

When “not really OK” is becoming “really not OK”

First of all, Kaaitheater acknowledges the harm and suffering that several people have experienced for years while working with and for Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. We see and regret the long-term impact of her toxic behaviour and acknowledge our part in the system that made it possible.

What the article published on the 22nd of June by De Standaard has made visible, is that problematic behaviour and harmful practices within the dance company Rosas, including abuse of power and toxic leadership, have been left unresolved for way too long. One could say that for years now, not only their management but many constituents of the Flemish performing arts sector (artists, programmers, critics, theoreticians, technicians, etc.) have known that the way Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker treats her team and runs her company is “not really OK”. But when does “not really OK” become “really not OK”? And why didn't we address the problem before?

Probably because the work of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker is exceptional. We feel lucky to have her company in our city. Exceptional choreographers are rare. It was common knowledge within the field of dance that Rosas did not offer a safe and healthy work environment. Yet, we at Kaaitheater, the historical presenters of her work, allowed ourselves to look away and eased our conscience with the thought: this is what you get when you're working with the only woman from the Flemish Wave of the 90's. The woman who had the strength to create an exceptional body of work, with international recognition and within a - at the time - almost exclusively male milieu. We thought: maybe this is what is asked of that woman who, on top of that, has been brave and persistent enough to establish a dance school from scratch that has since literally shaped the current and future dance field of Belgium and beyond. We were also wary of the fact that strong women are quickly called “difficult”, that women in leadership positions are still an exception and, therefore, also easy targets. For all these reasons, we didn't inquire any further. We heard rumours, but we didn't ask for details. Nothing was added up or brought together. Everything remained incidental, peripheral. Dancers continued to audition all over the world. Tour dates came and went. Funding and power continued to grow. But also, and above all, a culture of impunity slowly developed. The success that the work of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker encountered, blinded the many stakeholders, allowing them to focus solely on the aesthetic experience that was offered to them and to ignore the harmful conditions in which those works were created.

This is a system of normalisation. A system that not only enables but also rewards, protects and reproduces problematic behaviour. A system supported by the persistent romantic narrative of the genius who needs to create at all costs. And Kaaitheater, as many other organisations, has been part of this system.

NEW TIMES

But in the meantime, the world has changed. The #metoo movement caused a shift. A new, more precise language emerged to better name problematic situations and relationships. As a result, toxic and harmful behaviour is now more widely addressed and, if necessary, brought to justice. Even before this article was published in De Standaard, some people had been calling out Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker on social media. Many others have left the company. Cracks appeared in the system of normalisation; patterns of abusive behaviour were made visible. And slowly but surely, what for years had been considered “normal” wasn't acceptable anymore.

We know change is not an event, it is a slow process. And it took us a long time to shift from “not really OK” to “really not OK”. One could say far too long. This is also what we thought at Kaaitheater, this past year. And yet, we didn’t decide to stop presenting Rosas’s work to our audience. Why not? Because, while acknowledging the suffering of the many people who have been the victims of this problematic behaviour and our responsibility within the system that made them possible, we believe that “cancel culture” is a strategy of immediate and public punishment that isolates and shames the person it targets. And this is sometimes useful, when no other means are possible and/or when the danger is too great to be handled otherwise, but not always. Probably not when the final goal is to create safer work environments. At Rosas, but not only there.

A CULTURE OF CONVERSATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

What we did last year (as some other theatres and festivals of the Flemish field did as well), is to *call in*. We wrote to, then had a series of conversations with Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and her new management where we made clear that the stories we were hearing were impossible to align with the values we stand for. We made clear that acknowledgement, apologies and visible change were needed. We listened to the steps the company said they were taking to establish better work conditions. We continued to present her work and stayed in dialogue.

And we did so because we believe people are complex beings who can also learn, change and transform over the course of a lifetime. We did so because we believe that systemic problems are to be solved collectively. And that, as adrienne maree brown puts it, “we won’t end the systemic patterns of harms by isolating and picking off individuals, just as we can’t limit the communicative power of mycelium by plucking a single mushroom from the dirt”^{*}.

We also did this because we believe Rosas’ work cannot be reduced to the toxic behaviour of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. Moreover, she works with a whole entourage of dancers and staff. And they could become victims of a negative response from the sector to the problematic behaviour some of them endured.

We do not want to cancel Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. But effective and visible change is needed urgently, at Rosas and in the broader field of dance. We can no longer simply continue to present pieces that are made in conditions that clearly show signs of harmful or toxic behaviour. We need to learn to have difficult but generative discussions and implement a culture of consequences.

To conclude, we invite the Flemish field of performing arts to acknowledge its role in the current situation and to be resilient and strong enough to accompany this difficult process, in solidarity. Because this urgent need for change within the specific dance company that is Rosas, is offering us all an opportunity to learn together about how to end and repair harmful systems of abuse in the field of performing arts at large.

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* adrienne maree brown *We Will Not Cancel Us And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice*, AK press, 2020.