**Wasco!**

VOETVOLK/HETPALEIS

Messing with jazz: young action painters dabble in Voetvolk

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hetpaleis, Antwerpen

‘WASCO!’, the first production with children by Voetvolk in partnership with hetpaleis, emerged from the choreographer Lisbeth Gruwez’ fascination with action painting. Composer and DJ Maarten Van Cauwenberghe added his own fascination with hard bop and post-bop jazz from the same tumultuous era. The makers followed their desire to see what would happen if you gave children their freedom within certain bounds. That combination of freedom and boundaries, a constant theme in their work, resonates well with both jazz improvisation and action painting.

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The show begins with emptiness. We see an enormous stage with a bare white set, a vacuum in anticipation of what is to come, with a single white, fluorescent tube (scenography by Stef Stessel) above it. The three enormous blocks around the dance floor seem to be made of compressed paper; they might be residue from previous workshop sessions. Far away, at the back of the stage, a door opens and the first dancer appears. Gus (aged 8) is dressed in feisty dungarees: workwear and children’s clothes rolled into one. He opens the ceremony with swag in his step and immediately makes things clear: I’m an entertainer, just you wait! The poses he strikes are eye-catching. When he stands with his arms raised like a toreador, he recalls Gruwez’ dance vocabulary, for example in the solo ‘It’s going to get worse and worse, my friend’.

The next two dancers in painters’ outfits appear on stage. They work together to mark out a rectangular workspace on the gigantic floor with brightly coloured tape. Young Yahto (aged 6) treads it down as competently as a professional, one foot after the other, as if he were walking along a balancing beam. His colleague holds the tape taut. When their work is done, the light accentuates the tape, and the working area becomes visible. As the rest of the dancers gradually join them on stage, a busy tableau emerges organically in which everyone has a job to do. At the front of the stage, three children make a sketch on paper. A transparent sheet, smooth enough to slide on, falls onto the white dance floor. Then comes the moment when a dancer draws the very first crayon lines. His movements coincide with the lines in the jazz music. Short, long, slow and fast solos by the young performers are reinforced by the music. Madeleine, the oldest member of the cast, walks incredibly slowly along a diagonal line in a bright blue headscarf, for example, making flowing movements with her arms. She has a presence that creates a breathtakingly beautiful visual and musical moment.

Explosively, powerfully and without hesitation, the children draw lines, dots, circles and scratches on the floor and in the air, using the wax crayons as an extension of their arms. Their oversized drawing gestures morph into dance. Just as – to put it crudely – the work of art in action painting emerges from the energy of the movement through which the paint lands on the canvas, Voetvolk aims here to make the choreography emerge from drawing.

The makers taught the children to expand their drawing and painting gestures into a language of dance. That language regularly resembles the choreographer Gruwez’ own vocabulary of movement. The fragment in which a girl turns pirouettes is one example, letting her raised arm fall as she spins in a recognisable Gruwez style.

Besides functional action painting tools, the crayons and brushes are also a cleverly chosen way of influencing the children’s movements. The gesture grows from the hand to the arm and onwards to the torso, until the whole body is dancing. It’s a great way to introduce children to dance and get them moving in dance workshops, but as dance content it has little weight in this production. All the same, the movements the children make are anything but insipid. Take the moment when they are dragged over the floor on their bellies with crayons in each hand to draw long lines. Or take a run-up, one by one, to hurl themselves onto the floor and slide across it (like Gruwez’ first dance solo in olive oil).

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Before the second half of the piece begins, the first layer of the flooring is lifted up. The children crawl underneath it and turn the canvas over. In the transition to a new section, the children put on oversized painters’ overalls. Particularly for children, these are clumsy things to put on, which is especially emphasised in this scene. When everyone is ready, we see a dozen little Martians in white astronaut suits. The paint spectacle can begin. A girl draws big circles round herself in yellow paint and smears it on her face. A second performer joins in and does the same. More and more movement, more and more paint. After a countdown of ‘one, two, three, four’, the show explodes completely from a sliding race into a chaos of children tipping entire cans of paint over each other’s heads.

Voetvolk’s smallest and youngest dancer, Yahto, is irresistible with his lovely curls. About halfway through the show, he whirls like a helicopter propellor through the air with his arms outstretched. Madeleine holds him by the ankles, swinging him around. This helicopter scene couldn’t be further from the scene from the film ‘La Grande Bellezza’ in which we watch a girl of about twelve being forced by her parents to give an action painting performance in tears for an audience of rich people and art buyers. In ‘WASCO!’ the children are not forced to perform, but while I revel in the cuteness and joy of this production for people of all ages, I couldn’t help remembering that scene.

It’s an inappropriate comparison, because obviously it’s delightful to watch children surrender wholeheartedly to dance, jazz music and litre after litre of paint. We see them running, sliding, falling and, above all, having fun. As an adult, I find it easy to get caught up in the spectacle. The young dancers who lose themselves almost as much in the colours of the paint as in the music: this is another recognisable ‘trademark’ of Gruwez as a choreographer. The powerful, driven directing ends successfully in a burst of applause, with a standing ovation from the public and music that keeps on playing contagiously, as if the applause were still part of the show.

‘WASCO!’ is like a joyful, open workshop combined with an action painting event that simultaneously offers a glimpse of the inner workings of Voetvolk. The basic ingredients are space versus boundaries, individual talents combined with teamwork, jazz music, wax crayons and paint. Add to that the disarming effect of the children’s cuteness, which is played for all it is worth in this production.

The end comes unexpectedly quickly, and I was not prepared for the impact of the artwork by the ten young action painters. When it is hoisted upwards, dripping and wet, after sixty minutes, I was overwhelmed. Eye to eye with the gigantic painting, jubilant with colour, I not only see the hands, feet and signatures of the young masters, but also the dance, the music, the throwing and hurling, the careful footsteps. Just after it happened, as fresh as could be. And gone sooner than you think.