

Jan Fabre: Belgian Theatre Magician

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Jan Fabre

Belgian Theatre Magician

Arnd Wesemann

The critics called out: Beware of charlatans, magicians, and gurus in the theatres! Beware of the critics, came the resounding echo, the critics who left the theatre of the Flemish artist and director Jan Fabre in protest and spilled their venomous ink in the press. But the opinions expressed were sharply divided. More than a few enthusiasts, driven by curiosity, remained in the theatre and intoned his praises. The radical disapproval of some was matched by the admiration of others, who would soon come to believe that, in the midst of short-lived theatre fads, Jan Fabre, born in 1958 in Antwerp, would belong among the leading directors in European theatre.

That was 1984. The theatre that was being discussed seemed more brutal and persevering than ever before—a theatre that was fundamentally not theatre, worse yet, was a betrayal of theatre itself. This trumpet blast heralded the beginning of not only Fabre's international career, but also the international reputation of the new Flemish theatre. The role of "commanding Flemish theatre avantgardist" fell to Fabre, but at the same time choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker as well as director Jan Lauwers and his teacher, director Jan Decorte, were renovating northern Belgian stagecraft, moving away from the conventions of European civic theatre.

At the Venice Biennale in June 1984, the audience in Teatro Carlo Goldoni saw for the first time Fabre's now legendary production of *The Power of Theatrical Madness* (De macht der theaterlijke dwaasheden). A piece—if one could call it that—in which everything was done "wrong" that could possibly be done "wrong" in the theatre. The spectators were allowed to come and go as they pleased. Out in the foyer, the bar remained open for four hours. Inside, a slender, blond young woman who had been bumped from the stage into the orchestra pit, tried for 20 minutes to climb back onto the stage. Whenever the increasingly enraged, crying, screaming, and cursing Els Deceukelier seemed about to succeed, actor Paul Verwoort would shove her off again, insultingly screaming a password at her: eighteen hundred seventy-six (1876). It was no game, rather it seemed mercilessly, deadly serious. A loudly ranting horde of barefoot men and women ran in place. The sweat of these trained endurance runners sprayed into the front rows, and their panting filled the theatre with the level of intensity one might expect in a sports sta-

dium. Meanwhile, audience members ran to the bar, drank a beer, and stumbled back into the theatre to find the actors still running, becoming pale, and finally collapsing from exhaustion. The spectators groaned with relief as the runners gasped for breath, sat on the floor, and lit cigarettes.

Charlatanism? Fabre had broken a few of theatre's "rules." There was no illusion and no story—everything took place in "real time." There were no roles—only actors, dancers, and singers. There was no decorative set, only a stage. There was no beginning and no end, rather, "intermissions as the audience saw fit," and for the actors, "action to the end of their strength."¹

Theatrical Madness

The artist Jan Fabre stormed the theatre world like a gladiator into a drowsy puppet theatre. He insisted on the traditional proscenium stage, on the strict architectonic closedness, on immense precision, and on an adherence to classical form. His entry into theatre work was no accident. Fabre made a declaration of love to the "aristocracy" of the opera, the ballet, and the theatre. Yet Fabre's forceful challenge was aimed less at the classical performing arts than at a theatre that had become paralyzed by convention.

1. In *The Power of Theatrical Madness* (1984), dancers move with intense concentration in strict, geometric order and in precise formation in front of a backdrop of projected French classicist and Italian Renaissance paintings. (Photo courtesy of Troubleyn)

Two blindfolded actors are balanced at the edge of the stage, one brandishing a knife and lunging wildly at the other, while belting out Wagner's "Liebestod" from *Tristan and Isolde*. In front of a backdrop of projected French classicist and Italian Renaissance paintings, dancers move with intense concentration in strict, geometric order and in precise formations. Naked knights carry sleeping princesses downstage, who always, upon being laid on the ground, spring up to return to their former spot, only to again be carried downstage by the knights. This continues until the knights reach the limits of their heroic strength—a limit that seems to determine the duration of this "action." An actor repeatedly



utters old German phrases about insatiable passion—for example, Kleist’s “Küsse, Bisse, das reimt sich,” (kisses, bites, no difference)—while a naked woman is lying across his knees. **With each slap delivered to her bare bottom, two parrots perched on poles like indignant onlookers shriek in protest.**

In 1984 the “postmodern” was on everyone’s lips. It was understood as the decorative or ironic mixing of classical works with the modern. Fabre—unintentionally—developed the reputation for being the only “really postmodern” director. In fact, Fabre’s disciplined and physically strenuous stagecraft—the apparently explosive mixture of corporeal overexertion and strict order, a Concrete Theatre of “absent meaning”—was informed by the canonical forms of the older arts. The true innovation of his theatre was based on a disconcerting meticulousness—the precision and drive for form that seemed to have been long lost in the theatre. The choreography that dancer Annamirl van der Pluijm developed for *The Power of Theatrical Madness* was based on a few classical ballet steps, which she danced *adagio* for 13 minutes with her back to the audience—an ode to and a deconstruction of the ballet that Fabre had learned with Balanchine in New York.

Fabre, who first appeared as a theatre maker in 1980 and who has since 1987 also been active as a choreographer, has staged his own plays since 1989: precisely executed compositions of muteness, duration, volume—musically set, corporeally manifested “plays” that had been foreshadowed in *The Power of Theatrical Madness*. In 1990 opera was added. Playing on the keyboard of each and every genre allowed Fabre’s theatre to become increasingly self-assured.

Like many other theatre pioneers before him—Oskar Schlemmer, Axel Manthey, Robert Wilson—Fabre came out of the visual arts. As a painter and sculptor, he strives for an artistic intensity on the stage, which he feels results from terse discipline and insistent repetition. His commitment to an ordering structure, to an “architecture of staging,” was reflected early in his fundamental observations about the essence of theatre:

As I see it, the “duration” of action and movement is incredibly important. It should arouse the impression that it will become a creative moment. Theatre, by definition, has to do with time—with the “duration” of a manipulated time. [...] My theatrical images are built architectonically and structurally. It is an ordered world in which abscesses are periodically ruptured.

While directors were speaking of “real timing,” Fabre was proceeding on a more basic level, questioning theatre’s very terms: duration, space, order, movement; not without simultaneously examining their twinlike complements: velocity, absence, chaos, stillness. The questioning of these “structural” elements, which for decades had been practiced in the visual arts and in music, was extended to theatre in the hope of releasing it from the realism—the compulsion for illustration and representation, for imitation and meaning—that the visual arts had long abandoned.

