

Hear the Silence – Zoë Demoustier & laGeste, Ultima Vez, KVS

Dancing against the atrocities of war

We are a good twenty minutes into *Hear the Silence* when the seven performers begin to glide across the stage, turning gracefully, their upper bodies upright. They do so in three-quarter time, with one arm stretched forward and the other raised sideways. The dance posture is familiar, except that there is a void between the two arms: the bodies waltz without a partner. It is a poignant, slightly unsettling scene that metaphorically but sharply captures the essence of this new performance by choreographer Zoë Demoustier.

The performers move to Maurice Ravel's *La Valse*, composed between February 1919 and 1920. The twelve-minute piece sounds like a requiem for both a once popular society dance – think Vienna – and for the aristocratic-bourgeois order that collapsed with “the Great War”. Ravel himself contested this interpretation, but Demoustier fully affirms it: this deconstruction of the waltz was also a musical commentary on a destruction that had just taken place. Hence the semi-dark stage, with a semicircular white cloth at the top left; hence the repeated transformation of *La Valse* into gritty noise or techno, which is an unmistakable reference to the present; hence also the scene in which the dancers move in unison but at the same time waltz solo. The absent partner is gone for good: the embraced emptiness is home to a war victim.

In *Hear the Silence*, the violence of war is evoked by bodies supporting each other or a body being dragged across the floor amid clouds of smoke. The movements appear clichéd, their slow execution further emphasising their stereotypical nature.

Demoustier cannot be blamed for these embodied platitudes. The violence of war cannot be depicted, certainly not on stage. It can only be suggested through a highly coded visual language with a very limited bandwidth: its monotony expresses a more general powerlessness in the face of the unspeakable nature of deadly displays of power and “naked life”.

In the same scene, Demoustier contrasts the platitudes of war violence with clichés of solidarity: performers form a circle, dancers move with their arms intertwined and crossed. The reference to folk dance is evident, but the context gives the evoked sense of community a specific meaning. The scene functions as a danced argument: no war without a nation state. That is a “thick description” on my part, but the dramaturgy of the performance – which is both narrative and non-narrative at the same time – encourages you to make such connections. Thus, between the waltzing without a partner and the war scene, there is waltzing in pairs. So “after the war” is followed by “before the war”,

at least in my reading, followed by an evocation of the violence of war and its nationalist roots. The dramaturgy of *Hear the Silence* does indeed replace the linear time of history with the associative temporality of memory. Or, in other words, resonance takes precedence over sequence.

The dramaturgy of Hear the Silence replaces the linear time of history with the associative temporality of memory.

There can be no war without an army, but that collective only appears in concentrated form after the war and folk dance scene. The seven performers first march slowly, close together; their steps are amplified, recorded and set in motion. Then the tempo accelerates, the group breaks up and it seems as if the performers are dancing separately, turned in on themselves. But this does not quite happen: the dancers begin to run loosely, from back to front and back again. Once again, it is a social choreography, but one in which the discipline of the military parade gives way to the apparent informality of the fashion show.

Hear the Silence contains several scenes that combine originality with effectiveness; the partly live sound score by Rint Mennes, Willem Lenaerts and Misha Demoustier reinforces their impact without ever drowning out the images. Sometimes the tableaux vivants created have a sculptural feel, but more often they create a cinematic atmosphere. For example, after Mennes, who is on stage throughout the entire piece, appears, the dancers freeze into a war memorial in a social-realist style (an image that returns later). In the next scene, Misha Demoustier stands dressed in a dark suit, in the light of a dimmed spotlight. He performs simple movements; the sound of some of his actions is amplified, as is his breathing. With his right arm, he regularly beats time in three-four time – an allusion to the coming waltz. A voice says “out away of the body”, and a moment later a snippet of violin music is heard. No more ingredients are needed to solidify a scene into an enigmatic image, one from which time slowly drips away and which at the same time fills with an indefinable desolation.

The shift feels like a statement: a danced affirmation of the possibility of individual freedom versus the possibility of war.

I couldn't help thinking of Pina Bausch's work, partly because of the gestures, the thoughtful way in which Demoustier makes the movements or, more accurately, shows them. In later scenes, there is also that unemphatic request for attention: an invitation from the movements themselves – rather than from the movers – to look closely at how each fleeting action articulates its own time and space over and over again. This

invitation is the focal point of every dance performance; within the tradition of Tanztheater, this often implicit core is highlighted by restrained emphasis and concentrated movement. It is a now widely established performativity, which, however, often fails due to excessive emphasis: precision becomes precious, the display of movements contrived. None of this is present in *Hear the Silence*, in which the performers are convincing precisely because they maintain their distance from the audience, not wanting to rub the viewer's nose in the facts of the movement.

In the final scene, *La Valse* plays in overdrive, with no performers on stage and a projection of dancing colours on the white screen at the top left of the stage. In the performative end-before-the-end, the dancers move to a soundtrack that also runs its course: the generic, mechanical time of the uptempo beat takes over and with it the energy of the party. The shift in movement register is striking, especially when Anna Tierney performs a powerful solo. The change feels like a statement: a danced affirmation of the possibility of individual freedom versus the possibility of war. The tension that has run through the choreography all along is thus discharged: “this is about us”.

“Those who, like Demoustier, possess worldly senses, perceive in every dance an expression of the zest for life.”

‘Listening to silence’ means hearing the past, present and impending violence of war in dance movements inside or outside a theatre, performed by professional performers or hooping children, connected to elaborate choreographies or the *freestyle* of a raver. Those who, like Demoustier, possess worldly tuned senses, discern in every dance an expression of the life instinct which, directly or indirectly, criticises the death instinct permeating military displays.

Walter Benjamin originated the idea that every present has a quotable past and, conversely, that every past can only be understood in a specific present. *Hear the Silence* can “recite” the constellation recorded by Ravel, in which waltz and WWI intersected, because it resonates with *our unthought present* – with that constellation in which noise and, even more so, techno engage in a strange dialogue with imminent war violence.