

PRESS

HOUSE GRAMMAR

PIETER T'JONCK IN PZAZZ, 08.2019

Amongst the 'young work' shown at TAZ#19 there were two dance performances, both of which, coincidentally or not, are inspired by house dance. Cassiel Gaube presents it in 'Farmer Train Swirl' in the form of an 'étude', a compositional principle taken from 'serious music'. It makes you look at this dance style from a different angle.

In classical music, Wikipedia reports, an étude is a composition for educational purposes, and is not intended to be performed publicly. But it can also be a piece that examines difficult techniques of playing an instrument. In that case, it is meant to be performed in public.

'Farmer Train Swirl' belongs to the second category. Before the performance begins, Gaube takes the floor to explain the set-up of the evening. He has been practicing house dance for years. This dance style originated in the 1980s in abandoned warehouses in Chicago. Its mixture of various black dances such as hip hop, salsa, tap dance, etc. grew into a genre in itself.

After his studies at PARTS in Brussels, Gaube continued his training during workshops and jam sessions in Paris and New York. Clubs provided important learning experiences. He wants to demonstrate the 'moves, grooves and attitudes' that he learned there 'in an embodied and subjective way'. There is a didactic side to this. He will not only demonstrate the skills required by the genre, but also how it has a precise, articulated vocabulary. In order to give the audience a helping hand, they receive a sheet of paper that maps out his trajectory across the stage. The names of the successive 'moves and grooves' are written down along this winding line. Different colours indicate their source material. Red for 'hip hop', blue for 'house', yellow for 'variations' and green for 'signature steps from teachers'.

This didactic approach wouldn't surprise anyone if it were a classical ballet, as this a dance form following a strict code, making it perfectly possible to note down positions, intensities and figures on a diagram. But you don't expect anything like that to be applicable to house. Yet it proves to be possible nevertheless.

Although it is far from easy, if not impossible, to follow what move Gaube is at in the diagram during the half hour he dances. Do we see 'the pepper seed', or is this already 'the smurf'? You can make a rough guess, because the word 'clap' along the line indicates the moments when Gaube actually claps his hands.

But whether or not you can follow the diagram is not really the issue here. The point is that it proves that such a diagram can be made, and what that implies. Because with ballet too, few viewers can name all the steps, but that doesn't prevent them in any way to enjoy them. The knowledge that what you see corresponds to a precise codex relieves the viewer from the burden to 'understand' the moves. You only need to pay attention to the specific way in which a dancer interprets this codex. It's like a story that one knows through and through: the joy lies in the way it is time and again told in a slightly different way.

Mutatis mutandis, the same goes for house. That is Gaube's claim. It's just as much a repertoire, a codex. Here, too, everything revolves around the way in which a dancer shapes a figure, breathes life into it. The same story, told differently every time. The beauty of the performance is that Gaube, after his short introduction - much shorter than my explanation here - also proves his point. During almost half an hour he demonstrates, largely in silence, the basic principles of house.

The first 'move' focuses on the legs, which he crosses back and forth in an ever faster way. Slowly he sinks through his legs, and his arms start to swing. Eventually his feet stay on the ground. They still bounce lightly, but the centre of the movement moves upwards. His swaying hip makes his back and shoulders turn back and forth, and the arms follow in wider swings. His head follows until he lifts it up. Now he regains control of his wildly winding arms. The strenuous exercise requires an intense control of the breath. Gaube blows out and then inhales loudly through his nose again. In this way his breathing develops into a kind of percussion that accompanies the movements. It sounds like a steam locomotive that starts up slowly but then picks up more and more speed.

The centre of the movement now slides even further upwards, towards the shoulders, which in turn swing forward and backward. Instead of his legs, his arms now make super-fast cruising movements, like the drive shafts of a steam train indeed. It is only after this initiation that Gaube initiates his swirling walk across the stage. It is at first slightly comical in appearance. Spastically waddling, he constantly shoots through his hips and then involuntarily pulls out an arm. But as if by magic, this drunken 'attitude' changes into a graceful round dance, which defies gravity in its slowness.

In this way, one figure keeps tipping over into another. The centre of the movement moves back and forth in his body. Pelvis and legs indicate the basso continuo, the breath is the leading voice, shoulders, arms, hands and head articulate the nuances of the movement in countless variations. Virtuoso fights with gravity add bravura. Moments of (deliberate) loss of control add witty humour.

Only very late, at about two-thirds of the length of the piece, does music suddenly resound: brilliant jazzy piano runs on a tapestry of electronic percussion by Omar S. After the long introduction into the language and grammar of house, Gaube now opens all improvisation registers. It is an exhilarating moment, that slowly fades out when the music also dies away.

The final movement is a small tap dance, without 'claquettes', but still very recognizable. That is not without importance symbolically. It is the oldest 'black' dance that became known worldwide, and despite all the corruptions and 'wrong' appropriations never completely disappeared.

Gaube shows here in half an hour that house has grown from countless popular sources into a fully-fledged expressive medium. Not only can you 'read' that language, you can also tell a lot with it. That's why this dance, *mutatis mutandis*, doesn't differ that much from ballet. That, too, was derived from popular dances. But sarabandes, chaconnes and minuets were traded here for reggae, hip hop, tapdance or salsa. If you can demonstrate that in such a short period of time, then you've done something important.

[Read the review in Dutch here.](#)

