

Dossier

Creation 2025

Première 24 January 2025

O amor natural

Andrew Graham | laGeste



rehearsal photo © Kurt Van der Elst

"I realized that the presence, the proximity, the openness of another body can be an answer to a relational need, a motivation to dance. Dance then becomes an emancipated environment that can respond to our needs and intentions." Andrew Graham

CONTEXT

Andrew Graham appeared on Hildegard De Vuyst's radar in 2019. At the time, she was a dramaturge at the Festival de Marseille and had put together a revival of Alain Platel's *Le Sacre* as an urban project. This version of Stravinsky's dance music was populated with local dance groups that share a physical practice for very different reasons: from salsa and samba to krump and hip-hop, to

Eastern European folk dances, to more contemporary practices, with groups of schoolchildren or elderly people, from institutions or neighbourhood-based.

One motley collection of dancers stood out in Marseille: a group that did not let itself be known by a strongly defined identity, guided by dancer-choreographer Andrew Graham. Its individuality consisted exactly of this blending of possibilities and limitations, of generations and genders. That group was the externalisation of Graham's desire for 'mixability'. After years of experience at the pre-eminent inclusive dance company in the UK, Candoco, a return to the south of France was the starting point for developing its own practice based on a unique vision that embraces all bodies: with visible or invisible disabilities, formally trained or self-taught.

Since 2019, a few things have happened. Andrew Graham founded L'Autre Maison in Marseille, dedicated to the practice of mixability, and made the creation *Parade* (2021 and 2022) at the invitation of Festival de Marseille. Hildegard De Vuyst became artistic director of laGeste, a dance organisation that continues the legacy of les ballets C de la B and Alain Platel's inclusive approach.

After Marseille, between 2019 and 2022, Graham, at the invitation of Jan Goossens, also thoroughly immersed himself in Tunis where he set up the project *Lines* for Dream City 2023. Over a two-year period in Tunis, he brought together a group of children with disabilities and their mothers, nieces, brothers, from migrants, LGBTQIA+ and everything in between. The downside of the local work is that both *Parade* and *Lines* did little or no touring and generated little international visibility.



Parade © Sofie De Backere

O amor natural is a medium-sized theatre project made to travel. It was developed in different stages.

In autumn 2023, Andrew came to Ghent for a period of research and development/pre-study around *O amor natural*. He opened the doors of Studio laGeste and drew inspiration from 1970s New York ballroom culture: a haven for a marginalised community that perfected its own dance codes and styles.

Ballrooms created a meeting place and party space in the heart of the city, bringing together people whose paths would not spontaneously cross: dancers with disabilities, the queer community, refugees, members of the laGeste choir (from *Mein Gent*) as well as participants in laGeste's inclusive workshops.



Ballrooms © Sofie De Backere

Although initially intended as a preliminary study for *O amor natural*, [*Ballrooms*](#) developed into a distinct participatory project based on a protocol that can be implemented in any city. It has since been successfully tested at la Raffinerie in Molenbeek as part of MolenFest (September 2024), supporting Molenbeek's candidacy as European Capital of Culture in 2030."

Ballrooms also became the context in which Andrew Graham met the cast for *O amor natural*. During the first ball, Tijen Lawton was his companion de route, Wim Auwerx signed up through the inclusive workshops, Maarten Degezelle came to take a look out of curiosity as part of his job as an audience worker at NTGent, Isnelle da Silveira occasionally popped in on a walk with Kito, Alain's dog; Amir Sabra who injected the energy of a dabke workshop led us to his friend from the same refugee camp at Nablus Hamza Damra, etc... After an initial research week in May 2024, six performers began rehearsals in November 2024.



rehearsal photos © Kurt Van der Elst

CHOREOGRAPHIC POEMS

The title of *O amor natural* is based on the work of Heddy Honingmann, a beautiful documentary about poems and erotic stories by elderly Brazilians. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8LzRtiVKE0>
It situates sensuality and eroticism where we do not immediately expect it.

Andrew Graham sums it up this way: "Care, romance, fluid identity and fantasy all come together in this choreographic creation, conceived as a series of non-verbal haikus. Poems choreographed around touch and the possible relationships of trust between bodies such as the tension between two bodies, two hearts in a tango, for example." The keywords in this physical creation are desire, love, pleasure, consent and limitation.

