

Where magic happens

Project and communications manager, **Corina Hösli**, reaches out from Switzerland to bring us up close to the practice of Marie Nüzel's *Search in(g) Bodies*, where participation and performance invite us to think again about ageing



Hanna Brunner, Bergstudio. Photo: Rebekka Bigelmayr

It turned out to be a quiet and gentle piece with tender moments. For about 14 weeks 13 non-professional dancers over the age of 65, trained weekly together in dance-theatre, experimenting and researching the way closeness and ageing relate to each other. Different constellations, distances, dynamics or rhythms evolved and were developed into solos, duos, trios or set pieces for the entire group.

For most participants, this project «Nähe» (German for closeness, proximity, vicinity) was their first artistic stage performance.

«Nähe» was produced by *Search in(g) Bodies*, an international dance and theatre collective that organises workshops and stage productions with older people. It is led by Marie Nüzel, artistic director and choreographer, and myself, Corina Hösli, project management and communication.

We created it as a platform where participants are given space and freedom to come together to tell and explore their stories in an artistic way. In a bodily, performative way *Search in(g) Bodies'* projects aim to rethink aesthetics, people's perceptions, and what the ageing body and becoming older means nowadays, as well as challenge common perspectives on dance, bodies, or bodily norms.

We believe a performative, artistic approach may be able to accentuate the beauty and kindness of age, which is often overseen in political and social discourses. We wish our projects to have the potential to reframe traditional views and sensitise older and younger people to critically reflect on the subject of age. Therefore, our projects share stories and contribute to a broad social, political debate on what becoming old means in our societies in this day and age.

Our projects are announced publicly in strong collaboration with local communities and institutions. They are based on several artist-led workshop sessions, but with an active engagement of the cast. By a combination of taught material and improvisation, we encourage participants to reflect on one's body regardless of any previous knowledge of dance or theatre. Writing exercises, video portraits, and other artistic forms, such as poetry, or vocal training also

may be part of the process and the final performance. We aim to create an almost documentary space open to discussions, reflections, and discourses in which participants are invited to actively share lives, narratives, experiences, perceptions, or social interactions.

Each process is based on these unique, personal moments, which are artistically elaborated, abstracted and refined. Therefore, a specific attention is paid to collaborative development, in which the participants, to some degree, become co-choreographers. Our background knowledge and Marie's choreographic structures merge with the participants' biographies and physicality and this is the moment where magic happens! As a final highlight, a performance is developed, which includes participants' unique material embedded in a contemporary, artistic context.

Search in(g) Bodies started with the dance performance «Ein Fest» which dealt with the subject of body. As the topic of body, both in art and everyday life, mostly focusses on young, juvenile bodies, Marie was interested in these parameters and how they may relate to older bodies. She asked how much the older body, on one hand, is affected by its own biology and, on the other hand, by our society and its perspectives and perceptions.

«Ein Fest» was shown at the festival Zürich Tanzt, Switzerland, in 2017. Marie created three sequences based on the idea of a feast: Dress up, Flirt and The Last Waltz.

The first part, Dress up, was an immersive audio-video installation showing participants' portraits projected on hanging blouses which moved softly in a breeze. The audience wandered about this installation and listened to the participants' voices talking about their perception of beauty, ageing and images that described their bodies. The second part Flirt was a live dance performance based on the concept of a ball or a night out. It contained improvisational and choreographic material specifically generated through the workshop process. The Last Waltz, the third part, culminated in a feast and the performance transformed into a real party that aimed to dissolve the division



Gisela Sutter, Naehe. Photo: Fabian Helmich

between performers and audience, old and young, and offered different perspectives on age.

This successful start was followed by our second project «Nähe» (which I describe above). According to Marie, “closeness is the logical continuation to the subject of body, as also this subject emphasises social perspectives on becoming older”. To develop the topic of closeness as a performance project with elder people, she asked us, for example, to reflect on sensible social ‘borderline areas’ such as physical closeness, care of the elderly, or changing relationships between children and their parents.

During a first research workshop in Zurich, we expanded our knowledge first with physical explorations. These were supplemented by a study week in the Swiss valley Engadin, where we collaborated with Rebekka Bigelmayr as a voice trainer. Based on this research phase, we realised a five month project in Munich, Germany, which was funded by Kulturstiftung der Stadtsparkasse München and Kulturreferat der Stadt München within a strong collaborational process with the latter.

The first project phase focussed on acquiring possible future participants and Marie taught taster sessions in relevant institutions for senior citizens. We particularly tried to find participants who had not yet participated in an artistic-performative project.

The workshop phase which followed explored the comprehensive facets of

closeness together with the amateur cast as well as Anna-Maria Hirsch, a theatre coach, and the actress and professional dancer Louisa Difliff. It was our intention to add a separate layer to the piece through the inclusion of a young professional performer. Her appearance was based on the perspective of a daughter talking to her father on the phone. Three interventions showed how her relationship with her father changed over the years – from being a young, playful daughter who wanted to change the world together with him, to a daughter who cared for him as he became older.

At the beginning of «Nähe» Marie noticed some participants were sceptical of dancing, the topic or being on stage. In the end, they could not have been any happier about their own courage and the feedback they got. “Again and again”, Marie observes, “I am impressed by the impact it has on people when they conquer themselves and when they get the chance to express and present themselves as soon as there is someone who listens. Be it in a lesson or on stage.”

And, again and again, we love to see the laughter and happiness of our cast members the moment they come off stage after their first performance!

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