all its darkness, we have to take history with us.

For Agamben, fashion is a contemporary barrier between ‘not yet’ and ‘no longer’, much in the way that the models who present fashion are simultaneously in and not (yet) in fashion and present

clothes without wearing them. Fashion also has an interesting relation to history: certain periods can return, become *en vogue* again and be contemporary. The contemporary looks at history in a similar way: some aspects have not yet come into their full potential, and must be brought back to the present. Could May ‘68, and *Paradise Now* as the emblem of that time, be such an unfulfilled potential? And if so, how could we transport it to the present?

Perhaps the play is a valuable way to deal with history. Sometimes the farce is worse than the tragedy, but for Marx the farce was a step in the ‘blissful leaving behind’ of history. Not to then lead an unhistorical and therefore apolitical life, but to be no longer subject to a chronological logic of growth, to be no longer dragged into an uncontrollable stream, but rather to be able to study history and play with it (as in Kafka’s story about the horse Bucephalus, for whom the law becomes an object of study, and no longer a means of power). History repeats itself, first as a tragedy, then as a farce, and then, on stage: as a play. In our western saturated visual culture, iconic images circulate that belong to a virtually unconscious frame of reference, without us really knowing what these images are or what their concrete historical context is. A playful embodiment of history allows us to carry with us forms, images, expressions and emotions without being paralysed by it or being excluded from it as a spectator

The arche of anarchy

There is also that other way of re-appropriating the course of history: the revolution, the suspension of the course of things. We can therefore view the revolution of ‘68 as a caesura, a fault line in the history in which time seemed to stop – just think of the many strikes. In Greek, the word *arche* has a double meaning. It means both ‘start’, ‘origin’ and ‘order’, ‘command’. When we go back in history, looking for a perspective for the present, we may find a beginning that can keep on beginning, a command, an appeal that remains active. What is the appeal of ‘68 today, in view of the fact that Woodstock may have been transformed into Tomorrowland and individual development has become part of a post-Fordist labour regime in which we only become more ourselves only to then put that self at the service of profit and competition? The generation of ‘68 protested against an industrial, Fordist society, and built itself on a post-Fordist economy. How can we resist the current, more subtle, controlling power structures?

1968 was also the year of the murder of Martin Luther King (and Medgar Evers and Malcolm X

CREDITS

CHOREOGRAPHIE Michiel Vandevelde | **WITH** Zulaa Antheunis, Sarah Bekambo, Jarko Bosmans, Bavo Buys, Wara Chavarria, Judith Engelen, Abigail Gypens, Lore Mertens, Anton Rys, Margot Timmermans, Bo Van Meervenne, Esra Verboven, Aron Wouters | **COSTUME** Lila & John | **CHOREOGRAPHIQUE ASSISTANCE** Zoë Demoustier | **DRAMATURY** Kristof Van Baarle | **TECHNIQUE** Bregt Janssens | **HEAD OF PRODUCTION** Kathleen Vogelaers | **PRODUCTION** fABULEUS | **CO-PRODUCTION** STUK

before him), and in the run-up to that year, also the Vietnam War, the Cultural Revolution in China, the mass murder of alleged communists in Indonesia, the murder of Lumumba, the Franco-Algerian war ... Today the question is rather whether 'it' continued the same as before, after that fault line, after the caesura of '68. Or have reactionary and neoliberal tendencies gathered momentum in the emptiness of that rupture to push through their own agenda?

What remains of 1968 is an image. In *Paradise Now (1968-2018)*, the potential of a specific practice is explored, namely the performance of The Living Theater. *Paradise Now* consisted of several phases, influenced by Buddhism, Tantra and Kabbalah. These phases consisted of a critical performance on 'the dominant culture', which was then countered by an 'aesthetic assault', to culminate, finally, in a situation in which the status quo was meant to be broken. The goal was nothing less than a permanent revolution, a permanent breaking open of history, an anarchist life. The call for anarchy is that of an an-arche: a society without commands, without totalitarian systems of money and violence.

Now, the demand and the aspiration contained in the title, is the suspension of all possible commands. In '68, there was, according to The Living Theater, an urge to 'move a goal from the future of mankind to the present', yet now the detour via the past presents itself to express that urge again. If the present is a desperate time, and hope is absorbed in a self-exploiting dynamic of cruel optimism, then perhaps energy is what we need most. Energy against the depression, not to be productive, but to let history momentarily explode. To be together and to derive a potentiality from what presents itself as necessary. A centrifugal force to escape from the vicious circle.

