



Scottish Arts Council

## ARTISTIC EVALUATION – DANCE

**Artist/company:** Wim Vandekeybus and Ultima Vez at New Territories (New Moves International)

**Venue:** Theatre Royal, Glasgow

**Title of Event:** Blush

**Type of Event:** (*e.g. performance, informal showing, work-in-progress, etc*) performance

**Date of Visit:** 18 February 2004

This report has been commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council to evaluate the artistic quality of the production named below. It has been prepared by either a specialist Advisor, or an officer of the Scottish Arts Council, as indicated at the end of the form. The report will be circulated to the organisation which produced the work and to the management of the venue, if the venue is core funded by the Scottish Arts Council.

The report may be made available to Scottish Arts Council Officers, Council and Committee members, and specialist advisors as appropriate. It will be taken into account in assessing the work of the producing company in relation to applications for funding to the Scottish Arts Council. It may also be used by the Council to report on the overall performance of its Core Funded organisations.

**Evaluators should enter their rating under each section, explaining briefly their reason for the rating with reference to their comments under each section. Ratings should be given in accordance with the following:**

**Very Poor** – standard falls well below what is acceptable.

**Poor** – not attaining acceptable standards of conception or presentation.

**Competent** – routine rather than especially interesting.

**Good** – well conceived and executed

**Excellent** – conceived and executed to a high standard.

1. **Artistic Assessment** - please evaluate the **artistic quality** of the event taking account of the following:

1.1 **Vision and imagination**

Rating for this section (Please tick)		Comments and key reasons for rating:
Very Poor		A large-scale dance theatre piece featuring strong, highly physical dance/movement and original music, integrated with text/spoken word and interactive film projection. The piece explored major themes – human relationships, desire, love, sex and death in an inventive and stimulating way. The action and focus moved and played between different worlds – stage (play), audience (real), and film (dream, otherworld). The piece suffered from a lack of directorial/editorial control and therefore felt self-indulgent and tiresome at times. It needs to lose at least 30 minutes.
Poor		
Competent		
Good	✓	
Excellent		

1.2 **Clarity of communication**

Rating for this section (Please tick)		Comments and key reasons for rating:
Very Poor		The piece communicated on a number of levels – through the immediate, physical action; through the spoken word and dialogue between performers (and occasionally between performers and audience); through the lyrics and mood of the specially commissioned music; and through the imagery of the film. Occasionally these various media – all of which were individually strong – became overwhelming and convoluted when layered too densely. Letting these elements stand alone, or in duet, rather than symphony, would have been more effective.
Poor		
Competent	✓	
Good		
Excellent		

1.3 **Quality of production**

Rating for this section (Please tick)		Comments and key reasons for rating:
Very Poor		Produced to a high standard, with careful consideration given to most elements. At times the transition from one scene/image to the next felt slightly rough, but this was more to do with direction than quality of production as such. The lighting level overall was on the dull side – this is not uncommon with contemporary dance, but slightly more light to emphasise action would have lifted a few repetitive sections and facilitated transitions.
Poor		
Competent		
Good	✓	
Excellent		

You are also asked to **assess the strengths and weaknesses** of the event with specific reference to the following:

**1.4 Choreography (including originality, use of space, number and use of dancers, length of piece, etc)**

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating:
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good	✓	
Excellent		

This was a total theatre piece, and therefore the strength of the choreography was but one aspect. Although there were occasional glimpses of post-Eurocrash, there were also stretches of choreographic inventiveness and aching beauty, particularly in the duets and trios. Strong use of the ensemble within and around the space, and above and beyond the stage.

**1.5 Performers – including technical standard, performance skills, and ability to communicate.**

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating:
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good	✓	
Excellent		

Highly skilled, diverse and confident performers capable of delivering complex dance-theatre. The four-piece band played a range of instruments.

There were a couple of occasions when I couldn't quite hear the spoken text, which seemed to be a combination of weaker vocal projection in some performers and slightly unbalanced sound levels vis a vis the music. But this was a minor distraction in an otherwise superior ensemble.

**1.6 Sound – appropriateness of sound/music to the production. Please also indicate whether the music was performed live or recorded, in whole or in part, and what effect this had on the quality of the production.**

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating:
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good	✓	
Excellent		

It's a real treat to have live music in a contemporary dance theatre piece. Live music not only adds another dimension to the visual spectacle, but visibly lifts the action through the dynamic between dancers and musicians. The fact that the music was commissioned for this piece was evident in the integration between sound and movement/image, with the folksy, blues-rock style echoed in the costume and film. I would have welcomed more musical diversity in a piece of this duration (although if it were cut by 30 minutes it would work well).

**1.7 Design – including costume, set, lighting design.**

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating:
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good	✓	
Excellent		

Simple but effective costuming, as noted above – I liked the fact that costume changes were mostly visible and part of the action (especially the transition into black mourning clothes). I also liked the images created by the use of several dozen travelling bags/hold-alls, although the need to move them around the space sometimes caused the action to drag. The highlight for me was the first film section, where the performers jumped in/out of the screen in unison with images of them jumping in/out of the water.

**1.8 Technical standards – comment on the whether the production was technically well presented (e.g. lighting and sound cues, etc)**

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating:
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good	✓	
Excellent		

This was a complex production with set, interactive film projection, lighting, live music and fast-paced performance all coming together seamlessly. One noticeable missed lighting queue, but given the complexity of the piece, it was well presented.

