

Contextualising means everything at the Kunsten Festival

Beri Juraic

Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels, Belgium. 10 May—1 June 2024.

The Kunstenfestivaldesarts of 2024 (KFDA or just Kunsten) was supposed to be celebrating its thirtieth edition since its foundation in 1994, but due to the pandemic it 'lost a year'. The festival has been known for its consistently cutting-edge multidisciplinary arts programming and discovering new artistic voices alongside well-established artists. Taking place over three weeks in the Belgian capital, the festival does not have an overarching theme, but the majority of the programme consists of world premieres. The 2024 programme featured twenty-seven world premieres.

The current artistic directors Daniel Blanga Gubbay and Dries Douibi took over the reins in 2019. For the past two years, the programme has been marked by the post-pandemic conditions. For example, the 2022 edition was oriented towards site-specific productions while the 2023 edition saw a gradual return to theatre spaces. In 2024 edition artistic directors seemed to have opted for a more hybrid format making wonderful use of abandoned spaces (cinema, hotel), schools and city streets along with traditional theatre spaces. They also chose to slightly deviate from the non-thematic nature by providing some thematic guidance through the mammoth of a programme in their editorial. Directors have nevertheless not yet found a good formula for contextualising new work for the audience, especially from the non-European context.

[PHOTO 1]

Birds-eye view of the atmosphere from Łukasz Twarkowski's six-hour show *Respublika*. Photo: Tuur Spillemaeckers

What makes the festival a compelling proposition though, is that it creates a certain excitement before it even begins because the majority of works presented have no performance history. This year big names included Łukasz Twarkowski's six-hour happening *Respublika* that turned the former covered market and now cultural centre Halles de Schaerbeek into a rave party with bars, restaurants and sauna, the European premiere of Back to Back Theatre's *Multiple Bad Things*, a morbid contemplation about mundanity or Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and dancer Radouan Mriziga's take on Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. However, what draws me repeatedly to this festival are the hidden gems.

[PHOTO 2]

Dancer swirling in Nacera Belaza's *La Nuée*. Photo: Luca Ianelli

One such gem is choreographer Nacera Belaza's *La Nuée*. Belaza, Algerian living in France, regularly appears in KFDA's programme. This latest dance piece for six dancers is a result of a meeting with First Nation people in the Midwest U.S. and observing their dances and cultural practice. *La Nuée* follows her previous work *L'Onde* (2019) in so far that it tries to find connections between Algerian and Native

American experience of colonisation. As an outsider, she was able to observe two elements that were also at the heart of her artistic practice—rhythm and circle.

The performance begins in total darkness with audience in the round. While I am adjusting my eyes to this darkness, I sense the bodies of dancers coming onto the stage. Soon the light appears in the middle of the stage very faintly to reveal one dancer's body that is sometimes still and sometimes swirling their arms and body. Like swarms (*la nuée*) from the title, five other dancers run around the space as they brush the edges of the light. Coupled with darkness, this kind of dramaturgy plays with our perception of distance. The soundtrack, based on the music by First Nation people, is also sometimes barely audible. This interplay between absence and presence of the bodies, light and music also points to the decentring of the performers and spectators' bodies. A reminder that one is constantly deprived of something. However, knowing Belaza's background one cannot shake the feeling that this piece also references the Algerian Black Decade (civil war in the 1990s) during which people disappeared into the darkness in plain sight. The latter half takes a slightly different turn when dancers bounce, swirl, run, jump around in circles visibly evoking the process of everyday life, its longevity, slowness and velocity. Towards the end as spectators we are blinded by the extremely bright light again blurring our vision. In short, I see this piece as a contemplation on the past and uncertainty about the future.

[PHOTO 3]

Eduardo Fukushima and Beatriz Sano suspended from the floor among Tomie Ohtake's sculptures in their dance piece *horizon*. Photo: Anna Van Waeg

Another dance piece, Eduardo Fukushima and Beatriz Sano's *horizon* (or *horizonte* in Portuguese) epitomises the interdisciplinarity that has become the trademark of the festival. Living in São Paulo, choreographers and dancers Fukushima and Sano are part of Brazilian Nikkei communities (the largest Japanese diaspora communities in the world). In this piece, Fukushima and Sano are inspired by Tomie Ohtake's sculptures, also a part of scenography. Tomie Ohtake, Brazilian Nikkei of a different generation, was a key figure in the Brazilian geometric abstraction movement and her sculptures are exhibited in major museums worldwide.

