



laGeste  
creation 2021

# promise me

Joke Laureyns & Kwint Manshoven  
laGeste (kabinet k + les ballets C de la B)

photo: promise me (2021) © Kurt Van der Elst

## Joke Laureyns in conversation with VIERNULVIER about promise me.

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### Your work always delves into the world of children. Why do you prefer this perspective?

It is not so much the world of children, it is actually the world of every human being. But somehow we are collectively more alert when it comes to children. Or not alert enough: children do hold a window to the future for us. They tell us where we are evolving to as humanity, they incorporate the input of the society in which they are growing up... In that sense, they are no different, but with them we can still build utopias, there is still a certain flexibility to do things differently.

### Is it because of this that your work can appeal to both children and adults?

It is indeed important to us that everyone can look at the piece, yet we want to make uncompromising performances. Because our starting point is always one of great humanity, we succeed in doing so. Furthermore the presence of different generations on stage also provides keys for an audience of all ages to look at the piece. This gives a nice dynamic: when the audience is as mixed as the group of dancers on stage.

But it's neither a method, nor a recipe, I wouldn't want that either, it's the attitude with which we want to stand in life, not to think in frames or pigeonholes, without hierarchy.

### Let's talk about *promise me*, your production that is currently on tour. What was the starting point for this creation?

The performance was born out of a desire to be surrounded by people who are not ruled by fear, those who nurture their curiosity, who dare to take risks (rather than wanting to protect themselves against everything).

The performance is based on a concern that western children are no longer growing up with bumps and bruises, that their whole world is gradually being ruled by health and safety guidelines, so that we can no longer learn from danger. It is an appeal to society: give us the confidence that we will do the right thing, but also that we have to push back boundaries and question norms in order to bring about change. Let go of us, in order to become who we should be. It takes a certain hubris, recklessness too, not to settle for the status quo. But to choose risk over stability. It is also an attempt to step out of our comfort zone and show solidarity with circumstances in which children grow up in a climate of oppression and fear. It is a tribute to the resilience of Palestinian children, of refugee children, and by extension of all people who dare to put fears aside to pursue something new. Be it out of necessity or out of commitment.

And finally, there is our fascination with the duality in our humanity: the urge to live and the contempt for death, a brutal intimacy that borders on violence, resistance and anger versus peace and connection.

### How is this translated into dance material for a performance?

Through the performers themselves. Creating with different generations is a way of working for us, almost like a sculptor's choice of material. For example, we choose to work with young, immature bodies. Because of the tension between strength and vulnerability, between imagination and reality. The contrast and interchangeability with the trained 'adult' dancers: how both challenge, complement and propel each other. And how ultimately a universe is created in which they are each other's equals. Not as beings and as performers. As choreographers, we see in the child a way to reduce each movement to its essence, to the flowing together of an energy with the articulation of the body, breath, muscles & joints. It is an invitation to look at our humanity, at our bodies, stripped of any discourse or rhetoric. We do not give the children any responsibility with regard to the content of the performance: they give, play, experience; they search for a state of being, which they find in the dance but which they never have to justify or verbalise.

For us, improvisation is a way to allow the cast to co create and feed the subject matter with a very physical input and translation, to reinforce insights, without having endless conversations. It is a way to convey a language: to install our specific signature. Dancers and children constantly influence each other and build up a great physical trust between them, in complete freedom. These are two key words that recur in all our work: freedom and trust. Just because they are inherent in every process, they are ultimately also so visible and eloquent in our creations. We do not explain our intentions, we make them tangible in the atmosphere that hangs over the creation process.

### Does the live soundtrack also play an important role?

Thomas' role as a musician is decisive: he can very much influence the atmosphere in the studio with his timbre, which is an unspoken dialogue. He steers from the inside out, helps determine the direction in which the dance material develops.

His presence at the rehearsals from the beginning is crucial: he designs the sound in the improvisations with the dancers. It allows them to incorporate movement material without too much manipulation from a choreographic point of view. We start from very practical, physical concepts. In promise me, these were: tilting, swinging, bouncing, transformations, opposite directions, extreme twisting of the torso. Thomas' answers to these directions with his voice and guitar, he too behaves as freely as the dancers. We avoid an emotional starting point for improvisations during the creation process. We like to leave our audience free to project their own interpretations and emotions onto the dance and read the work from their own experiences and knowledge. It also creates a certain 'alienation' in viewing, a distance between the adult gaze and the young body. This has a slightly disruptive effect and I have the feeling that, as a maker, we get a sharper translation of our subject matter to the audience as a result. Thomas and his music reinforce this process. It is important that it happens wordlessly, purely physically, and that every

viewer has to/can/may translate and interpret it in their own way. Not in the sense of decoding, but in the sense of experiencing.

