

DE STANDAARD

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THE MINIMALISM OF SCHWALBE

Techno sold as theatre

'Is this still theatre?' It's not only the young Dutch group Schwalbe that's forcing the public to consider this question. Increasingly, more and more theatre is flirting with the 'nothingness' of reality.

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BRUSSELS      Nine young people jumping for an hour to monotonous techno beats. They are in scattered groups, the only thing binding them is the fact they are in a small space. And just like the beats, they carry on endlessly.

No, this isn't a snapshot from La Rocca. Rather, it is a scene from the theatre performance 'Spar ze' ('Save them') by Schwalbe, guest performers at the Kaai theatre this week. The young collective, who graduated from the mime programme in Amsterdam in 2008, are taking a step further in 'Schwalbe speelt op eigen kracht' (Schwalbe perform on their own'). For an hour, the nine performers cycle themselves into a sweat on second hand exercise bikes. Lined up next to each other, powering their own lighting. They pedal to be seen.

Is this what we go to the theatre to see? To watch what you also could see at a party, or at a gym? 'This is even less than little', was the reaction of one spectator online. 'The emperor's new clothes!' And yet, both productions are fascinating. Every small deviation feels like a landslide as when two of the dancers in 'Spar ze' suddenly break out of their trip, dropping down for a gulp of water and a conversation that you can't hear. In 'Schwalbe speelt op eigen kracht', the single spotlight slowly revolves around the theatre, its beam piercing every watching eye.

There is also the gradual exhaustion, the sweat, the pained glares of the dancers or cyclists, a group within which you glimpse increasingly more individual nuances.

Done with acting

What inspires Schwalbe to make their performances so radically empty, with so little theatre? 'We don't make any distinction between theatre and reality', is the vision of the collective.

'The spectator and performer are in the same space, at the same time, experiencing the same things.'

It sounds like a return to the performances that we watched thirty years ago: shared, physical celebrations that surpass all fiction, exploring the pain limits of the human body. At that time too, time and repetition came before the actual 'meaning' of what was being shown. Schwalbe is not alone in peeling away everything that makes theatre what it is: text, symbolism, story. 'Ont-roerend Goed' sold like hotcakes as theatre. In '2019 (Droom- spel)', Piet Arfeuille showed us the banal goings-on of a supermarket kitchen; in 'David', Ayelen Parolin allowed three naked men to pose as statues for an hour.

Again and again, there has been minimal acting where very little to nothing, happens on stage. And yet you continue to watch.

In the Netherlands, the languid theatre of directors such as Jetse Baetelaan, Boukje Schweigman and Lotte van den Berg (who is also Schwalbe's coach), has been around for a few years now. They explain their work to be a protest against the speed and consumerism of these times and as an invitation to once again learn to look with focus.

The Schwalbe mime performers push the minimalist trend further but break with silence. Their feet pedal faster than you can follow. The result is an engaging image of a world struggling to keep up with itself, peddling desperately on the spot with machines. If that's not theatre, then I don't know what is.

'Spaar ze' is playing on the 7th and 8th of June and 'Schwalbe speelt op eigen kracht' on the 10th and 11th of June in the Kaai theatre, Brussels.