

Every Direction Is North

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It's not the first time that Karine Ponties, a Franco-Belgian choreographer, works with a Russian dance troupe. Her cooperation with troupe Dialogue Dance from Kostroma culminated in the performance "Pastime Paradise" and a Golden Mask nomination in 2015. In 2016, a new piece called "Every Direction Is North", performed by the contemporary section of the Moscow Ballet won a Golden Mask. This victory was entirely deserved.



At once surrealistic and realistic, “Every Direction Is North” takes the spectator into a trance from the very first scene, where a man appears on stage with a cube on his head, muttering angrily and neurotically as he attempts to free himself from the burden of the cube. His mumbling, sometimes rising into borderline shrieking, reminds the audience of both the guttural singing of Buddhist monks and the incomprehensible monologue of one’s next door neighbour as heard through a shared wall. This vocal activity at once repulses and attracts the audience’s attention, forcing them to carefully follow every convulsion of the prisoner of the cube. Human psychology explains the bewitching effect of that which causes us panic and repulsion. And it is with this hope that the anxious cries of the beginning of the piece are used to grab the audience by the throat. The next act begins with the removal of the cube and the sudden silence that follows this act. Six more young men with similar boxes in their hands appear on stage. They crowd, push, knock into one another, all in a hurry to get somewhere, all complete strangers.



Within the next hour, each of the six reveals more about himself in a small solo, and with each individual performance, it is not theatrical fiction which continues to unravel, but rather very real elements of life. “This is a man’s world” is the unspoken leitmotif of the piece, which focuses on the spiritual evolution of seven different heroes. They are familiar to the audience because these are the kinds of boys that walk amongst us thinking, suffering, dancing, drinking, playing cards and stretching their arms to the sky. Through “Every Direction Is North,” the dancers undertake to look for something important within themselves which holds them tethered to this multipolar world.



Ponties's plan is to show that there is a little boy living in each man and, to frame it in a wider perspective, that a Soul lives in each one of us. This soul is pulled towards its own ideals and understanding of happiness, which, as it turns out, can only be discovered through Unity with fellow man. That is why each of the protagonist's solos is preceded by a "dash" from a realistic scene tightly packed with weirdos, and ends with brotherly cooing and tight manly hugs. In the end, the tales of the seven heroes closes in a square of light where they walk past one another, no longer crowding and pushing past one another like strangers, but warmly clapping one another on the shoulder and looking by all measures like a family.



"Every Direction Is North" is masculine both in its intention and its choreography. It intends to be masculine because it is precisely the nature of man-to-man relations and male character traits that allow an examination into human nature without looking at

the parallel stories which inevitably follow the dancers as soon as a heterosexual couple appears on stage. There are no hidden “loves”, “self-sacrifices” and “passionate sufferings”, just psychology and self-knowledge, an approach that is hard-core. It is a masculine play in terms of choreography because the hypnotic physical work literally forces us to rethink the human body: at times the unaesthetic movements suddenly morph into a delicate cat’s dance. The contact improvisation also bedazzles: it is notable that the first step of the work required improvisation by the artists themselves, which Karine Ponties recorded on camera, later picking out the pieces she liked best to be included in the final production. The ability of the simple touch of one artist to provoke a volcanic eruption of movement from the other is bewitching. The trust between the performers is visible and remarkable. Those who are in the know may notice elements of yoga featured in the piece, which also brings to mind concepts such as the search for harmony and inner balance.



The set design are those aforementioned wooden boxes and several wooden corners, which at different moments of the piece may turn into either a table, or a wardrobe, or a picture of Salvador Dali (such as when the piled up corners grow into a strange piece of surrealism with heads, arms and legs jutting out chaotically). Such object minimalism makes the performance very mobile and dynamic, just like a Lego construction, allowing new contexts and situations to house the monologues of the protagonists.



For Ponties, “Every Direction Is North” is a terrible “nothing”, a path to nowhere, a place where there is no socialization, but rather rampant loneliness that forces a person to turn into themselves. This is what the piece starts with- remember that lost and angry man, blinded by a cube? That person, existing in a contemporary context, should be open to dreaming of his goals and completing his tasks, yet he turns out to be lost to himself. Ironically, the moral of the piece turns out to be completely the opposite of the title of the play. Although all paths may lead to the lonely North, we must still be able to find the path to another direction, where a person can be free from the shackles of being.