Julien Beck and Judith Malina, the founders of The Living Theater, point to the importance of the group in the perpetuation of that (permanent) revolution: not only physically, in the performance, but also outside the theatre, as well as psychologically. The embodied group, the friendship, is necessary in the path to anarchy. When a collective body sets in motion, it becomes political; it creates a sense of possibility.⁷ Knowing that collective action has little political impact today, this potentiality does not take on the form of optimistic, hedonistic, joyful freedom. And yet, just like the playful embodiment of history in a post-historical era, collective movement is something we must continue to 'practice'. A kind of 'reverse' biopolitics, which in turn can lead to a 'reverse' psychopolitics. Protest, resistance, collective action and living in community are all practices that not simply 'exist', but that require practice. Fake it, 'til you make it. Pretending at least forces one to view the present as ambivalent – or in other words, it makes it possible to no longer regard the current condition as one without an alternative, but rather as one of many possibilities, an internally unstable construction. Pretending introduces a prefiguration of something that can occur.

A dark horizon

As the contemporary perceives the darkness of its time, the potentiality that emerges from collective action in a time of despair and impotence becomes a dark potentiality. For Berardi, the bridge between a physical movement and intellectual despair is friendship. Friendship is a model for a community, a way of being together, that is not based on any specific characteristics or identity. It is being together for the sake of being together, a sharing of the self. This friendship is characterized by intimacy. In an intimate friendship, the individual is there thanks to the collective and the collective thanks to the individual. It is the feeling that one of the performers of *Paradise Now* described as 'a loss of personality, only to rediscover it'.⁸ Intimacy is both a physical reality and something that takes place in one's thinking. The body is at the same time the most personal and the most foreign thing, as so many adolescents uncomfortably experience during puberty. A feeling that does not disappear with aging, but that becomes less acute. That unease, that ambivalence, is however something to cherish, because it is a figure for a 'we' that is based on a shared alienation, a shared non-knowing, a shared darkness from which we emerge and return to. Intimacy is a combination of loneliness and the feeling that this indivisibility is shared. Or as Agamben describes it so beautifully in *The Use of Bodies*:

'Being alone by oneself can be a figure of a new and happy intimacy. "Alone by oneself" can only mean: to touch, to be together beyond every relation. We are together and very close, but between us there is not an articulation or a relation that unites us. We are united to one another in the form of our being alone.'⁹

The feeling of impotence, of not belonging, of hopelessness, can be courageously embraced as the starting point for a radical rethinking of the world. For The Living Theater, the theatre can be a place of revolution. It does not have to be closed, as in '68, to become a place of meeting and discussion. Even in a performance, being together can take on the form of a dark intimacy, in which we catch a glimpse of an equally dark potential.

Just like The Living Theater's *Paradise Now* ended with a call for permanent revolution, a friendly, intimate collectivity is something that we will always have to keep working towards. Mutual support and collective drive are necessary, because the courage of despair is a heavy task. It requires an openness to the unknown: 'what escapes my grasp, what I cannot see, what I cannot imagine, what I cannot even conceive is the means of escape'.¹⁰

It is a gazing at the horizon, looking for possibilities. Perhaps we already feel the warmth of a rising sun without seeing it. Sometimes we reach those moments in which we are 'truly contemporary', in which the darkness reveals itself as a light and a highly individual sense of intimacy generates the deepest, unnameable connection. It is these fragments, flashes, that commit

us to keep running to be on time for an ‘appointment you cannot but miss’.¹¹

Footnotes

1. W.G. Sebald, *Naar de natuur* (tran. Ria van Hengel), De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam, 2006.
2. Geert Buelens, *De jaren zestig. Een cultuurgeschiedenis*, Ambo/Anthos, Amsterdam, 2018.
3. Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, *Futurability. The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*, Verso, Londen en New York, 2017.
4. Slavoj Žižek, *First as tragedy, then as farce*, Verso, Londen en New York, 2009.
5. Adam Curtis, *Oh Dearism*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8moePxHpvoK>.
6. Giorgio Agamben, ‘What is the Contemporary?’, in: *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays* (tran. D. Kishik en S. Pedatella), Zone Books, New York, 2009.
7. Erika Billeter, *Living Theatre, Paradise Now. Een reportage in woord en beeld*, Paul Brand Uitgeverij, Hilversum, 1969.
8. Ibid.
9. Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies* (tran. A. Kotsko), Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2016.
10. Berardi, *op. cit.*
11. Agamben, ‘What is the Contemporary?’, *op. cit.*

MORE YOUNGSTERS ON THE KAAITHEATER STAGE

Radouan Mriziga & fABULEUS 8.2

Radouan Mriziga finds inspiration in an old love: rap music. Along with seven young performers, he researched everything that makes rap unique: the rhythm, the flow, the statements and gestures, and its history from the grandmasters to Kendrick Lamar. They attempt to capture the essence of a style of music that transcends musical trends and survives across generations – and which constantly reinvents itself.

Sat 26/10 20:30

ALSO CHECK OUT

How to Hiphop-workshop

by Tomas Ntamashimikiro

Sat 26/10 16:00 (free)

Gentle Swag Party

with Zulu Nation & Saintklet

Sat 26/10 21:30 > ... (free)

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