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This Is It: Interview with Matthias Sperling and Vicky Malin

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One of the beautiful things about This Is It – a solo choreographed by Matthias Sperling and performed by Candoco dancer Vicky Malin – is that the piece starts with a self-affirming image only to move past it and dig into what else ‘this is it’ can mean.

Given this observation as a starting point, both Matthias and Vicky discuss what they wanted to make visible, how they are broadening their own boundaries and an attempt to reconcile Yvonne Rainer with spectacle. What arises from both performer and maker is a shared desire for dance audiences to express themselves and not let the show stop at the edge of the stage.

In discussion with Alexandrina Hemsley

MATTHIAS: I like the idea that the piece’s title has this really affirmative thing about it and then that we spend some time together questioning what it is. We spend our time and invest our attention in questioning the situation that we, the audience, are sharing with Vicky in that moment, so perhaps what this is, might be a shifting thing.

VICKY: Yeah I suppose that it is an exploration of things that are constantly changing. I feel like when I perform the solo, my relationship with the audience is constantly changing which I think is one of the exciting things of performing that piece. It, is about that space at that particular time.

It was really clear for me that there was an encountering of yourself, the space and the audience.

VICKY: Absolutely, yes.

Did you spend time in the studio with that kind of balance in mind or was the studio time very much about yourself and your body?

VICKY: If you are in a studio then there might just be two or three of you and you are in a different space but I think the same principles are going on [as in a theatre]. I’m going to get a lot more feedback and a lot more reactions from an audience full of people, but I think very much from the beginning, the process was about awareness of the space and people in it – it wasn’t just me being all internal in my head and in my body.

MATTHIAS: Definitely. Something that both Vicky and I were interested in from the beginning was thinking about how Vicky and how the work are practicing their relationship with the audience and how the audience is practicing their relationship with Vicky. I am very interested in Deborah Hay and I like the way that she talks about the only materials that she works with as time, space, self and other. Sometimes, I like to think that This Is It refers to those things in the sense that this is all we need to let the exchange of performance happen.

This is what we have and let’s see what we can do with it.

MATTHIAS: Exactly, yeah.

But then, the really fascinating thing is the piece has some very extravagant moments. It seems that within those quite abstract, specific notions you can still find room to play with theatre.

MATTHIAS: Definitely. That whole thing comes from an interest in playing with our expectations of spectacle and experience, and going to different extremes with that.

Matthias, you mention Yvonne Rainer's Trio A (1965) as an inspiration for the piece...

MATTHIAS: I was just thinking about that again today! I really loved reading Catherine Wood's book on Trio A[1] and there were a lot of things in it that I was interested in exploring in this piece with Vicky. A lot of them had to do with the idea of the power of the individual and the way that each of us practices our relationship with 'the society of the spectacle' – if I can use that expression from Guy Debord (1967) – which I guess nowadays would be like the advertising and celebrity culture.

Can you say more about those two influences?

MATTHIAS: Well, there was something about how Catherine Wood talked about Yvonne Rainer opening up new possibilities for the performance of the self that really directly related to what I was interested in working on. Also something about her constant expansion of the space that she had available to operate in, always widening her range of freedom in lots of different ways. I think also, the way that Yvonne Rainer in her 'No Manifesto' (1965) so clearly rejects spectacle, glamour and magic and make-believe. In lots of ways, I relate to and really believe in that and then at the same time, I recognise that I live in the society of the spectacle, Rupaul is my hero and I am happily infected by Lady Gaga. One of things that I thought was important was to deal with the way that both of those opposing tendencies are part of our daily reality, and we all need to retain the freedom to choose to draw a boundary between ourselves and the overwhelming force of the society of the spectacle, but we equally need to be able to participate in it because it's what surrounds us and connects us. So we need to not reject it, but negotiate our relationship with it. In fact, Catherine Wood talks about Trio A as being that kind of a negotiation already rather than an all out rejection.

Writing in the Village Voice, Jill Johnston saw "a heroism of ordinary people[2]" within Rainer's piece, We Will Run (1963) and within This Is It, I felt a similar kind of courageous presence.

MATTHIAS: Wow, that's fantastic [laughs]

VICKY: Yeah, put that bit in!

MATTHIAS: That was exactly what we were going for!

[laughs] It was very apparent! I also think that the piece's courage came from the moments of vulnerability. What you were saying about expanding the space we have, seems so relevant for an individual dancer to be bold in that space of performing a solo.

VICKY: Through performing it, I'm finding already that the questions are always there. All these things that I have to juggle. But what I am seeing, is that as I perform, my confidence grows and my ability to be in that space in that moment with those people gets more interesting, exciting

and enjoyable. I see the work as something that can just continue to develop. When I look back to the premier, I see a big change in myself, and my thoughts towards performing.

MATTHIAS: I think that's so interesting because we were talking a lot in the beginning about this idea of moving the boundaries of the self and whether we could make something in which the audience could see a movement of the boundaries of the self. I think what you've just said Vicky, is about a movement of the boundaries of the self occurring over a period of time.

VICKY: Absolutely, yeah.