As Fabre was researching the foundations of the aesthetics of theatre, and while *The Power of Theatrical Madness* was enjoying a two-year world tour, tomatoes were thrown in Tokyo, and in Rome the stage was stormed. In Tel Aviv the audience protested by singing the national anthem; fights broke out in the Royal Albert Hall of London; in France a spectator stripped and threw his clothes onto the stage. Gérard Mortier, the then-manager of both the Brussels Opera de Munt and the Vlaamse Opera in Antwerp, reacted with restraint. On the occasion of Fabre’s first opera production, *Das Glas im Kopf wird vom Glas* (The Glass in the Head Becomes Glass), which had taken place in Mortier’s own home in 1990, he said in a television interview:

I would say that those who are labeled as charlatans tend to be those who want to innovate something. I believe that Jan Fabre is one of those people who really thinks about the theatre. It is not an intellectual reflection. Rather, he is someone who has observed a lot, and, what one must say to that is: he is really a man of the plastic arts. That's why I believe that he is no charlatan, on the contrary, he's a very earnest artist who raises many questions. (in Verschaffel and Cornelis 1990)

As for the reason why Mortier allowed a visual artist, and one who at that time was inexperienced with opera, to stage an opera he himself had composed, Fabre's committed patron continued: "With Fabre I promised myself nothing. I promised him something, not myself. I simply wanted to give a chance to a young artist whom I value" (in Verschaffel and Cornelis 1990).

Fabre took advantage of the opportunity. Always unflappable, he ventured his conviction, "Anything goes"—and occasionally the complement, "Nothing is barred." He works with a tireless and obsessive energy. As one critic wrote, "[Fabre is] simultaneously a very heated and coolly calculating aggregate" (Doepfner 1992), a bundle of energy with the ability to meet his goals with an unbelievable accuracy.

Antwerp. Fabre is rehearsing in a former movie theatre. There, where there was once a screen, is the stage. At the back wall of the theatre he lurks at a table, with the assistant director Miet Martens next to him. The audience rows are dismantled. Fabre leaps over his desk, runs through the auditorium and is on the stage in a single bound. He gesticulates with both his arms and his legs for the actors. Fabre is like a supercharged battery showering the actors with its energy sparks. He hovers like a spider over its prey. The slightest distraction brings him onto the stage like a comet. He quietly solves inconsistencies in an almost uninterrupted ten-hour rehearsal, correcting the actors

2. *Silent Screams, Difficult Dreams* (1992), a collaboration with composer Eugeniusz Knapik. (Photo by Carl De Keyzer)



with the relentlessness of a father who is watching over the first steps of his child—as if the elegance of a ballerina might reside in the tentative steps of a toddler. He honors and tends to the dancers and actors individually, arranging every head posture, every foot position. Not even the jackhammers, which during the remodeling of the Théâtre des Arts in Rouen in 1992 created an earsplitting racket, could disrupt his concentration during the rehearsals for his second opera, *Silent Screams*, *Difficult Dreams*.

Fabre has never, for any of his 20 productions, begun with a finalized concept. Together with his actors he researches and reworks pieces again and again. Role and plot are suspect. The real should flow in the most boundless beauty out of limitless duration. In Fabre's view, the ideal actor is a "warrior of beauty" whose weapons are his discipline and his body. Fabre sees discipline as a system that "facilitates freedom," since only persistence can lead to the extraordinary—a beauty which a dancer, an actor, or the theatre has the potential to reach. "Beauty is an homage to absence, to the unspeakable"; beauty without discipline is unthinkable to Fabre. Not the safety of stepping out of oneself into an imaginary role, but the precise physicality of the actors or dancers in relation to themselves transforms the theatre, according to Fabre, into the old-fashioned notion of the beautiful. The beautiful and the sublime, according to this concept, are not attainable through representation and imitation, but only through an onstage-created reality.

Art as a Gamble

In his first piece conceived for the theatre, *Theatre Written with a K Is a Tomcat* (16 November 1980 at the Ankerrui Theatre in Antwerp), long before *The Power of Theatrical Madness*, Fabre began to search for a language for his



3. *Geometry and symmetry, synchronicity and repetition, dissect the space in Fabre's The Dance Sections (1987), an early study that became part of his opera The Glass in the Head Becomes Glass. (Photo by Flip Gils)*



theatre. Approaching words as cues that trigger specific actions and elements in a performance in order to mark the end of one and the beginning of the next action, he began with letters, to set the tone, and used punctuation marks to bring the composition out of stillness. The text became the impulse for instigating “real action.” Jan Fabre:

If theatre were only text-theatre, it would be difficult to recognize that theatre has a language of its own. In *Theatre Written with a K Is a Tomcat* I used Iggy Pop’s “Lust for Life,” repeated 30 times consecutively, sometimes inaudibly, sometimes deafeningly loud. In *The Creative Hitler Act*, which I presented during the Philosophers in Aesthetics Congress at St. Louis University, Milwaukee, in 1980, self-written texts were read, while at the same time reference works were ripped apart and books were attacked with color as censoring material. I wrote sentences on blackboards and eliminated words and phrases so that new meanings emerged. The basic concept was to tell something about power and powerlessness in the visual arts. The performance was based on the reading Marcel Duchamp had given of “The Creative Act” in 1957 for the American Federation of Arts in Houston, Texas. Artspeak, televisionspeak, radiospeak, manipulative propaganda, advertisement, etc.: meanings of words are here purposefully thrown together to sow doubt.

As René Magritte (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*) and Marcel Broodthaers (*Ceci n'est pas un Magritte*), had done for the visual arts, Fabre translated the text in a new way for the theatre. In *Theatre Written with a K Is a Tomcat*, handwritten text was projected on the back wall of the stage; the audience could both decode the writing and view the letters as artistic elements. Language and writing as sign and drawing—this is how Jan Fabre the artist moved Jan Fabre the maker of theatre. On the stage, a volley of word-slaughter was discharged, sustained by pop-like music repetitions that required the engagement of the actors’ bodies as a motor. For hours, the spoken words were typed out while the amplified typewriter rhythmically doubled the spoken words. “It was literally and figuratively, mentally and physically, a slaughter to depletion,” ac-

ording to Fabre. “I determined that acceleration and computerization result in the dissociation of language from life. It was a battle between the ‘authentic’ and the ‘inauthentic’—can there be a winner?”

The “battle” between acoustical reality and linguistic sense, the ambivalence between interpreter and role, between truth and simulation, between player and actor, between action and reaction became Fabre’s research matter. He began to toy with the idea of the game of chance as the basis of drama. The performance of *Art As a Gamble, Gamble As an Art* that took place at the New York School of Visual Arts in 1981 was a “theatre without an audience”—only critics were invited. Every critic was involved in the “action”: he had to read a short newspaper review out loud, which was recorded on a dictaphone. Fabre tried to orchestrate the critics with a directing baton. The recorded reading was then played back while he played a round of poker, Russian roulette, or “drawing straws” with the “spectators.”