[PHOTO 4]

Eduardo Fukushima's twisting his body underneath Tomie Ohtake's swirly sculpture in *horizon*, choreographed by Eduardo Fukushima and Beatriz Sano. Photo: Anna Van Waeg

I climb up to the third floor of Wiels, former brewery turned into contemporary arts centre, where Fukushima and Sano are already on the floor drifting among Tomie Ohtake's white twisty sculptures, along with spell-binding beats of percussion played by Chico Leibniz. In this vast hall marked by four pillars with audience seated behind them, dancers' bodies are suspended from the floor like puppets, moving up and down. At other times, they move closer and further away from each other. Bodies stroke the sculptures ever so slightly, producing a wave-like effect similar to the movements. Their airy brightly coloured costumes (designed by Rita Comparato) blend into the space seamlessly. Every now and then, a single powerful beat shifts the movements in another direction. Fukushima and Sano also puncture the flow of

Leibniz's drumming through bird-like whistles. All the dramaturgical elements seem to reside in an (in)visible centrifugal force. This is especially evident when Fukushima and Sano move outside the space to the room at the back. In this meeting of dance, sculpture and music, we can also observe the flow of in-betweenness that rests on migration of experimentation across generations and disciplines.

[PHOTO 5]

Domestic scenes in abandoned hotel in Brussels. Left to right performers Zere Asylbek and Gulmira Tursunbaeva in Theatre 705's *Уя (Nest)*, directed by Chagaldak Zamirbekov. Photo: Inge Vermeiren

My final highlight was *Уя (Nest)* directed by Chagaldak Zamirbekov for Theatre 705 with a script based on interviews with Kyrgyz people about the meaning of home. Zamirbekov and his group are one of the few feminist and queer voices in Kyrgyzstan. Due to censorship in their home country, the group performs in apartments in the capital Bishkek. There, buying tickets means registering in advance and being contacted personally by the team. Here, in Brussels, the situation is different, but similarly intimate because it is performed for only forty paying spectators in an abandoned hotel Continental.

As I arrive on Place de Brouckère in the city centre, it takes me a while to locate the entrance. Maybe it is because I am not local, but it adds to the feeling of secrecy. The performance itself takes place on the first floor in a narrow corridor between two rooms where we are seated on benches very close to the action. It commences when the performers bring a large bucket of water into the middle of the corridor and director Zamirbekov closes the door. Through seven episodes, the actors recount verbatim various stories; a story about a boy, whose father joined Daesh, about an ultra-nationalist politician who is a member of a party Kyrwk Choro that wants non-parliamentary form of government as well as to abolish human rights; about struggles of a female director of an orphanage and about domestic violence. It is clear that the actors have been given freedom to go off-piste from the scripted text.

This performance is based on verbatim dramaturgy with live and scripted translation. The first part centres around everyday life as a mother bathes her son. As mother narrates her everyday struggles raising a child and being a wife in the Kyrgyz language, we rely on surtitles on the side wall. However, it is clear that there is something lost in translation. After a while, her daughter, turned interpreter/guide translates parts of her speech for us. She also verbalises that the surtitles might be unreliable thus urging us to listen to the original language. This creates a sense of attentiveness about one's surroundings, of our perception of the space and actors in it, and ultimately of fear, that, at least from what we are told, permeates contemporary Kyrgyz society. Conversely, it is also perhaps a double critique of linguistic dominance of English, of Western values and international festivals that increasingly rely on surtitles to translate the local context. This year's KFDA was particularly marred by poor surtitling in some shows that omitted important cultural contexts.

[PHOTO 6]

Re-enacting political speech by a member of Kyrwk Choro, ultra-nationalist party in Kyrgyzstan. Performer Zhusupbek uulu Emil in Theatre 705's *Уя (Nest)*, directed by Chagaldak Zamirbekov. Photo: Inge Vermeiren

Furthermore, there are elements of audience participation. At the end of the first episode, I was asked to put away the heavy bucket while other audience members helped sweep the floor. While stories are re-told with passion, they do not rest on pure verbatim. Rather, they confront the audience directly with questions such as: 'do you have a mother/father?' 'do you love her/what do you wish for him?'. This leaves many spectators bewildered and incapable of answering. After a particularly poignant and tense episode about domestic violence, they throw a question at us about whether this happens in our homes. This unique performance demands that we deal with difficult questions in a world that does not want us to.

In the case of these three performances and others that I saw, KFDA missed providing important cultural context beyond a few lines in programme notes. The festival should take note how one goes about contextualising performances for the audiences means everything.

Beri Juraic is a PhD Candidate in Theatre Studies at the Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts, Lancaster University, United Kingdom. He was a Visiting Scholar at the Kansai University in Osaka, Japan in the autumn of 2022 supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK and The Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation. He holds an MA in Japanese Studies (Distinction) from SOAS, University of London. His research interests include post-war and contemporary Japanese theatre, theatre and migration and multilingual theatre. Prior to academic career, he worked as a theatre producer and a festival programmer in the UK and abroad.