

Dancing in the air

Choreographer Pia Meuthen receives the Prince Bernhard Culture Prize for her productions in which she builds a bridge between dance and acrobatics. "You can tell something about people and their relationships with dance"

by Gerrit van den Hoven

In the big venue of the Verkademfabriek, the five dancers of Panama Pictures move in a fragile-looking structure of aluminum tubes. They grab each other and let go. In the background, clarinet player Han Stubbe and bass player Hannes d'Hoine (from the Belgian band DAAU) provide dark sounding live music. From the empty and dark tribune, the voice of choreographer Pia Meuthen gives directions or tells which scene she wants to have rehearsed. *Requiem for Lost Things*, the new piece from Meuthen's Panama Pictures' is about to start. It will premiere on Thursday 25 October. Meuthen: "It's about loss. It could be anything, loss of someone, of ideals of memories. We build our existence on the gaps that the loss leaves behind. There is no logic in life, there are no solutions. Yet we are asked to some kind of surrender. I place this opposite to the solidarity that the men of my group enter into with each other."

It sounds philosophical and it is. Meuthen often starts from literature or philosophical text. It was no different for *Requiem for Lost Things*. She read Julian Barnes' moving book about dealing with the loss of his wife. She had her dancers make a list of things they had lost. They served as preparation, just like watching the documentary in which singer Nick Cave tries to cope with the loss of his son. And then there was the movie *Ghost Story*, about a young couple whose husband dies but returns as a ghost in the movie. Afterwards, the company dances and moves in the rehearsal room of the company. Meuthen captures everything on camera and keeps parts that fit and touch her. From those improvisations, the choreographies for her pieces slowly emerge. "I know what I want to say. In the end everything is completely written out. But I try to put the authenticity of improvisation on stage in such a way that spectators get the feeling that it just came into being."

That works. "Meuthen has enriched Brabant with stimulating representations of unprecedented expressiveness," praised the jury of the Brabant Culture Prize of the Prince Bernhard Fund. After the premiere, Meuthen receives the prize of 10,000 euros from the King's Commissioner Wim van de Donk, the fund's chairman. For her performances in which dance and acrobatics enter into a completely logical connection with each other.

Meuthen (1972) made her first dance pieces at a young age, still in high school in Duisburg, the city in the Ruhr area, where she grew up. She saw the groundbreaking performances of Pina Bausch in the 1980s. "Those were eye openers. It went much further than nice lines. Her dance told something about people and their relationships." That's what she wanted. But she was not accepted at the Bausch dance education in Essen, the only modern dance education in Germany at that time. "So, I looked across the border. At the time, the Netherlands was very progressive in the field of modern dance. I could come to the dance academy in Amsterdam." During that dance education, she heard from the academy in Tilburg that had a broad education offering theater lessons and improvisation. After graduating there in 1997, she danced for another two years a.o. at the Huis van Bourgondië. After that period, she made her first pieces at L'Avventura in Tilburg and later at Productiehuis Brabant. She stopped dancing. "A choreographer does not have to dance himself. I no longer show any steps to my performers. But it gives me a basic knowledge. I have an idea how heavy it is and how much it hurts."

She has come a long way. In the beginning her pieces were about women. Then she

combined dance with lyrics. "I used actors and dancer. But I got stuck. Text is so concrete and defining. I lost the dance, so the text had to be removed again."

At Station Zuid, the dance house that was founded in Tilburg in 2003 to serve the southern provinces in the field of dance, she became a house choreographer. She was able to develop further there in complete freedom. "I have always felt good there, but you did notice the tensions that existed. It was expected from Station Zuid that we would make large scale productions, but they were not nearly there yet. The expectations were much too high."

Skin, a production in which she let her dancers move very close to and among the spectators, was her last for Station Zuid that stopped in 2012. It was also her last performance in which she used text. "I had seen *Loup pour l'homme*, a French company. I already had in mind to combine dance and acrobatics. The French showed me that it was possible. I went to see circus schools and made my first production in which acrobats and dancers worked together."

She developed further and further, exploring the possibilities. Her productions also got better and better. She also literally went up, used ropes, aerial straps and Chinese poles. She formed a solid, steady group of people around her. She has been working together with composer duo Jeroen Strijbos and Rob van Rijswijk for fifteen years. There is a permanent stage designer and a dramaturge. There is also increasingly live music. She needs the different disciplines. "Dance alone can be very bald. I need more that stimulates my imagination."

The audience grew with it. She managed to make a crossover between the audience for dance and acrobatics. Interest is also growing from abroad. And the next step therefore presents itself. "I would like to try larger scale productions for bigger venues," she says cautiously. "We are growing a bit out of the small venues. A step is coming. I am not saying that for next year, it has quite a few financial consequences and we are just a small organization. But an audience is growing. There is now a tour with *Requiem for Lost Things*, but we are also continuing our previous production *Go north*."

CV Pia Meuthen

Pia Meuthen (Duisburg 1972) is a theater maker and choreographer. She followed her dance education in Amsterdam and Tilburg. She worked as a dancer with the Huis van Bourgondië and as a choreographer she made productions for a.o. L'Avventura, Productiehuis Brabant and Station Zuid. In 2002 she founded her own company Panama Pictures, which in 2012 became the in-house company of the Verkadefabriek. Meuthen lives with her children in Den Bosch.