O amor natural goes beyond the binary codes of yes and no and explores consent in all its non-verbal richness: whispers, body temperature, breathing, gaze and speed of movement weave a web of intimacy. The concept of consent raises many questions about care practices, but also about sexual and artistic practices. How do we know and how do we communicate what we do and do not want? On what basis can we consent to a practice that is still foreign to us?

For people with disabilities, touch is often associated with a medical act, as if their bodies are objects to be manipulated and moved without regard to their physical and emotional needs, in a relationship that is necessarily devoid of any sensuality. *O amor natural* is about giving ourselves the chance to express the complexity of touch in our relationships, where we often only allow ourselves to conceive of touch in a medical or sexualised relationship.

Over the course of his choreographic work with a variety of audiences, including people with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ individuals, migrants, older people and professional artists, Andrew Graham has repeatedly witnessed a relational need and the lack of contact that leads some people to dance. "I realised," says the choreographer, "that the presence, proximity and availability of other bodies can be a response to this need and is a motivation to dance. Dance then becomes an emancipated environment that can respond to our needs and intentions."

It is also crucial to ask how a city, a cultural institution or a society can be a constraint for an individual, a body or a fantasy that falls outside the norm.

Cast

Six performers are at the heart of the production. Each person carries and brings a world with them. *O amor natural* is an encounter between people with very different sexual, physical, cultural and professional experiences. The cast brings together different worlds in terms of age, (in)visible disability, ethnicity, libertine or conservative minds, experience with dance and inclusive practices.

The dancers developed their own material, in consultation with Andrew Graham and Hildegard De Vuyst who, as dramaturge, guided the creation process. Composer Steven Prengels was also closely involved in the creation process. After long and intense collaboration with Platel (for *Gardenia, En avant, marche!, nicht schlafen, Mein Gent*) that culminated in the composition assignment for *Ombra* at OperaBalletVlaanderen, this was an opportunity to connect with a younger generation of creators. Prengels brought Beethoven in (piano sonata nr21 opus 53 parts 2 + 3), adapted LA LOM and Nina

Simone for Isnelle da Silveira; he stretched 'Jungle Fever' by Chakachas and composed for the laGeste choir 'I like your', which at the end breaks open the intimacy.

The Scenography was in the hands of Karolien De Schepper; she created a number of ambiguous objects that refer to intimate parts. Pink, red, and flesh tones dominate the visual, continued in the costumes by Dotje Demuynck. While the objects initially create intimate and fluid spaces, they are later, without hesitation, molded into erotic landscapes.

CREDITS & BIOGRAPHY

concept [Andrew Graham](#) & [Hildegard De Vuyst](#)

directed by Andrew Graham

created with & performed by [Hamza Damra](#), [Isnelle Da Silveira](#), [Maarten Degezelle](#), [Tijen Lawton](#), [Vladimir Perrin](#), [Wim Auwerx](#)

composition & soundscape [Steven Prengels](#)

scenography Karolien De Schepper

light Helmut Van den Meersschaut

costumes Dotje Demuynck

sound Arthur De Vuyst

dramaturgy Hildegard De Vuyst

touring Sepehr Sharifzadeh | laGeste

production laGeste

co-production Kunstencentrum Viernulvier

thanks to laGeste choir, Flup Beys, Valerie Boone

supported by City of Ghent, Flemish Authorities and the Belgian Federal Government's Tax Shelter measure through Flanders Tax Shelter



PRAKTICAL INFO

tournee 11 people on tour: 6 dancers et 5 crew.

set-up and take-down on the same day.

stage size needed minimum 10m/10m.

audience capacity +- 700.

ANDREW GRAHAM'S WORK

- website l'Autre Maison www.cielautremaison.com
- Documentary *Alors ils dansent* (realized for *Parade*)
<https://vimeo.com/781535609>
- The capture of *Parade* can be obtained from sepehr@lageste.be

AGENDA

Premiere 24.01.2025

24 & 25 January 2025 at 20.00, in the Theaterzaal in De Vooruit, programmed by Art Centre Viernulvier (Ghent).



rehearsal photos © Kurt Van der Elst

MORE INFORMATION ABOUT *O AMOR NATURAL*

Updates and additions to the presentation text, credits, biographies, recent photos, trailer, interviews and press will be available [here](#). This site will be updated.

As of the premiere, you can download new high-resolution photos and the trailer [here](#).

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BY
THE
BODY



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