Fabre loves the ritual of the gambling casinos, the tense reality of the game, the agitated state of the players, their intensity as concentrated “islands unto themselves.” The suspense of gambling seems to be an inherent, although rarely visible, force in theatre. Through the same tension that resides in the game of luck, the action of the theatre game could also be released.

Fabre’s second piece, *Het is theater zoals te verwachten en te voorzien was* (This Is Theatre As It Was Expected and Foreseen) evolved at the Stalker Theater of Brussels (16 October 1982). The seemingly endless repetition of increasingly similar, physically risky actions resulted in protest and violence. The stage was stormed, the lighting equipment destroyed, and Fabre, when asked who was responsible, ambiguously claimed that he was only the lighting technician. A film ran during the performance, which showed Fabre holding a pistol to his temple and firing it, while countless “maggots”—the twitching fingers of unseen actors—appeared to crawl on his face. Frogs were trampled. The level of aggression that was unleashed in the eight-hour-long piece has never been repeated.

The game had become obsessive overexertion, as only few performers—like Iggy Pop in music, perhaps—pursued. Yet such an obsessive striving for the realization of a particular artistic and formal design, such precision, although arising out of different motives, was seen in the early work of Robert Wilson. Fabre, who studied window dressing at the Institute for Decorative Arts and at the same time attended the Royal Academy of the Fine Arts in Antwerp, drew inspiration for his surrealist action paintings from performance art. One such action was *After Art*, in which he sketched on a mirror with shaving foam and his own blood. For Fabre, the self-mutilation and self-doubling inherent in this act represented two ambivalent aspects of one and the same life attitude.

In another piece he created while he was an art student, Fabre traced the path of an ant over a sheet of paper. This was his first “drawing” with the Bic blue ballpoint pen—a doubling of space, split in two by a single line. A shoebox that Fabre had scribbled dark blue in 1977 appears, in retrospect, to be the prototype of all of his later blue stage spaces. In 1981 he let himself be locked into a room for 72 hours in order to “bic” the walls, floor, ceiling, and all surrounding objects blue. Jan Fabre:

I wanted to be a drawing machine that drew everything it thought and felt as it was drawing. Like a prisoner who makes his time comprehensible by counting off the days on the cell wall, who writes his name on the wall, too, out of fear of forgetting himself, and disappearing. Because everything is oriented toward the disappearance of the “I.”

Drama

Fabre's first dramas were developed while he was studying at the art academy: *The Interview That Dies...*, *The Palace at Four O'Clock in the Morning...A.G.*, and *The Reincarnation of God*, which Fabre produced at the Theater am Turm in Frankfurt in 1989. Predicated on this notion of disappearance, they ask, "What is there left to imagine? Nothing and disappearing."

They are texts that anticipate their own acoustical disappearance—their submergence beneath all of the other stage signs through, for instance, the blaring into the quiet of music by the Doors or the seemingly endless pauses between two words, which become filled with silence. Fabre thought of *The Interview That Dies...* as a test for the text-based theatre:

It had to do with the introduction and execution of single spoken words. Each word of this production was spoken separately with an interval of five seconds between each word, so that this word could be perceived as a spoken object. Every word would become an occurrence of time. Every word would create a new space. And every silence would build more space.

4. Els Deceukelier plays with two human marionettes, the twins Jacques and Albert de Groot, in *The Palace at Four O'Clock in the Morning...A.G.*, Theater am Turm, Frankfurt, 1989. (Photo by Ute Schendel)

Staged as if they were composed, Fabre's texts fade out through intervals of time, as in *The Palace at Four O'Clock in the Morning...A.G.*—a title inspired by the sculpture of the same name by Alberto Giacometti, *A.G.* (1932/33). The twins Jacques and Albert de Groot remain speechless in a mute conversation with a projected painting of the sphinx. On the stage, Effie Briest and Karl May chant the laws of Fabre-esque theatre: "We have laid down strict criteria for the body, the character, and the spirit of the image" (Fabre 1994).





Karl May's worried intonation of "Erase!" returns rhythmically—erase, to make the text disappear. "The padding is cut away through concentration and elimination," says Jan Fabre. "Only the essential elements remain. My pieces are thus bodies that breathe and carry the tumult of quiet within them."

Fabre had a twin brother who died at a young age. He never knew him, but the idea of a possibly identical other lingered. The twin, as a doubled existence, as one who is similar, was expressed less as a mournful remembrance than as a fascination with the nature of twins. The twin loses his uniqueness through his opposite, who remains available as a mirror, as something other, missing, unspeakable. This mirror motif is an integral component of Fabre's productions. His piece *The Interview That Dies...* is divided into four parts, represented by four tables. Behind each table, one of the four characters sits across from an invisible antagonist who is actually sitting at another table. The relationships are not direct, but imaginary: the characters look into an invisible mirror and address themselves.

A conspicuous image of doubling arises in *The Palace at Four O'Clock in the Morning...A.G.*: Els Deceukelier plays with two live marionettes—the twins Jacques and Albert de Groot. They see neither one another nor Deceukelier, who is standing behind them. Yet they react as marionettes to every, sometimes jerky, sometimes drawn-out movement of their puppet master with unparalleled precision and synchronicity—the result of a trained "scent," an instinct that twins develop for one another over the course of their lives.

5. In *The Interview That Dies* (1989), Fabre's challenge to text-based theatre, Els Deceukelier plays one of four characters who each sit at a separate table, look into an invisible mirror, and address themselves. Theater am Turm, Frankfurt. (Photo by Ute Schendel)

Insects

The synchronicity of twins has its model in nature itself. Already in his early years Fabre had observed in his parents' garden the mercilessness and the freedom of spiders and insects—the stringency of their movement patterns; the symmetry of butterfly wings; the goal-directed flight; the hermetically sealed, armored creatures that give rise to the analogy of people as social insects. “With one difference,” says Fabre, “insects have no master. They are always in transit. They know no height and no depth and have a different spatial sense than we do.”

Fabre's great-grandfather held the same fascination for the free, ancient, highly organized insect world. The well-known French entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre (1823–1915) wrote what is still acknowledged as the standard work on entomology—the ten-volume *Études sur l'instinct et de mœurs des insectes* (1951). In his home in Antwerp on Lange Beeldekenstraat (where Vincent van Gogh had also lived), Fabre heard countless stories about his great-grandfather and read his dramatically written, adventurelike descriptions of the insect world. Kurt Guggenheim's comments could be applied to the talents of both Fabres: “The sharpness of the observations, the incorruptibility, the tireless persistence, and a patience that vies with that of nature” (Guggenheim 1989).

