

# British Theatre Guide

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## What the Body Does Not Remember

Wim Vandekeybus

Ultima Vez

Northern Stage, Newcastle

17–18 March 2015

Cement breeze-blocks hurled from person to running person across the stage; performers stamping and jumping and just missing others (or being in exactly the right place to catch others)—these are the things for which *What the Body Does Not Remember* is known, but this 1987 piece by former psychologist Wim Vandekeybus is much more than that.

There are moments of playfulness, of humour, of pathos, of eroticism; there's the desperation to fit in; there's anger; there's theft, attraction, repulsion—a whole range of human experience expressed through the body and its movement, from the gentle use of the breath to keep a feather in the air to the stomping, stamping rage of the finale.

The emotions of *What the Body Does Not Remember* are often described as "raw" or, in the choreographer's own word, "visceral" and, while that is true, it doesn't really acknowledge supreme control (and energy!) needed to perform this 90-minute work. And control is the key word in this high-speed piece: a misplaced foot, a step, a throw, a leap just a fraction of a second too soon or too late and the result would not just be a fluffed move but could result in serious injury. But then, moments later, there are scenes of almost stillness, of quiet.

Nearly thirty years ago, Vandekeybus was devising / creating a movement language which has become an important part of modern dance / physical theatre vocabulary. He was exploring not so much how the body reacts but how that reaction can be expressed by the body and music and sound (by Thierry de Mey and Peter Vermeersch) are an important part of that expression.

In the opening scene, a female dancer controls two men by her gestures and the sounds she makes with her hands on a table top. There is a restlessness and an increasing insistence in the scene which is quite disturbing, a worthy prelude to what is to come.

It's 28 years old. Does it still have the power to shock as it did then? Not really. It certainly impresses, as the standing ovation at Northern Stage witnesses, but so much of what Vandekeybus created has become part of our artistic vocabulary, has even been built upon by himself and others.

But *What the Body...* was always more than the raw physicality of the famous bits and now, the shockwave being so far in the past, we can see, appreciate and enjoy the rest: the subtleties, the humour, the human insights.

This revival reminds us that *What the Body Does Not Remember* was always more than shock—although in the artistically bland, style-over-substance days of the eighties that shock was very definitely needed! And today it remains an important and moving piece of dance theatre—and should be seen by all who have an interest in contemporary dance and/or physical theatre.

Reviewer: [Peter Lathan](#)