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Running in Place with Hans Van den Broeck - ALMOST DARK - Running from Hoghe's 'Sacre'

By [Paul Ben-Itzak](#)

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PARIS -- When Edwin Denby said* dance criticism needs more poets and less academics (I paraphrase), he must have recognized the futility of trying to offer a sensical description of what is often a poetry of movement, an attempt to articulate in and on the body that which is impossible to articulate in words. Put more simply, if it could be captured in words, it would have been written in them. Still, the reporters among us (including your correspondent) usually feel impelled to try to find the story, the narrative, the message in the dance before us, so that we can bring it to you second-hand as it were, in a medium not the one of choice for the work's creator. Program notes are as often a hindrance as a help, promising more intellectually than the choreographer is able to physically (and coherently) probe. In the case of "Almost Dark," the latest work from the Brussels-based ex-Ballets C. de la B. choreographer Hans Van den Broeck, a look at the program notes before the show actually helps, as a signpost to the problems about to be addressed, if not fully resolved.

In my feeble French, anyway, Jean-Marc Adolphe's program notes for last night's performance, at the Theatre de la Ville - Les Abbesses in Montmartre, suggest "Almost Dark" will tackle the problem of how we surmount family psycho-histories to forge new relationships. The vehicle will be the body.

In what most closely resembles a sort of green room -- coffee table in the back, lockers lining stage left, a shower stall behind them and benches in front of them, and portable seating at stage right -- six people are situated. At the audience end of this row of lockers a sink and mirror are attached. Extending about a third of the way across the downstage from the stage-right wing is a sort of elevated scaffold beam, from whose end drops another beam, attached to which is a call box with a big red buzzer. Halfway into the piece, someone will scrawl "To kill love may wound" in white chalk across the elevated beam.

The buzzer starts the action in what is eventually, and literally -- through an offstage narrator speaking in English -- revealed as a "Redemption" course. First we have to

shake it all out, as the ensemble does by running in place in a horizontal line. The only body parts not vibrating, until the end of the segment, are the performers' feet, which remain firmly planted on the floor. Early on, they repeat, *sotto voce*: "They're coming to take me away, hah-hah, ho-ho." They breathe and pant audibly. Shoulders and heads jerk suddenly, punctuating the passage and reverberating through the rest of the body. Suddenly they stop, except for Harold Henning, who takes an easy chair and can't stop vibrating. Maria Ohman, sitting on an arm of the chair, tries to steady him by taking his hands, but she just picks up his vibration and is soon shaking too.

Neutrally dressed at first according to what could be personal preference -- one man, Gustavo Miranda, dances barefoot, while one woman, Carole Bonneau, balances on stilettos for much of the piece, most rivetingly when they seem to motor her shaking body across the room -- the members of this family break off and become more distinct. Harold Henning dons the garb of a *flic* (cop) or park guard, while Palle Dryval straps on cardboard wings and starts flapping them. The group's dynamic at its most malevolent comes out when, the stage darkening ominously and a wind seeming to sweep across it, Ohman suddenly starts, witch-like (just by pointing her hands at them) hurling objects around. Presumably exercising her magic on Dryval, she makes him divest himself of the wings, strip to his underwear and eventually out of it, and start barking and panting and begging and rolling on his back like a dog. Right away I thought, "Obligatory Belgian dance nudity moment" (sometimes it seems it must be a funding requirement) but this time I was wrong. Miranda joins in teasing the 'dog,' barking back and laughing at him. Eventually Dryval awakens from the spell, realizes embarrassedly that he's naked and, resentfully scowling at Ohman, hurriedly retrieves his underwear and, modestly turning his back to us, puts it and his wings back on. Humiliation is this family's demon, and it has been unveiled.

The next (I may be skipping one) session of the redemption course -- we know it's a session because the offstage voice tells us so -- involves finding a partner and then pushing him/her away and coming back together. Some go too far: Repeatedly slammed against the lockers by him with alarming force, Bonneau starts giving Miranda looks that say, "Overdoing it a bit, aren't we?" Yet even the "Embrace" session can't seem to throttle all the violence; if Bonneau and Miranda truly embrace with caressing enthusiasm, two of the men interpret the command as allowing them to charge and jump into the partner's arms, invariably knocking him to the ground.

Finally this session ends, and everyone takes a coffee break, around a table at about stage center -- except for Dryval, who can't stop moving. Ohman grabs him, perhaps trying to arrest him, but just gets stuck to him and pulled into the whirl. Bonneau tries to unpry her from behind him and gets stuck too, backed up against the lockers. Others try to help, with similar results. Meanwhile, whoever's not involved in this -- most drolly the choreographer -- maintains a casual coffee-klatch conversation over the table. Finally Dryval tumbles onto the table with Ohman, scattering everybody. Standing on the table-top for a moment, he fixates on Bonneau, jumps off and races after her. She spreads her arms, drolely, as if to evade being stuck to him, but it's no good. I should mention that during this sequence, composer Nic Roseeuw's choice is brilliant -- a Bachian fugue, amped up diabolically whenever Dryval claims a new victim.

Eventually, though, everyone is swirling with a partner, waltz-like, around the table. An elygiac ending, it seems, but the piece, like life, is not so simple. A harangue by Henning at the callbox follows. (Here my French fails me.) He disappears for a moment to reappear from the stage right curtain balancing along the beam above the stage; traffic noises are heard, suggesting he's precipitated himself perilously over a highway. Suddenly Bonneau slides out from the wing -- sitting on the beam, while he is trying to stand. She mutters something unintelligible. He turns to look, loses his balance, and falls as the lights black out.

"Almost Dark," a production of SOIT co-produced by the Theatre de la Ville and La Rose des Vents, continues through Saturday at the Theatre de la Ville - [Les Abbesses](#).

I'd intended to review Raimund Hoghe's "The Sacre - The Rite of Spring" today too, inspired by my colleague Laurie Uprichard's brief notes on the piece in her [Flash Journal](#) of last summer. (By mutual agreement, Laurie restricted herself to just some notes, rather than a full review.) But the piece seems to have lost something en route from Montpellier, where Laurie caught it, and the Theatre de la Bastille, where I attempted to see it Monday -- or rather, gained something, specifically, many decibels. Stravinsky's music carries its own thunder in the composition, and did not need to have its volume pumped up to the degree it was at this theater Monday. After wet tissues in the ears and mom's new scarf wrapped around them failed to diminish the decibels, I chose an early exit over hearing loss. It's not for me to say whether artists need to suffer for their art, but audiences -- even critics -- shouldn't have to.

What did you think of this Flash Review? E-mail author Paul Ben-Itzak at paul@danceinsider.com.

*In his entry on dance criticism for the "Dance Encyclopedia," edited by Anatole Chujoy. (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1967.)

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