Particularly remarkable in Jean-Henri Fabre's essays is the passion of his observations and experiments with the digger-wasp (*Scolia*). This wasp paralyzes the rose chafer (*Cetonia*) with a poisonous sting and then deposits one of her eggs on its belly. Immediately, the newly hatched larva begins to gnaw a hole in its living host. As soon as it has burrowed itself into the body of the paralyzed giant, it begins to live inside the beetle like a maggot in lard. Still, the larva must be circumspect in its feeding habits: a premature bite at the wrong spot would be fatal, the victim would die, and the larva would drown in the poison-saturated corpse, as Jean-Henri Fabre had shown. The beetle must be eaten alive. Next, the larva destroys the nonessential body parts, fatty masses, muscles, then the digestive system, and finally the nerve centers. After two

6. *The audience peers into the inner world of the eccentric Helena Troubleyn (Torgun Birkeland) in Silent Screams, Difficult Dreams (1992), which formed the second part of Fabre's opera trilogy The Minds of Helena Troubleyn. (Photo by Carl De Keyzer)*



weeks, the larva abandons an artfully hollowed-out rose beetle that has remained fresh. In order to survive, precision is nonnegotiable. Fabre's work method resembles the precision of these larvae. Their stamina and prudence seem to him to be requirements for the grace and mute beauty of these sublime creatures. In 1993, Fabre created a dress from thousands of prepared green-shimmering rose beetles—a surreal dream of cruelty and metamorphosis, the magically glimmering dress as the larva of feminine beauty.

The cruel beauty of the insects is a model for Fabre's stage: female dancers in armor simulate an infinitely slowed-down beetle flight. Their movements recall the altered time-consciousness of flying. The beholder peers into Fabre's theatre cosmos as if into a preserving jar and watches an interplay of creation and destruction that is reminiscent of what occurs with the larvae that pupate in order to molt and be transformed into the beauty of a butterfly. The strangely precise actions taking place on the stage, which appear to have no purpose, seem incomprehensibly removed. It is as if one were lost in a distant reverie, watching people in another, quieter universe, and hearing muffled noise, like the sound of a fly trapped in a spider's web—the "tumult of quiet," as Fabre calls it:

I also experience quiet and storm in my body, so I practice Kendo. With Kendo one must listen, prepare oneself, be still and then fight, very aggressively. But it takes concentration, because the sword must cut through the space precisely in order to hit the opponent exactly. The way a line must split the surface in the right way. Or the way a dancer has to go through all of the positions of her movements in order to split the space precisely and quickly.

Blue

The path of the ant, which Fabre as a student had followed with a ballpoint pen to dissect the paper's surface using a single line, was multiplied and made dense through the technique of hachure to create the entirely blue stage space for *Prometheus Landscape* (1 July 1988 at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin). As with the dark sky-blue of early morning light, the play of light on the dense, shimmering blue of the walls and floor of the stage moves the color through hues of grey, green, silver, black, and red. It is a blue that Fabre believes creates an expanded awareness of space, of feelings, even of smells: an *heure bleue* as "Blue Box."

Fabre's largest Bic blue-colored object was the Château Tivoli in Mechelen, Belgium. On 30 October 1990, he covered the castle entirely with blue-drawn paper. A film remains of the day of the blue castle in the park. At least 180,000 ballpoint pens were required to create a blue that could absorb the light of its surroundings, so that the castle would take on the fairytale quality of a Magritte painting—the light of the "blue hour," a term coined by great-grandfather Jean-Henri Fabre to describe that short, mysterious period before sunrise when creatures of the night become still and creatures of the day have not yet begun to stir. This mood between high intensity and deep peace, between life and death, is characteristic of many of Jan Fabre's productions.

The blue was first reflected in *The Dance Sections*, a choreographed piece that was performed 18 June 1987 at the Staatstheater in Kassel, Germany, as part of *documenta VIII*.² "As soon as the curtain rises," Polish music critic Krystof Droba mused,

every doubt dissolves—the spectator dives into the "blue hour": a sparsely lit, empty stage robbed of every decor; its horizon and floor scribbled full with blue ballpoint pen. Ghostly figures take shape in the

half-dark, only to vanish back into it. The world that the “blue hour” calls forth is as unreal as the “blue hour” itself. (1987)

Jan Fabre—who draws primarily at night in his home, nude, locked away from the world in an intensive dialogue with the paper—finds that

bic-blue isn’t an obtrusive color. It is a peaceful color. In the manner that I apply the color, it makes noise. Through time and the repetition of action it becomes quiet again, which makes it possible to hear the image. I try to give the silence shape with all of its noise.



In front of this blue, the dancers in *The Dance Sections* transcend the space, like “islands unto themselves,” in a dimension of duration, of time. They appear as self-possessed, strong individuals, like insects that literally intersect (Latin: *insecare*) the space. To Fabre, their legs and arms seem like two scissors. Actual scissors hang from the stage “sky” and twinkle like sharp wings in the spotlight—scissors that only become capable of cutting when their halves are doubled. Geometry and symmetry, synchronicity and repetition dissect the space in *The Dance Sections*, carve it up through the precision of the bodies. Theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann writes: “Fabre wants to make the space between the bodies perceptible, and the bodies must suffer. Radical mathematization locks the aesthetic space joint-tight against the everyday” (1992).

The balance that Fabre forges between space and body rests on exactly calculated symmetries and time unities. Even the most minimal deviation could destroy this fragile balance. Fabre: “I wanted the *space* to dance, not the dancers.”

7. At the high point of the finale in *Silent Screams*, *Opera Difficult Dreams* (1992), Helena Troubleyn’s imaginary daughter Fressia (Els Deceukelier) majestically holds high an eagle—Fabre’s metaphor for Troubleyn’s “self-destructiveness in beauty.” (Photo courtesy of Troubleyn)

The *Dance Sections* choreography that had taken form on the blue stage became the model for the opera trilogy *The Minds of Helena Troubleyn*, which Fabre began to compose in 1990. The opera is based on an actual encounter. In his youth, Fabre often visited an elderly woman whose Old-Flemish name, Troubleyn, means “to remain true.” She told stories, most of which were dreamed and fantasized, in a wonderfully possessed manner. That this might be madness troubled Fabre. He was fascinated by her storytelling, whose beauty eclipsed the poverty of her life. Seldom leaving her house, she lived a reclusive and self-destructive life. She had no children, yet she engaged in loud conversations with an imaginary daughter. Fabre loved how the quiet would stand in for answers. When Troubleyn died in 1985, Fabre planned the opera trilogy in her name. Even his production office in Antwerp, which handles the organization of his works and productions, is named Troubleyn.

