

'I am sick and tired of the way audiences are seated in theatres'

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Who are the dancers and where does the audience sit? In the performance by Ultima Vez choreographer Seppe Baeyens, the boundaries are blurring. 'I am giving the theatre back to the people.'

We're quarter of an hour into *Invited*, at the KVS in Brussels. The three-piece band is playing a rousing mix of jazz-rock and Tom Waits-style blues. Seppe Baeyens pulls me off the bench, a 60-metre long, blue braided rope that snakes across the stage and on which I, along with 125 other spectators, have been deposited. The choreographer – himself also a 'performer' in *Invited* – leads me by the arm into the performance area. I am standing eye to eye with a black girl. We feel as though we are being observed from all sides. At least, I do. As my gaze drifts to her purple dreadlocks that fall pleasingly over her shoulders, she takes my left hand and places it on her heart. She looks me straight in the eye, unsmilingly; I feel uncomfortable.

She guides me to another place on the rope. 'Look mum, there's Léon', whispers a boy of around ten sitting beside me to his mother. Léon, 94, is one of the twelve performers in *Invited*. He comes from family of Brussels butchers in Molenbeek. Baeyens literally plucked him off the street in the neighbourhood where the headquarters of Ultima Vez, Wim Vandekeybus' dance company, is based.

'I spotted him on the pavement in front of the door', the choreographer recounts once the try-out is over. 'I asked if he wanted to come inside for a moment to watch a rehearsal. 'Dance?' he said. 'That's not my world.' But in spite of this, Léon did go inside. And he came back again. And again.

Invited is the second piece by the choreographer in which Léon performs. Baeyens selected all the performers for this piece in this way. No one is a professional dancer. The youngest performer is ten years old; the most picturesque is a young man with Down's syndrome and a yellow cowboy hat.

For an hour and a quarter, these 'dancers' do something that you don't often see in contemporary dance or theatre. They put themselves on a par with the spectators. The boundaries between the performers and the audience are breached. Who are the dancers and where are the spectators? In the end, nobody knows any more. What is the point of *Invited*? 'It is an invitation to togetherness', the choreographer explains. 'I invite people to look at one another, at people they don't know.'

He is giving the theatre back to the people, he says. A nice thought, but doesn't it sound a bit formulaic? 'Do you think so? For me, the theatre has always been the ultimate place where we can get to know one another better. But can we achieve that by maintaining a hierarchy between spectators and performers? I am sick and tired of the way audiences are seated in theatres. It creates a distance between people, and that distance is already so terribly big in real life. I have the feeling that there has never been so much communication, and yet it seems that we are living in

highly anonymous times. I feel that I don't know my own neighbours as well as in the past. We live more in parallel with and above than with one another.'

What was the catalyst for this? He picks up my smartphone – which I'm using as a tape recorder – from the table. 'I want to engage with human beings, not with extensions of them which we think are offering us a window on the world. A window on what world? The real world, or the contrived world?'

He notices it in his own behaviour, when he's walking to work or sitting on the train: how his smartphone often puts up a wall between himself and his environment. It bothers him, because he's not really like that. 'It comes naturally to me to make contact with people easily. Whether it's a professor or a homeless person that I encounter, I always manage to find a starting point for a conversation. Unless this thing (he takes his own smartphone out of his inside pocket, ed.) gets in the way. We don't look at one another any more, apart from indirectly, via that stupid screen.'

By breaching the boundary between performers and spectators, in *Invited* we are prompted to actually look at – even to touch – one another. People are given a chance to enter into encounters with other people in a safe space, people that they would perhaps ignore 'outside'.

The strength of the performance is that Baeyens, his performers and musicians allow everyone to be themselves. You are not obliged to participate in the performance. Anyone who prefers to observe from the sidelines how the 100 other 'actors' take each other in tow, is free to do so. They will see a fascinating spectacle unfold.

Invited by Seppe Baeyens/Ultima Vez & KVS, from tonight at the KVS in Brussels. On tour until the end of April. www.kvs.be