



Natalie Gordon.



Filip Van Huffel.

RAUW dance

Retina's producer, **Natalie Gordon**, and its artistic director, **Filip Van Huffel**, find that site-specific performances bring rewards and responsibilities

Since the inception of Retina Dance Company we wanted to find ways to forge links between our professional and community strands. In the UK we feel we've earned a reputation for our education work, and wished to create the same buzz in Belgium through something unique. We've always believed that our education programme needs to be of a high professional standard, and a continuation of the work that happens on the stage. And so we cooked up a concept that could combine these elements.

RAUW is a dynamic performance project that brings together people from extremely varied backgrounds into a site-specific dance event. It's also transferable to different settings and communities. It was initially called RAW, for Retina Accessibility Window, but as the first manifestation was in Belgium those words just didn't work in Flemish. And so it became RAUW, with the dual purpose of its acronym (which relates directly to the English 'raw') coupled with a certain leonine power – rather like the roar of a lion! As the project has grown we've also grown accustomed to the word, so it's stayed with us and now has its own identity.

Retina has to date delivered three quite distinct versions of RAUW: a large-scale project for a very mixed community in Berchem, an intimate arts centre rendition for adults in Borgerhout, and one for the over-50s in Deurne. All have so far been in Belgium, but we hope the UK will follow. (To that end we are planning the first British RAUW in the Lincoln Drill Hall from August 2 to 6 this year, a performance project aimed at professional and community dancers of all ages.)

The inaugural RAUW took place in Cultuurcentrum Berchem, an area of Antwerp, in February 2008. Here the company literally took over an entire building and made it move. We had 80 participants from all over Flanders, aged

12 to 78, many of whom had never danced before. It was a complete blend of professional and community dancers of mixed abilities, experiences and cultural backgrounds. Together we danced in the foyer, the cellar, the bar, the small theatre, the corridors and stairways and the cloakroom before the 90-minute performance culminated in the big theatre. Our objective was to lead the audience on a journey through a building where they could catch dance in different environments. Each space that we used became a zone for which a specified group, working with a teacher from our company, created something special. We didn't want to make a piece that could be performed anywhere; these had to be dances that could only exist in those exact areas. Filip and five Retina dancers achieved this by working with their respective groups to devise solos, duets and small ensemble dances to enhance the atmosphere in each location.

There were many memorable moments in Berchem, such as the shock and hilarity that ensued as some dancers' legs extended out from under a stairway where many audience members were standing. This, combined with the exciting physical phrases that were flying around inside the cloakroom walls, was guaranteed to galvanise the crowd.

In practical terms staging such an event is an enormous challenge, but eminently worthwhile. Designing a performance with three audience groups passing through a building to watch dance continuously for an hour and a half is a real brain-teaser. But, as we found out by actually doing it, with careful planning, a skilled company of dancers, a soundscape containing well-timed musical bridges, a few iPods and a crew of dedicated technicians the project can become something people will remember. The sight of 80 dancers in a moment of free improvisation on stage in the final section was not to be missed. Here the passion for dance they'd acquired during the preparatory >



Retina Dance Company's RAUW, site specific project in ccbe, Antwerp.

week prior to the performance came to fruition. The standing ovation they received was worth each moment of panic – theirs and ours!

The second RAUW occurred in Rataplan, a small community arts organisation in the Borgerhout region of Antwerp. The area has encountered difficulties trying to integrate an extreme mix of cultural communities. Here we danced in an old and dilapidated ballroom as well as in the theatre's entrance, corridors, toilets and green room before winding up in the auditorium and on the main stage. Again the group was mixed but smaller (30) and composed mainly of adults, some professional but many from the wider community. The personal growth in each one became increasingly visible during the week we worked with them. Here they were taking brave steps towards performing a duet for the first time in their lives, or joining together for a big and challenging group dance in the finale. Having a few musician/dancers in the group was beneficial, too, as the green room contained a piano. A great section evolved with a singer, a pianist and dancers moving beneath and on top of a large wooden table as the audience relaxed in big armchairs. In that moment a surreal combination of dance, music and theatre unraveled to show the individual skills this particular group possessed.

The third RAUW took place at the Cultuur Centrum Deurne, a suburb of Antwerp that's striving to find its own identity within an expanding mix of cultures and a general lack of arts activity. The programmers at CC Deurne had seen RAUW in Berchem and knew that this was a viable project for them, but they needed to tackle their own objectives. One was to reach the over-50s in an innovative way. RAUW in Deurne is consequently the one that has potentially changed the most lives. The group, thirty-strong and aged 50 to 79, came from very different social backgrounds and experiences. They included a retired minister, several ex-nurses and many uninspired housewives whose children had left home and for whom daytime TV had lost its appeal. Filip and the four male dancers of Retina leapt into their lives with technique and improvisation classes, the rudiments of choreographic skills and partner work, plus a strong touch of theatricality to create what turned out to be an unforgettable performance event.

The week began tentatively; with a lifetime behind you there are many bridges participants must cross in order to do a dance project like this. Between the woman who

didn't want to be touched and another with a fear of failure, there were many people who suffered a confidence crisis – but also a few blessed with the exuberance of youth. Among the latter was Jef, a 65 year-old who'd recently discovered dance after a lifetime in the church and now can't get enough of it. The performance started while the audience was entering the building and the cast was brimming with party spirit, drinking together, playing the fool and building one another up. The music commenced and a contemporary waltz appeared out of nowhere, followed by a crazy sofa dance that featured six energetic seniors jumping through the air. In some sections Retina's dancers performed with the group, displaying moments of tenderness and strength in beautiful duets. Everyone performed partner work, solos and group dances with confidence and absolute commitment.

One of the most exciting things about RAUW is the mix of people that want to come and dance. In Borgerhout there were a couple of scientists who needed to have a break from working in the laboratory. In Berchem we worked with a post-operative cancer patient rediscovering her body, and a 78 year-old man who'd always wanted to dance but never had the chance. In Deurne there were many women in their 50s and 60s who left husbands at home watching TV while they unleashed and set free a new side of themselves. In every case you felt the responsibility that such a project brings. Seeing the exhilaration of the seniors at a recent Retina performance made us realise that we are changing peoples' lives. They've found a new group of friends and want to continue to dance. Clearly our responsibility to them doesn't end here!

For Retina, RAUW is a site-specific performance that lasts one week, providing an opportunity for audiences to explore the nooks and crannies of their local arts centre and integrating a wider community into a shared dance project. For the participants, RAUW is an energising and powerful experience that signals a commitment to improving their physicality while at the same time it inspires a passion for dance, creativity and the body. I trust that we will continue to reach diverse communities in this way, and prove that successful professional-level projects can happen in any environment.

Again, RAUW will be staged in Lincoln Drill Hall from 2 to 6 August 2010. Interested? **contact** natalie@retinadance.com / **visit** www.retinadance.com