In *The Minds of Helena Troubleyn*, the audience peers into the inner world of her persona and experiences how she makes her fantasies real. Helena Troubleyn (played by Torgun Birkeland) calls her “daughter” Fressia into life as a twin—a mute, silently responding double who is played by Els Deceukelier. Fressia combs and cuts Helena’s hair until Helena has a vision in



8. Fabre's insect motif appears in the Fabre/Frankfurt Ballet collaboration *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1990), in which costumes of armor allude to the shells of insects. (Photo by D. Mentzos)

which she sees herself fall to her death. Hair spirals down from the stage "sky." The name Fressia is derived from the Italian *frescia*, the arrow. Fabre likens Helena Troubleyn to an eagle that is pierced by an arrow made from its own feathers—a metaphor for her "self-destruction in beauty." A live eagle dives over the heads of the audience toward the stage. And Fressia majestically holds the arrow high at the climax of the finale.

The first part of the opera trilogy, *The Glass in the Head Becomes Glass*, premiered 7 March 1990 at the De Vlaamse Opera in Antwerp. Having used Górecki's "Symphonie of Sorrowful Songs" in *The Dance Sections*, Fabre began to work collaboratively with one of the composer's students, Polish composer Eugeniusz Knapik, whom he had met at the 1986 Adelaide Festival in Australia. With Knapik he made the second part of the opera trilogy, *Silent Screams, Difficult Dreams*, which on 18 December 1992 concluded *documenta IX*.

The one male character, "the boy with the moon and stars on his head," carries an African owl on his shoulder—one of the two owls, Dali and Ilad, that live in a large aviary in the garden behind Fabre's production office. The boy appears to be the creator of the universe in which Helena moves. He throws scissors into the air, which stay hanging in the heaven above the actors' heads like stars. Helena savors "the landscape of the dreamworld of the lies of the fantasy" (Fabre 1992). Escorted by Fressia and her girlfriends, she enters this world full of mirrors and reflections, which take on a menacing aspect, and announces her struggle with the picture puzzles of the past and of the dawning unconscious—"The past, oppressive and bleak, is unimaginably easy to dispense with" (Fabre 1992). Fabre plants the stage with singing clockworks: the singers in the choir of the Rouen Théâtre des Arts are blindfolded and their hands move synchronously. He stages a choir that is blind to reality.

Koen Kessel's conducting seems to be directed at nothing. As the choir ebbs into a violent whispering, Kessel shatters the plates that Helena Troubleyn had earlier held as mirrors and whispers, "The endless of the endless of the same."

"History dies every day, every hour," says Eugeniusz Knapik, "so that it can rise again" (in Wesemann 1992). According to Knapik, the postavantgarde became possible as a result of postmodern thought. "Now," he says, true to Fabre's motto, "everything is possible. I am allowed to compose in the style of the late-Romantic again, I can be classical again. I have regained the right to compose conventionally. Without the avantgarde, that would have been unthinkable" (in Wesemann 1992). The world will become good, sings Helena Troubleyn. Amid the din of shrill laughter, the choir members destroy the dishes and laugh uproariously. A short film sequence mirrors Els Deceukelier, who mutely emits bizarre screams as she repeatedly whirls her head around in fright.

Order and Chaos

On the stage, two rows of microphones. Wittgenstein drones through the loudspeakers: Think of a script in which letters are used to signify sounds, but also to signify intonation, and are used as punctuation signs as well. Ten dancers belt out the U.S. anthem, their hands over their hearts, bang, a shot in the head, freeze, the freezing of a classic pose, "In the land of the free and the home of the brave," the dionysiac dark side in the form of Jim Morrison forces its way through: "Break on through to the Other Side," no pause for breath, scream, hysterical laughter: the dignity of humanity is inviolable. No trace of the classical which was to be foreseen and expected.

9. Dancers execute symmetrical basic ballet steps, prolonging each movement until the audience itself enters a different temporality, an altered time-consciousness, in *On the Backside of Time* (1993). (Photo by J.P. Stoop)



So culminates the ballet *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*. Again and again, shrill speech whirls across the stage, as if set free after a long, interminable silence. In a moment of release, chaotic cacophony breaks out, only to become contained again in a still flow of exact movements. *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, premiered 22 December 1990, was a collaboration with the Frankfurt Ballet, which, under the direction of William Forsythe, had become acquainted with the great freedom made possible through the unfolding of artistic potentials. With Fabre the dancers were confronted with unfamiliar restrictions and a willful precision, which would accumulate to then unload explosively in the middle section of the ballet.

This middle section—a “hell” that is enveloped between two blue acts (“heaven”)—begins with the violent assault of a language, which Fabre had used in his earliest pieces only as aggressive *ex tempore*. Like a howling nightmare, the *corps du ballet* resists its characteristic mechanism, which in Fabre’s ballets is now barely perceptible beyond the patter of ballet shoes. In this “presto,” the insect motif also reappears and enters more aggressively than ever before.

During this black, panicky part of *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, the dancers shriek, scratch, and hit their bodies to drive away imaginary insects, while Els Deceukelier slowly, calmly, quietly, and watchfully appears to be gathering up those fallen insects. In the blue part of this ballet, the dancers are arranged in a formation that, as they move, forms a slowly creeping insect. These “warriors of beauty” are, in *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, involved in a combat that is taken even further in Fabre’s play *Sweet Temptations*. *Sweet Temptations* begins with a flood of bellowed and screamed sentence fragments



and ends in an exalted self-sacrifice of all of the actors, who fall silent before the owl (familiar from *The Minds of Helena Troubleyn*). “This bird, damned—certainly a sign of the night, certainly a sign in the dark,” is softly uttered in this piece, which premiered 17 May 1991 during the Vienna Festwochen.

In *Sweet Temptations*, order emerges out of chaos, and individuals merge to form a cohesive mass. According to Fabre, as soon as individuals come together, they become a dynamic body, a mass that disregards—humbles and abuses—that which is individual. In the closing scene of *Sweet Temptations*, the mass is just such a group of individuals, who destroy themselves psychically and physically through sensory overload.

Again the twins appear, who here resemble the wheelchair-bound physicist Stephen W. Hawking. Surrounded by aggressive and sexually obsessed characters and immobilized in their electric wheelchairs, they philosophize almost inaudibly as they watch the owl perched on a branch. They converse slowly, tiredly, attentively. Suddenly, cacophony erupts. Nurses go berserk and play at surgery in a TV show–like clinic. The twins are heaved out of their wheelchairs, undressed, and laid onto the floor, while the greats of world theatre—*Faust* and *Richard III*—are recited. Dancers in bikinis and high-heeled shoes arch backwards, slowly lowering their bodies over the bases of the Vegas slot machines.

