

The trembling body in the square of the unknown

A review of the beginnings of 'g r o o v e' by Soa Ratsifandrihana

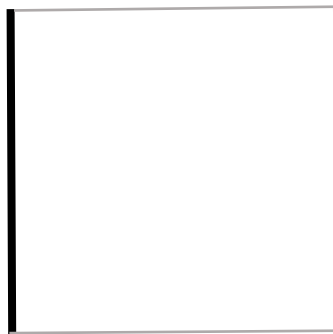
By Susanna van Grinsven

The silence was so loud that I could hear the rumbling bellies of my neighbouring spectators.

The darkness was so bright that I saw the movements of the unknown.

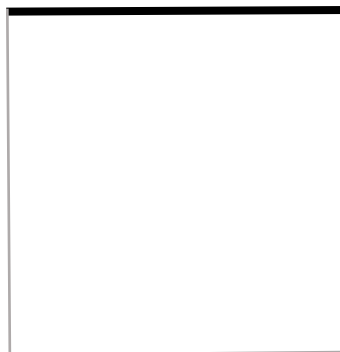
A trembling hand moved from corner to corner.

A leg stuck in the air, perpendicular to the body, parallel to the square.



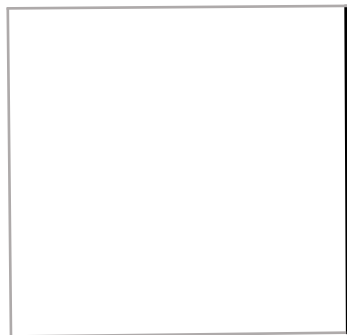
Side 1: Entering the stage

I saw French-Malagasy choreographer Soa Ratsifandrihana perform her solo *g r o o v e* during the opening night of What You See Festival in Utrecht. When I entered the theatre hall, I encountered curtains with a small opening to the left through which I stepped. Stepping through the curtains brought me – not surprisingly- to a much smaller hall: a theatre in the round, with a stage in the middle with chairs placed along its four sides. Everyone present was seated at the same level, which made me feel welcome and connected to the close-by audience and the unknown performance to come. With my feet on the stage, I waited.



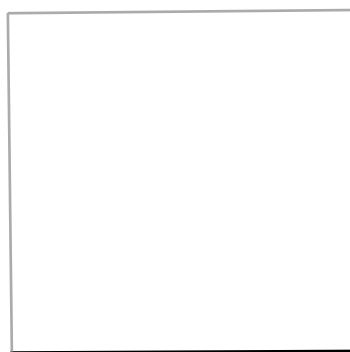
Side 2: The darkness and the light

At a certain moment, the lighting turned off and the audience's chatting started to fade. I cannot tell how long I waited, the darkness almost stretched into infinity. I could not see a thing, I could only rely on my mind to recall the image of the stage before me and the sensations of the bodies beside me. As the complete darkness stayed, my mind started to fill in shapes and colours until my eye caught something coming from the corner of the stage. Without noticing that the light had slowly increased, I recognised a dancer's body moving in front of me. The dancer's clothes reminded me of armour, with patches of skin extending from her shoulders, shielding her from the dark. The shoulders moved shockingly, the dancer's hands trembled. While shocks and trembles extended to the rest of her body, the dancer slowly moved along the four sides of the stage. She came close to the audience, facing our presences, before stepping backwards to discover the centre of the square. The hesitant way she moved made me think she was stepping onto this stage for the first time, just like we were – approaching it anew, ready to explore its unknowns and her connection to it. Before the darkness could return, she stepped into the light to discover, and remove her armour-like clothes: to shed her skin, and evolve.



Side 3: The silence and the sounds

The human bodily behaviour of the audience was as present as the performer's movements. It was as silent as it was dark at the beginning of the performance. I heard rumbling bellies, coughing mouths, and laughing sounds. As the light emerged, so did the mechanic, electric sounds coming from speakers. The sounds from the audience's bodies merged with the dancer's movements and the speaker's sounds, creating a fitting ephemeral collective soundscape to this performance. Throughout the performance, the dancer repeatedly brought her hands close to her mouth, then extended her arms, hands, and finally her fingers as far away from her mouth as possible. As though she tried to pull breath or words from her mouth without actually saying something, her silence louder than her potential words. As my belly started to rumble too -is this something infectious?- I wondered what my role in relation to the performer was. Who am I?



Side 4: Present bodies and discoveries

Who am I? The dancer tried to discover who she was on and with this stage, her trembles and movements making her move across the stage from silence to sounds, from darkness into the light. At a certain moment, she gifted her armour-like clothing to an audience member, symbolically shedding a past skin and evolving into someone new. While this moment carried significance, I found myself wishing we had lingered longer in the earlier stages of her exploration. Her small movements, trembles, and shocks -still encased in that clothing- were captivating, drawing me closer to the discomfort of her journey of discovery. I and we as audience were very present during this discovery, through our placement, through our sounds. We encapsulated her in the square of the unknown, provided the boundaries of her discoveries. Were we providing or were we restricting? I enjoyed the time in the darkness and silence the most, as all was so present there. This start of the performance, as described along the sides of the squared stage, established all that the performance entailed. It set the stage in time and space and here I felt, without being able to see, the most close to all the discovering bodies – both audience and performer– in, along, and outside of the square of the unknown.