MATTHIAS: And, I'm still really fascinated by to what extent an audience can possibly see that in the movement within one fifteen minute performance. In some ways, I think that's difficult. I think that we have tried to point towards that through your shift in the piece from being a contemporary dancer to being a pop superstar, but I think it's so fantastic to hear about how you're experiencing that actually happening over a period of time.

What is the solo like to watch?

MATTHIAS: Vicky makes me laugh so much! I have such a good time watching it. I really do love watching Vicky do the piece and I find it so thrilling as well to watch the audience. I've been in three different audiences out of the performances that Vicky has done and each time has been so incredibly different. One of the things that I would wish to become more apparent for audiences who watch the piece is that they are as much a part of the piece as Vicky is. Sometimes I get the feeling that a lot of people watching this piece assume that the piece finishes at the edge of the stage and I really, really don't see it that way at all.

VICKY: And also, I think it's fair play if someone watches it and they don't find it funny at times, but if they do, I wish that they would feel free to express that. In the Queen Elizabeth Hall performance, when I was doing a particular movement, my brother just laughed out loud quite boldly and someone in the audience turned to him and gave him the evil eye as if to say, 'What are you doing laughing?'. He felt like saying, "She's my sister and she's being ridiculous! Can't you see that?".

It provides interesting questions; what do people think is interesting or amusing? What can and can't they express an emotion to?

MATTHIAS: One of my first desires with this commission came out of watching Candoco perform at the Queen Elizabeth Hall the year before. I was watching Sarah Michelson's *The Hangman* (2010) and I just thought it was fantastic! It was so articulate and so intelligently funny in such a brilliant way. I was absolutely laughing so hard through the whole thing although not particularly out loud. I was amazed that I felt like the whole audience around me was so silent and so uncomfortable. I felt like it was a really missed opportunity for those audience members who didn't allow themselves the freedom to laugh. One of the things I was interested in exploring was how an audience can allow themselves the freedom to laugh and how that can allow everyone in the room to get more out of the experience.

Maybe Vicky, as much as you say you shift and relocate your self during the performance, the audience need to take that up upon themselves as well... do you try and alter the state of the audience during your performance or is it about you trying something new with your body?

VICKY: I think it's both and it's simultaneous. I am aware of my assumptions of the audience's reactions and the feelings of sensations that I am getting back and I do test that. I almost can't articulate it but it is very much in that moment. I wouldn't say that the whole time I am in one kind of state, I'd say I was changing. Then of course there are moments when I'm feeling a little bit out there [laughs] and vulnerable. I guess it is understanding that it's okay for me to feel that and that it is okay for the audience to see that in the moment. Then there are also times when I feel really happy and in control and just wanting to do my thing!! Get myself out there!!

Did you see yourself as part of a bigger statement about the company?

VICKY: It's a big deal for the company, it's a big deal for myself and Matthias as well but I felt like it was a great opportunity and I really just wanted to grab it and go somewhere with it. Matthias as well is so involved in it and is such a part of it...

MATTHIAS: I'm still not getting out of your big hair!

VICKY: [laughs] ...which is really nice because I feel so supported and I feel like I could phone up after a strange performance and we'd be able to talk about it...it was a really nice process to do but then that process is continuing.

MATTHIAS: I'm really aware of how much of yourself you have put into the work Vicky, and I'm really aware of what a big ask it is. We're doing this...well...you are doing this quite out there thing and you are putting yourself out there in so many different ways in such a short space of time. I feel like you absolutely deserve every ounce of support I can give you and everyone else's too. I love the way that after the first few performances, the rest of the company made videos of themselves dancing and singing around backstage. It's amazing!

VICKY: Yeah, they know all the words! To be honest, I have to try and fight my costume off them otherwise they'd have it on all the time.

It's the dream of every dancer to have some shiny, shiny thing to wear.

MATTHIAS: That's right, and now we're just starting to admit it to ourselves!

The song from This Is It is on iTunes, where did the inspiration for that come from?

MATTHIAS: That was really an important part for me from the beginning. Ideally, I have been aiming for the audience to know very little about what they are going to experience before the piece starts but then that afterwards, they have access to lots of information about it. The song being released on iTunes, is one of the things that makes the distinction between whether Vicky's activity is a real activity or a pretend activity. My interest is in the doing of real activities and so I really believe that when she sings her song, Vicky is a real pop star and her single is a real single; it's really out there in the world. It's not about a bedroom, standing with your hairbrush and your fantasy that maybe one day you could be a pop star. Vicky is actually doing what she is doing in front of an audience with the single already released and that distinction is really important to me.

I wonder how many audience members will cross that divide?

MATTHIAS: That's the whole other thing then about where the performance ends and where the boundaries of the self end as well. And how these networks could go out further and further and further if we are prepared to see them that way.

The song This Is It by Vicky Malin is available on iTunes © 2011 Robin Rimbaud/Matthias Sperling

by Alexandrina Hemsley from Collective Movement

[1] Wood, C. (2007). Yvonne Rainer; The Mind is a Muscle. London: Afterall Books

[2] 1963, p9 cited in Sally Banes, 2003, p.8