The twins’ puzzled contemplations in front of the owl are drowned in the outcry, “Is this the decade at the end of the world or just another excuse for a party?” An actor with an owl mask climbs the drum set. Els Deceukelier appears in front of the twins, slowly undresses herself, and strides off the stage, cackling like a hen. Then she cries softly to herself, her arms crossed over her chest, wearing only a bikini. She comes across as sensitive and vulnerable and at the same time as ironic and confident. Deceukelier, who hails from Brugge, has been working with Fabre since she was 18. Fabre composed three solo pieces for Deceukelier and for her once longtime partner Marc Van Overmeir.

10. In The Sound of One Hand Clapping (1990), Fabre’s collaboration with William Forsythe and the Frankfurt Ballet, the dancers shriek, scratch, and hit their bodies to drive away imaginary insects, while Els Deceukelier appears to be gathering them up. (Photo by D. Mentzos)



Soli

Els Deceukelier's first solo, *Zij was en Zij is, zelfs* (She Was and She Is, Even), premiered 5 September 1991 at Felix Merits in Amsterdam. In a blindingly white wedding dress, Deceukelier strides across a mirror-black stage, repeating "and again, and again, and again" like copulation thrusts. The hem of her dress brushes softly against the hairy backs of three black tarantulas, as if her beauty were arousing a latent passion. She declares her only function: "Making love." (Fabre originally had 200 live spiders in mind for this piece, but only two real and one fabricated spider have remained.) Whenever the hem of the wedding dress brushes against a spider's back or when she kisses one of the spiders, the audience winces. *She Was and She Is, Even* is an homage to Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915–1923), a work about eternal longing, about the desire for unattainable fulfillment—a metaphor for a sex machine that consists of various motors. The bachelors perform as these motors, trying to ignite the bride's passion. Yet the cylinders are too weak to bring her to complete fulfillment. Deceukelier strips off the top of her dress and rears in simulated orgasm. She remains unmoved, straightens herself, relaxed. Then, with a trace of sorrow, she decisively folds her arms and contemplates the weakness of the *pauvres malheureux*—the pathetic wretches—and the impossibility of finding fulfillment through them.

In *Wie sprekt mijn gedachte...* (Who Speaks My Thought...), which was first performed at the Kaai Theatre in Brussels, 12 March 1992, Marc Van Overmeir appears as a huge, flat-footed, and mortally wounded rabbit. He wears a tiny fireman's helmet on his oversized head and carries a sharp ax. The visibly injured giant rabbit is jostled into a corner of the black-lacquered stage, where the audience sits nearby, triumphantly in judgment over the animal. At the light table, Fabre, like a prison warden, holds the animal on an electric leash. Van Overmeir receives soft shocks, and a stream of words pours out of him. Then he begins to bark like a mangy stray dog. He stops, listens to the quiet, his spoon ears hanging limp. Hearing only the rush of sounds, he speaks: "I hear myself listening"—a drama as mirror of one's own body, as a resounding resonance of internal echo and thought.

In *Verfalsing zoals ze is, onvervalst* (Falsification, As It Is, Unfalsified), which premiered 17 December 1992 at the Brussels Théâtre National, Deceukelier also eavesdrops, simultaneously listening in on her past and the future. She was a model, she says, and repeats in an agitated state of mind: "Cocaine running around my brain." She mimics snorting lines of cocaine, one after another, from a mirror. (There were originally 21 whining cats, all on short leashes, which are missing in later performances.) Like Van Overmeir, Deceukelier is faced with herself in the refrain—a woman as a copy, as a "doubled negation," that has "sprung from the original." When she speaks, it is as if she is sharing her personal secrets with the audience, drawing them into her private world. The solos reflect on the status of the speaking person—as an actress, as an exhibited person, as somebody seen by another.

On the Backside of Time

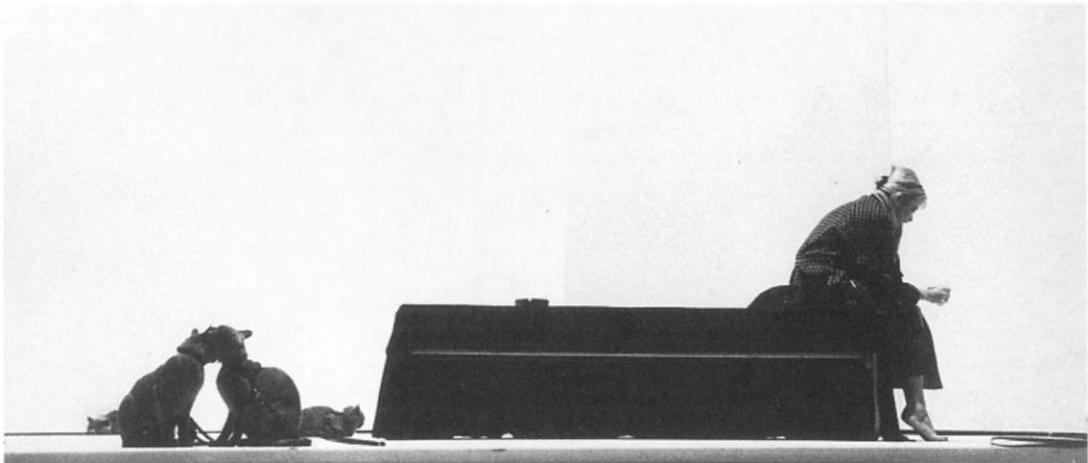
The backdrop for the choreography in *Da un'altra faccia del tempo* (On the Backside of Time), which was first presented 19 September 1993 at the Brussels Lunatheater, consists of a forest of black garlands made of countless chain links. This backdrop had also been used in *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* and appeared again later, on 10 February 1995, in *Quand la terra si rimette in movimento* (When the Earth Starts to Move) at the Musik Theater in Amsterdam. The dancers appear and disappear almost seamlessly through the

garlands. They diagonally traverse an architecture without walls—they “devour the space,” says Fabre.