### How did the creation period of *promise me* go?

We worked for ten weeks, spread over nine months. We could start from a very strong basis: the children in this production had already been through a whole creation process (for *as long as we are playing*) and had even been able to gain some months of stage experience, just before the first lockdown. In this sense, they have an almost professional basis and Kwint and I did not have to 'invest' in group dynamics first, nor in a natural attitude to performing (which we see as the essence of being able to work and create). From the first day of rehearsal, the improvisations had an enormous depth and started from a great understanding, almost a pact. In each case, there was an unseen surrender and uninhibitedness, which was additionally nourished by the limitations brought about by the corona crisis. The rehearsals became a value outlet and a counterweight: it became a breeding ground where the physical hunger for contact and touch could flourish.

The children make notes in their own notebooks, and they find names for certain pieces of movement material that presented themselves in the improvisations. In this way, together with them, we get a grip on the material and they experience the creation as something of their own. Until the end, the children surrender to our hands and our choices: they move and we steer. That is also a pact and it is only possible in an atmosphere of trust and openness. In this way, we push their limits little by little; they can do much more than they suspect at the start of a process. A performance can only succeed if the rapport between makers and performers is boundless.

We never had to convince them: they bring the material themselves during the improvisations. We are ambiguous as human beings: we have destructive sides, a dose of violence, a tendency to excess and to breaking out... Because the children quickly understood that we were looking for a certain recklessness in the material, they regarded the rehearsal room as a sanctuary to push boundaries and to give free play to sides that are more normal in the 'real' world. That this includes the risk of injury or a little pain, was obvious to them. Nobody ever wanted to stop; the most dangerous scenes are their favourites. They embraced the duality. And we were given their gift of squeezing 'blood' out of beetroot, licking a sharp knife, subduing a larger body....

### Why should people come and see *promise me*?

To give themselves a present: the performance is infectious. It questions your own standards, but in a liberating way.

And for ourselves: because we are finally playing in Ghent! A bit of a homecoming in our own city after a year of international touring with *promise me*. Incidentally, the children are growing up so fast that we won't be able to play the show for years to come, so there is also an urgency in time: play NOW and come and see NOW.

And it is a first for laGeste, which is the merger we started this year with les ballets C de la B. We have a long history of collaboration and a great artistic affinity in the search for visceral storytelling. We decided to join forces and continue our work under the new name laGeste: a home both for the intergenerational practice that we developed at kabinet k and for the legacy of choreographer Alain Platel, who was the pivot of les ballets C de la B for more than thirty-five years.

The new story of laGeste is not a break with the past, but a radical continuation of the values of both our companies: finding vitality, resilience and beauty where others do not seek them, creating space for ambiguous, even contradictory, contents: innocence and perversity, the constructed and the authentic, unconscious wildness and hyperconscious virtuosity. It is our way of countering the violence of the standardised representation of bodies and of creating role models where they do not yet exist.

## What is the next project on the agenda for laGeste?

We have now started the rehearsals of *someone will always be missing*. That is a project we have been looking forward to for a very long time. It will be a physical performance that spans several generations of Palestinians and interweaves various ways of life.

This project connects twelve dancers in six duets: always in pairs, an adult dancer and a young child, both of Palestinian origin and each with their own background. They live on the West Bank, in Gaza, East Jerusalem, in the camps of Lebanon, in Israel or in Belgium. Each duet starts from an intense encounter and reveals a context, stories, tensions and sensitivities. Each encounter is a search for understanding and trust, for mutual connection.

Perhaps they will never physically share the stage together, given the geopolitical barriers. The challenge will be to make their absence felt. This aspiration is utopian, it is a desire for an impossible reality. But the desire is there. It is this desire that will determine the dynamics of the performance; absence and want will colour every performance differently.

We are making this performance together with the Freedom Theatre in Jenin, in coproduction with VIERNULVIER, among others.

This interview was conducted on the occasion of the performance dates of *promise me* in the '22-'23 season of VIERNULVIER at De Vooruit, Ghent.

photo: *promise me* (2021) © Kurt Van der Elst



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THE  
BODY

laGeste

