

Where Vulnerability Transforms into Trust

Nana Yasukawa, 19/11/2024

On the last day of the What You See Festival, 71 Bodies' *The Basement* made its Dutch premiere at Theatre Kikker. This is a solo dance performance by a transgender man artist, Daniel Mariblanca,

As the audience sits facing each other along a carpet like a fashion show runway, Mariblanca already curls up at its edge. Except for a realistic mask resembling a man's face and high heels, he is almost naked, exposing not only his muscles but also his bare genitals. In the first half, he seems like an uncanny creature, sometimes moving on all fours and contorting his joints beyond natural limits without saying any words. His acts of self-injury and masochism escalate beyond expectations: inserting a red rose near his genitals and scattering its petals, smearing fake blood on his body, and enduring a shower of sharp stones from above.

The trans man's body raises questions about our stereotypical gender understandings. His inhuman figure especially challenges the audience's gaze. How should we perceive and interpret the body of a trans man? Is our gaze as ethically problematic as that of an audience watching a freak show? Such puzzlements are further enhanced by his painful actions. I sympathize with his pain, but I also feel a sense of guilt and apology for being unable to intervene and help him.

Gradually, he removes the mask, breaking his silence to communicate with the audience. He shouts, "I forgot how to cry," and expresses his suffering more directly in words. Initially, he uses a voice changer to deepen his tone but later stops using it, revealing his true voice and showing what he really is. The more the scene progresses, the closer he and the audience become, physically and mentally.

In the last scene, he invites the audience to gather at the center of the stage, selects about five participants, puts paint on their hands, dips and uses them with his unique brush, and draws a message on the paper. He is an ideal host who pays attention to not causing too much nervousness and stress among the audience. The chosen audiences also accept the risk of unexpected things and getting dirty with the paint. They gently interact with his brush—an extension of his body.

The contrast between the opening and closing scenes highlights a shift in his performance from radical body art to socially engaged art. Both arouse the audience's emotion and invite them to participate to the work in different way. The final collaboration scene allows the audience, who could not save him from suffering in the first half of the scene, to face his body in a more intimate proximity and communicate directly with him. While they only assist in putting paint on, I feel their actions convey a message like: we mean no harm, we love and care for you.

Through Mariblanca's performance, which exposes the bare body and shares vulnerability, we, as audiences, feel a profound sense of trust placed in us by him. This trust, in turn, inspires a desire within us to be worthy of it, transforming the theatre into an inclusive and safe space.