The dancers execute their symmetrical basic ballet steps, prolonging each movement until the audience itself enters a different temporality, an altered time-consciousness whose foreignness creates the sensation of being in an almost spaceless place. Rudi Laermans sums up this creative moment:

The dancers, singers, and actors stand outside of time and move in a space infused with a timelessness that allows neither exhaustion nor weakness, neither aging nor death. The stage transforms them into living statues, freezes their bodies, movements, and voices. (1995)

Again this eternal stasis ends abruptly. Out of the dancers’ clothes fall the Fabre-esque store of props: plates, scissors, flyswatters—reminiscences and studies of the still unfinished opera trilogy *The Minds of Helena Troubleyn*. Dancers sit on towers of plates, then jump up and chase an innocent culprit. Naked men simulate wild copulation, snake-people contort their bodies, women gently strike each other’s bare behinds. A giant wearing buskins of tied together porcelain plates drowns out the stage with the clattering of his steps. A couple in armor restrain two naked men who, in a dionysian fury, claw at the ground like roosters. Frankfurt dancer Antony Rizzi lecherously offers sweet temptations. Obscenity bursts forth out of geometrical discipline on a stage that is bathed in the deep red glow of a funeral pyre: bacchanalian dancers roughhouse on the stage; Deceukelier and Van Overmeir are painted with jam and then covered with feathers; Rizzi is daubed with “excrement”; “maenads” in fire-red costumes, their legs pointed as stingers, slither on the floor like scorpions. After a while, the choreography again abruptly returns to its ordered catechism, as if a backward flight returning to the time of the spectator were beginning from the other side, passing through the gate of seemingly endless repetition. The dream ends thunderously: 200 plates shatter on the stage in a fraction of a second. The demolished plates end the theatre of Jan Fabre—a theatre of imploded feelings and apparent uneventfulness glossed with the smooth veneer of merciless beauty. Yet once more, three dancers step into the jagged shards of the broken dishes and begin to dance, cautiously, precisely, and insistently, a dance against death.



Universal Copyrights

The medieval atmosphere invoked in the “hell” of the middle section of *When the Earth Starts to Move* returns with allusions to witchcraft and magic in Fabre’s 1996 solo for Deceukelier, *A Deadly Normal Woman* (Een doodnormale vrouw). This “hell” climaxes explosively in *Universal Copyrights 1 and 9*, which first appeared at the Lunatheater in Brussels, 24 October 1995. A raging pack of actors and dancers sings the Beatles song “Revolution.” Squawking, hissing, and whispering clown figures race across the stage. They slam into one another, screaming their heads off. Monstrous beatnik-clowns dance to the music, their childlike enthusiasm abruptly transforming into Beavis and Butt-head moves. They laugh at the battlefield they leave behind and dance with skeletons in their arms.

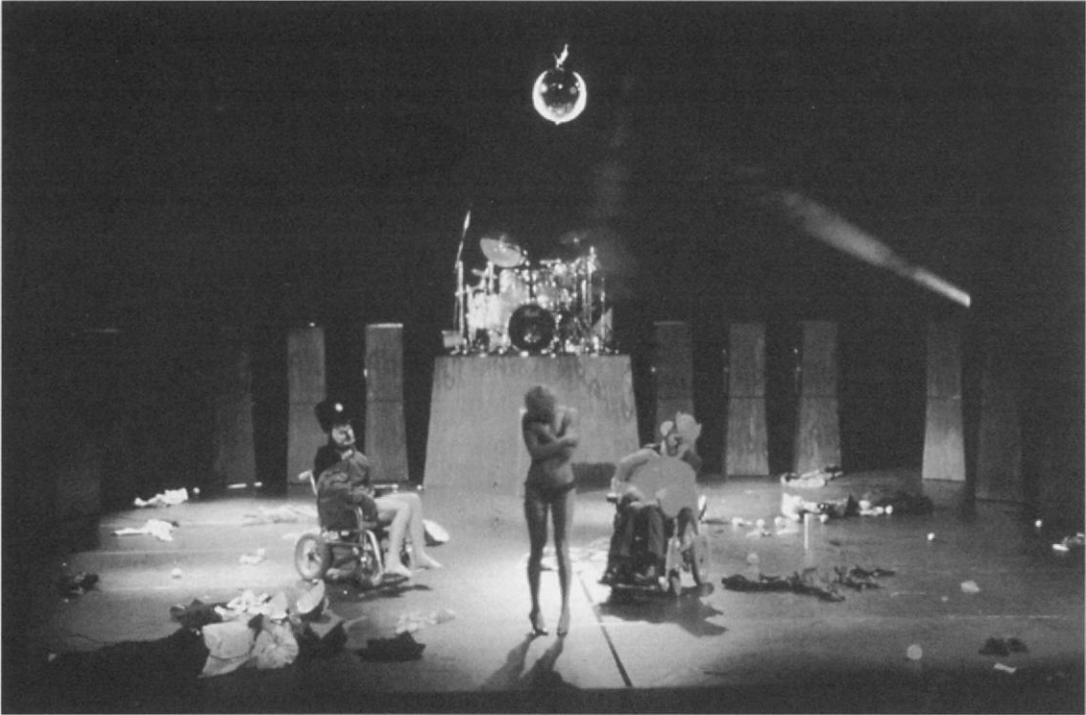
When eight softly sobbing clown figures gradually move into activity after having smoked three cigarettes—this is how *Universal Copyrights* begins—they launch into a deadly conventional clown repertoire: the always improperly opened matchbox and the tiresome picking up of the matchsticks that have fallen out; the inflating of a clown as a human rubber doll, which continues to grow until, upon being released, it flies farting around the set; and the hat trick: every time the clown takes off his hat, his trousers fall down, and each time he pulls them up again, the hat falls from his head. But this isn’t circus, never once even reminds one of it.

Instead, grinning sardonically, the clowns strangle themselves in the composed manner with which only cult members would do themselves in. Sitting in umpire’s chairs, the twins Albert and Jacques de Groot discuss their murders through megaphones. This trail of sect suicide and serial murder produces a dramatically colored reflection of theatre’s relationship to those mediums that are preoccupied with death and murder—a concern with violent mediums initiated by the theatre: in public bearbaiting, in patricide, in Shakespeare’s daughter-mutilating *Titus Andronicus*. *Universal Copyrights* is a parody of this history. But it is also a parody of Fabre’s work. Variations of the dancer who is bound with rope and suspended like a marionette or who is prevented with kicks from climbing back onto the stage from which she is repeatedly being pushed had appeared in Fabre’s early pieces, *The Power of Theatrical Madness* and *The Palace at Four O’Clock in the Morning...A.G.*

A troop of divers smoking cigarettes sits on the edge of the stage, way up front, their legs dangling into the first row. They blow the smoke out through their snorkels. The audience dares to laugh, albeit prematurely, because what follows is even more comical: a hilarious step dance in fins. Humor is the most recent innovation on Fabre’s stage. A theatre that is as poor as it is brutal, *Universal Copyrights* remains amazingly suspenseful throughout its entire five-hour duration. With skeletons tied to their backs, the dancers perform a *dance macabre* to the Beatles’s “Helter Skelter” (mass murderer Charles Manson’s favorite tune). People as scarecrows, as marionettes, and as troglodytes chattering with fear become eternal clowns in the ancient, actually medieval theme of the fool, and for five hours do nothing but try to lead death astray. It is an excruciatingly funny mystery play wrenched out of the Middle



11. & 12. *In Falsification, As It Is, Unfalsified* (1992), one of the solos Fabre composed for Els Deceukelier, the woman confronts her past and contemplates her future. (Photos by J.P. Stoop)



13. In *Sweet Temptations* (1991), Els Deceukelier appears in front of the twins Albert and Jacques de Groot, who are in wheelchairs, slowly undresses herself, and strides off the stage, cackling like a hen. Theater am Turm, Frankfurt. (Photo by J.G. Rittenberg)

Ages, a time when there weren't yet dramas and other noble achievements of civil culture—only the seduction of death...and clowns, scarecrows, and, in addition, a couple of leftover skeletons lying next to the coffin nailer.

