

*Architect, dance and theatre critic Pieter T'Jonck delves into the dark world of Bruno Beltrão's new creation. Beltrão blends capoeira and hip hop in a virtuosic spectacle that portrays a scattered Brazil, torn by contradictions.*

Bruno Beltrão has not given his new creation a title. It's a piece with no name. It's not even entitled Untitled, a moniker otherwise much favoured by the modernists. And it's more than just a mere detail. Whenever we're deeply touched or shaken by events, we often say we're left 'speechless' because what has occurred is not only inescapable, but also way off the beaten tracks down which our thought processes usually like to tread. What's special about this play with no name is that it creates razor-sharp images that become etched in your mind like a shock experience; yet by the same token, the audience is left to interpret the images by itself since there are no titles to go by.

The piece with no name begins as a sequence of short scenes that vanish almost as quickly as they appear. Episodes you catch sight of, in a flash and from a distance. Each of these scenes has a different sound image seemingly as arbitrary as the image itself: street noises, birdsong and, in the background, the sounds of hammering coming from a workshop. Between these scenes, the lighting and the sound vanish, yet stripes and bars appear upstage, like those you get on a badly adjusted TV set or a broken monitor, except greatly enlarged. As if we were channel-hopping and, for a brief moment, the images on the screen become trapped in our gaze, between the blackouts and the flickering.

It's an impression we get first and foremost because the scenes themselves are articulated with particular precision. They're precise in the way mediaeval miniatures are precise, conveying a great deal – some of it occasionally contradictory – in just a few moments or even at a glance, whether in quick succession or concurrently. Each miniature has its own light design, its own protagonists, its own body language.

In the third or fourth scene for instance, we see a man standing downstage, off to the left. He is wearing an oversized black jumper that looks more like a priest's cassock, especially when he holds up an open hand and, with the other, makes the victory sign. In that moment, with his intense and penetrating gaze, he looks deceptively like the traditional depictions of Christ, even if his expression is more sombre than anointing.

But it's an image that does not linger: indeed, as he slowly walks backwards, the fingers of his right hand begin to tremble as if he were playing the piano. Later on, after he has stepped forward again to stand right in front of the audience, it is his left hand that wiggles about before unexpectedly pointing its mid-

dle finger at the audience. Is this a preacher we are witnessing here, one who foments nothing other than hatred?

A woman in a baggy red trouser suit has appeared next to him; in fact, at this point, she has been there for some time. She emulates him, except that her fingers are fluttering about more slowly, more frivolously even. Then, two men step up on either side of her and brutally push her head upwards and off to the side. A fascinating reversal of roles occurs as she suddenly collapses, facing her aggressors, and they in turn catch her almost tenderly. Here violence and its opposite stand side by side, steadfastly connected in a single image, like the sacred and the blasphemous gesture earlier on.

*Here violence and its opposite stand side by side, steadfastly connected in a single image.*

The same complexity and contradictory state of affairs is to be found in the following miniatures, too. We see two men standing close to each other. One of them stretches his arm out; the other then uses it as a tabletop, running his fingers along it, back and forth. In no time at all, he is manipulating his counterpart like a tool that can be randomly adjusted into any kind of position. The roles are then reversed.

These miniatures are an outstanding dance in its purest form, not 'theatre pieces', but a refined, suggestive dance of limbs which, like capoeira routines, do not reveal their true meaning, even if it is unmistakably present. Thus Beltrão taps into the codes of hip hop. None of which alters the fact that the atmosphere of this dance is uneasy, threatening even.

Take another image: two men are gripping each other's head as if too heavily laden with thoughts. This is arguably the most significant image of the long intro. The people we see here are hanging their heads. For good reason, because suddenly there is this one man slamming full force into a group of three others, time and time again, without being able to dislodge them from their place.

Are these miniatures meant to depict a deadlocked world, but one in which rage, hardship, cruelty, indifference – and the occasional caring gesture – pass by in bewildering snapshots? It's rare that you get to see a performance that evokes such a complex picture of society within the first quarter of an hour, if that. In a small programme note Beltrão says that Brazil's art community has been very sluggish in its response to the shift to the right triggered by the Bolsonaro regime, which is now stifling society and democracy.

That, then, is the background to these images. You don't have to know much about Brazil to be aware that it is the weakest and the most defenceless of the country's population that have borne the brunt of the Bolsonaro regime first-hand. And it is precisely

# Etched onto the retina

**Bruno Beltrão's Brazil in snapshots**

Writer: Pieter T'Jonck

in this section of the population that hip hop is rooted, so perhaps that's also where the dancers on stage originate.

As soft cymbal percussion and synthesiser sounds begin to fill the space, new momentum comes into the dance. It is no longer chopped up into discrete images; rather, it takes up the entire area of the stage. The music by Lucas Marcier/ARPX has become the driving force, not that things are any more peaceful as a result.

*Are these miniatures meant to depict a deadlocked world, but one in which rage, hardship, cruelty, indifference – and the occasional caring gesture – pass by in bewildering snapshots?*

Percussive beats swirl chaotically over these drums as the synthesiser plays the eternally unchanging two-tone melody more and more whiningly. The stage gets brighter and brighter as if the music also controlled the lighting, to the point where it is almost blinding. The synthesiser begins to wail as the tone changes, now sounding like a deafening, chattering and droning bagpipe, only to end as a howling siren.

In this overwhelming acoustic and visual setting, the group of dancers grows into a human anthill, teeming violently at times, then nervously, then frantically. Here the world to which we were introduced in a dazzle of flashing lights evolves into a hectic hell. Rarely do the performers act as a group. Even when they are imitating one another they remain solitary figures.

The spectacle unfailingly astounds the audience through the sheer virtuosity of the dancers that is never ostentatious.

Then three or four of the male dancers squat down, buttocks touching their heels, and race across the stage like dots in a PACMAN game. How another male dancer is even able to jolt and bounce backwards across the floor while on his back, his shoulder blades transformed into 'feet', remains mystifying.

That there are no collisions is a miracle. This hectic dance is undoubtedly meticulously orchestrated, yet everything changes and moves so rapidly that it's impossible to work out how it all happens. From this point of view, too, the performance is not unlike a confused or even panicked society. It is no longer legible, but you sense the evil forces at work.

*The spectacle unfailingly astounds the audience through the sheer virtuosity of the dancers that is never ostentatious.*

As soon as the action, along with the lighting, reaches its peak, tranquillity returns unexpectedly quickly. Dusk appears to fall as the glaring light gives way to a hazy blue twilight. To the left of the stage, a monitor begins to flicker again, just as it did at the beginning. After a few final twitches, the dancers reach the end. But now they are together, united as one. As spectators, we are abruptly roused from this bad dream, one we struggle to put into words.

Some things are simply too awful to recount. And yet Beltrão has succeeded in etching some understanding, some image, of it onto our retinas. Quite extraordinary. 🗨️

*First published in the evening program of Wiener Festwochen (May 15, 2022)*

*Übersetzt aus dem Niederländischen von Stephen Grynwasser.*

**Bruno Beltrão / Grupa de Rua  
New Creation**

26.8., 19:00 | 27.8., 15:00+19:00 | Haus der Berliner Festspiele

