

Dance in the Forest, an Example of Immersive Theatre

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Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels, Belgium, May 2019.

The Brussels Kunstenfestivaldesarts presented a great variety of shows that is difficult to summarize. Several sought to establish new forms of spectator involvement. Among the dance shows presented, *Somnia*, directed by choreographer Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, was undoubtedly one of the most interesting. It was presented in Gaasbeek Castle, a medieval fortress in Flemish Brabant, south west of Brussels. Based on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as adapted by Johannes Kepler, *Somnia* is an extraordinary dance and theatre show, which Anne Teresa and Jolente De Keersmaeker put on with forty-four dancers, third- and final-year students of the Contemporary Dance School P.A.R.T.S (Brussels).



Playing in nature: on the slopes of the deep moat surrounding the castle (1, 2). *Somnia*. Photo: Michel Petillo

The presentation began in the courtyard of the castle. After four flautists played an extract from Henry Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*, several dancers stood on the walls of the fortress. They summarized the story of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in a casual way, pointing out the dancers who were going to represent the characters. Each character was split between at least four dancers, regardless of the physique or gender of the dancer and the character: during the show, several groups simultaneously performed the same scenes in different places in the park. The following scene took place on the slopes of the deep moat surrounding the castle. There the dancers represented the "mechanicals" (Quince, Snug, Bottom, Flute, Snout, and Starveling) clumsily rehearsing a play in honour of the Duke's wedding—sliding, hovering, falling, going up and down the steep slope, in a playful, festive, and mocking manner.



Immersive theatre: the public walked with the dancers and the musicians (Between I, 2 and I, 3). *Somnia*.
Photo: Michel Petillo

The slope of the moat seemed to be a metaphor for the social situation and the awkwardness of the mechanicals; the natural space became the frame and a fundamental element of the show from the very first moment. The audience became mixed with the actors. Collective engagement is achieved here through the movement in the space. The dynamism of the play is reflected in dance, in the division of the dancers into groups and in their displacement throughout the park.

The public walked behind the dancers who, dressed in brightly coloured sportswear, ran off and divided into different groups. For the next three and a half hours, the public followed them through the park of Gaasbeek Castle, among the towering hundred-year-old beech trees that make up its forest. Sometimes, we walked next to the flautist or the dancers; at other times, we saw them from farther away: the unpredictable distance of the dancers changed constantly. For the next scenes, the dancers stopped in a meadow, a hollow surrounded by wooded slopes, like a natural circus arena. There, running among the audience, they simultaneously performed several scenes. Standing on immense tree stumps, several actors simultaneously represented Titania and Oberon, questioning each other from one side of the hollow to the other, above the audience. Shortly thereafter, the actors ran away, suddenly stopping among the audience, to perform the sequences that followed. The groups constantly formed and dissolved, to the surprise of the audience. In the silence of the forest, the voices and cries of the dancer-actors and the music of the flautists who accompanied the different groups were heard, evoking the magical world of the play.



Somnia: The movements reflected a joyful and light interpretation of the relationships. Photo: Michel Petillo

The lines were often accompanied by dance movements or choreographed group arrangements, while preserving the impression of spontaneity. The dancers executed dance steps, agile or clumsy, seeking more the lyricism of the moment than technical perfection. The movements reflected a joyful, light interpretation of the relationships between the supernatural world and the everyday reality of the text. Suddenly, among the trees, a slow,

strange and dreamlike scene developed as night fell. Many dancers walked or ran among the trees, looking suspiciously at the audience and fleeing from it as it approached, like the jokingly surprised goblins, the tiny forest elves and the fairies present in Shakespeare's play.



Somnia: Among the trees, strange and dreamlike scenes developed in the falling night. Photo: Anne Van Aerschot

The spectator did not hear everything, often only hearing fragments of the scenes, from the different interpreters, but it didn't matter. I have seen more elaborate acting, but I have never felt that a representation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* had been more accurate, the natural frame and tone more adequately reflecting the bucolic and parodic spirit of Shakespeare's play.

This walk in the immense park of Gaasbeek Castle enlarged the poetic dimension of Shakespeare's work with beautiful images. At some point, the public watched a scene in front of the chapel of Sainte Gertrude, before going down to the park's huge ponds, in the middle of which, surprisingly, burned six bonfires whose light was reflected in the dark water. Like the play that begins and ends in Athens, the show began and ended in the castle. At the end of the fourth act, the forty dancers ran with their lights up a narrow staircase that ascended in a straight line to the esplanade in front of the castle. They stopped along the staircase, creating a row of lights that allowed the public to climb up.

At the top of the stairs, the music of three flautists, a clarinetist and a trumpeter welcomed the spectators. Formed into small groups as they arrived, three dancers mockingly explained to them that the fifth act was still to be performed, but that it was too late and that they were not going to present it; instead, two bonfires had been prepared to receive them.



Images of violence inspired in daily life in Brazil. *Fúria*. Photo: Sammy Landweer

As in Shakespeare's play, in which the fairies arrive in Athens after the rest of the characters, when the whole audience was already in front of the castle the dancers gathered on the esplanade; the headlights of a car illuminated part of the esplanade, and, for half an hour, in a very precise way, now demonstrating their originality and virtuosity, the dancers performed thirty wonderful minutes of dance. After a few minutes of dancing together, small groups followed. Each group executed splendid sequences, with different movements, that surprised by their variety and their originality. The sequences seem adapted to the individual sensitivities of the dancers, before a last collective movement ended the show.



Individuality disappears in collective rhythmic dance. *Shadows of Tomorrow*. Photo: Anders Lindén

The Kunstenfestivaldesarts also presented other great dance shows, among them *Furia*, the latest show by Brazilian choreographer Lia Rodrigues. With her company, Cia Rodrigues Companhia de Danças, based in the favela of Maré in Rio de Janeiro, she presented a show overflowing with energy and imagination, created from images of daily life in Brazil. *Cria*, a dance production directed by Alice Ripoll for the group Suave, also from Rio de Janeiro, formed by young black dancers, was another striking production, with hip hop elements and mostly with *passinho*; also notable were *Shadows of Tomorrow*, directed by Norwegian artist Ingri Midgard Fiksdal, a collective rhythmic dance in which all the dancers had their bodies completely covered; *Dancer of the Year . . .*, a moving dance production by Trajal Harrell; and *Atla*, directed by the Belgian choreographer Louise Vanneste.

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