Cleopatra, Einstein, Neil Armstrong, Snow White, Dracula, Madame Butterfly, Warhol: all appear as Disney-like depictions. Mr. Spock, the Little Prince, Napoleon, Dali, Bonnie (without Clyde), Mae West, Joan of Arc, Charlie Chaplin, the Virgin Mary, Janis Joplin, Jackie Kennedy, Elizabeth I: At the end of *Trilogy of the Body* (so-named belatedly, after *Sweet Temptations* and *Universal Copyrights 1 and 9*), a Disney-like world takes over the stage. Fabre calls his most recent piece *Glowing Icons* (Antwerp, 20 May 1997)—glowing sparks that spray out from offstage onto the smooth, mirrorlike black stage (like the one used in the solo *She Was and She Is, Even*), ironically spell out the title. Mr. Spock leads a mute interview with a massive sphinx face that is projected from the wings—similar to the scene from Fabre's 1987 *The Interview That Dies...*—and Joan of Arc destroys her armor, recalling a memorable moment from *The Glass in the Head Becomes Glass* (1987). Fabre himself wants to be an icon, and the collapsing of self-citations with the icons of pop mythology has a humorous effect.

Neatly arranging his overarching theme—the valorization of the body, haunted by the beauty created by his disciplining control—he lets his own theatre revue take place, now pared down to a mere two hours. The freaks, who in *Sweet Temptations* could barely speak, have matured into articulate actors; and the foolish antics and gibberish found in *Universal Copyrights* have now been distilled into cogent punch lines. Antony Rizzi shines in a wonderful travesty of Mae West, and Els Deceukelier is an insanely wicked Elizabeth I, despite her cumbersome gown.

Dracula, played by Elsemieke Scholte, lures the audience into his home. "I never drink...wine," the actress utters calmly, bidding them to a dance with death. In the finale, the death-dance becomes an unbridled party that takes

place on Dracula's vibrant red cape, which drapes down his back and across the stage floor. The pressing question in *Sweet Temptations* (1991), "Is this the decade at the end of the world or just another excuse for a party?" has lost its relevance. The performers now act out the boisterousness of previous productions in the style of the interlude dances of the Wooster Group and, under the careful guidance of Sachiyo Takahashi (who appears as Madame Butterfly), perform a collective ritual *harakiri*—the men separated from the women. Not a trace remains of the sinisterness evoked by the grinning "Beckett-clowns," who strangled each other in *Universal Copyrights 1 and 9*, only signs of the convulsive, explosive rage.

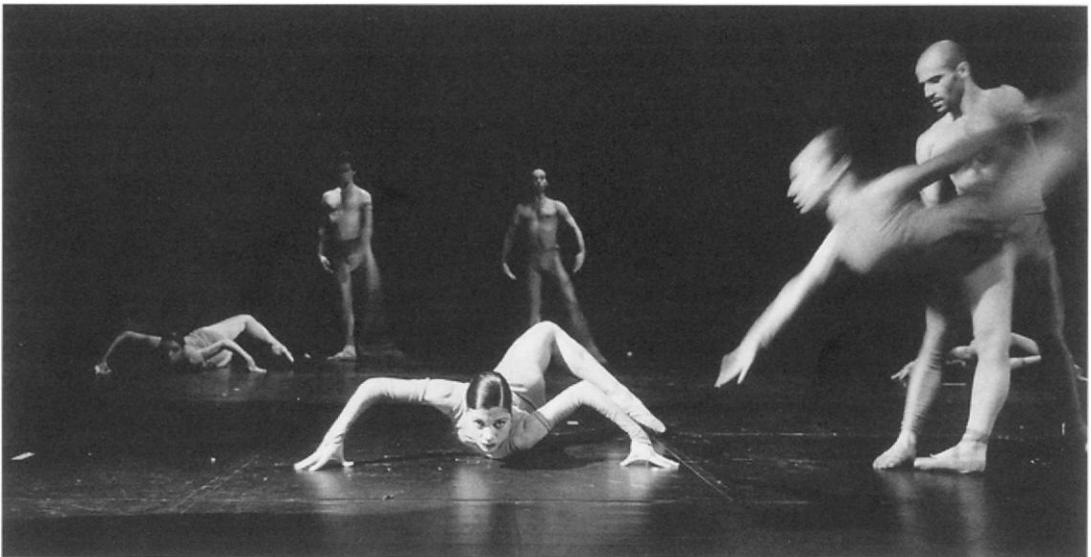
Never running out of breath, the actors take turns sucking on an oxygen tank. Wearing an Einstein mask, Albert de Groot (minus his twin brother) comments on the quiet that dwells in the spectacle: "The only reason for time is that not everything happens at once."

It seems that Fabre's provocations have retreated from the motivations that prompted the "scandals" of his earlier productions. The extreme intensity of his search for beauty has now arrived at the Elysium and has softened into a friendly laugh. The costumes have become haute couture. With Fabre the dancers and actors, once insistent seekers of a new theatre world, have, as "warriors of beauty," grown into mature comic figures. Nevertheless, whether as the Little Prince or a fully outfitted astronaut, they still create the impression of being at a theatre gala. Everything has been achieved, all is complete. One could stop here.

—Translated by Marta Ulvaeus



14. When chaos erupts out of strict geometrical discipline, Els Deceukelier is painted with jam and covered with feathers in *On the Backside of Time* (1993). (Photo by J.P. Stoop)



15. On a stage bathed in deep red light, dancers slither on the floor like scorpions in Jan Fabre's *On the Backside of Time* (1993). Lunatheater, Brussels. (Photo by J.P. Stoop)

Notes

1. Unattributed quotes are from Jan Hoet and Hugo de Greef's (1993) published interviews with the artist, and all were revised by Fabre for this article.
2. *documenta* is an international art forum that takes place every five years in Kassel, Germany.

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Arnd Wesemann is Editor of *Ballett international/tanz aktuell*, a magazine of contemporary dance that is based in Germany. He is author of Jan Fabre [*Fischer Verlag (Frankfurt), 1994*] and "Adventure in Empty Space," an article that appeared in *Jan Fabre: Texts on His Theatre Work [Kaaithheater (Brussels)/Theater am Turm (Frankfurt), 1993]*.

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