**1.9 Overall production – assess the success of the production in relation to any stated aims (e.g. in the programme or other printed material)**

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating:
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good	✓	
Excellent		

The promotional materials I saw (New Territories brochure) didn't present aims as such, but rather described some of the action and themes that Blush explores, and Vandekeybus' work as pushing performers and technology. In all these respects, the performance lived up to expectations.

**1.10 Audience – assess the appropriateness of the production for the audience, estimate the size of the audience and record their reaction.**

Rating for this section (Please tick)		Comments and key reasons for rating:
Very Poor		The Theatre Royal looked about 75% full, with a mainly young (under 40) audience. Reasonable gender balance and noticeable ethnic diversity. Promotional material makes it clear that the piece contained some explicit images and was not suitable for children, so the work/audience match was appropriate.  The performance, which lasted about 1 ¾ hours without interval, provoked an extremely enthusiastic response.
Poor		
Competent		
Good	✓	
Excellent		

**2. Management of Event**

*Please evaluate the way the event was presented/organised by the organisation and by the venue. Please answer, where relevant, with reference to the checklist below adding any other comments/observations you may have.*

**2.1 Suitability of the venue for the event.**

The piece worked well in the Theatre Royal, and clearly warranted a house of this size, although stylistically, it might have sat more comfortably in an industrial space like Tramway. Theatre Royal has developed a significant audience for contemporary dance.

**2.2 Information/interpretive material provided at the venue (e.g. programmes, displays etc), including the range of materials, quantity and clarity.**

Display space is limited at Theatre Royal, but season brochures and production fliers were clearly displayed. There was an A4 sheet with credits and biographies, although it would have been helpful if front-of-house staff actively handed this out (I picked it up from a table at the back of the dress circle). It was only upon reading this, on the train home, that I realised that there was also apparently a more detailed programme on sale - I would have liked to purchase this.

**2.3 Publicity/pre-publicity (leaflets, posters, etc), including the range, content, and when and where available.** *Please be alert to the publicity available prior to your visit to the event. Please also view and comment on the company's website where one is advertised. Comment on the ease of use, and quality of content and presentation, and currency of information.*

I first saw the production promoted in the Theatre Royal brochure and website, but was also aware through coverage in the national media, as its part of a Sadler's Wells/Dance Touring Partnership tour. I received a direct mail from Theatre Royal as well. This was then reinforced through the New Territories brochure and underground advertising, as well as preview articles.

**2.4 Accessibility of the venue, including:**

- *Ease of booking and payment* - very easy to book by phone through Theatre Royal box office.
- *location of venue* - Ideal – coming from Edinburgh, it is a short walk from Queen Street station.
- *external signposting and signage* – fine. Easy to find.
- *internal directional signage* – fine – I knew this venue well, but I did notice some people looking for the bar to no avail.
- *access and provision for disabled people* – good (and this is detailed on the Theatre Royal website)
- *timing of the event* – fine.

**2.5 Customer service, including: quality and efficiency of staff (e.g. box office, front of house, bar and/or catering).**

I didn't visit the bar on this occasion, but box office and front-of-house staff were typically friendly and efficient (with the caveat noted about handing out programme details).

**3. Acknowledgement of Scottish Arts Council Funding** (if applicable)

*The following is an extract from the Scottish Arts Council's conditions of grant for funded organisations:*

*The company should acknowledge Scottish Arts Council funding in press releases, at launches, on all published materials (including leaflets, brochures, programmes, posters, notices display, exhibition materials, websites and advertising). Acknowledgement of the Scottish Arts Council*

*grant must also be made in any secondary or indirect products arising from the revenue funding such as recordings, publications, video, broadcasts, computer programmes etc.*

*Please comment on whether these conditions of grant were met, including use and prominence of the Scottish Arts Council logo on the company's website.*

Theatre Royal acknowledges the Scottish Arts Council in its season brochure, but no one attending the performance on the night would know that the Scottish Arts Council had funded this event. The free A4 sheet available was obviously produced by Sadler's Wells/DTP and therefore only credits Arts Council England. There is no mention of the Scottish Arts Council on the website, and Theatre Royal should take action to address this.

The Scottish Arts Council is acknowledged alongside Glasgow City Council on the inside front cover of the New Territories brochure. Although this is clearly displayed, the design gives greater prominence to a range of other supporters (e.g. Visiting Arts, Esmee Fairbairn, Canadian High Commission etc) whose individual and collective contributions are much lower than the Scottish Arts Council's. There is reference to the Scottish Arts Council on the New Moves international website, but you really have to be looking for it (almost at the very bottom of the "About New Moves" page). New Moves International should take action to address these issues.

#### **4. Scoring**

*Overall Rating. Please rate the production overall, taking into account your ratings for each section. Please state the key reasons for your overall ratings – i.e. the particular strengths and weaknesses.*

Good – this was a good start to the large-scale programme of the New Territories Festival and a good production to have in the Theatre Royal's season, as the audience size and reaction demonstrates. Although *Blush* is not the strongest work I've seen by this Vandekeybus/Ultima Vez, and it would benefit from some considered editing, it clearly enthused a significant number of people who came out to the theatre on a Wednesday evening in February.

**Name:** Cindy Sughrue, Head of Dance, Scottish Arts Council

**Date:** 19 February 2004

**Advisor**

**Scottish Arts Council Officer**

