

INTERVIEW: ANOUK VAN DIJK

By Zahira Mous

Much more than just dancing better

Anouk van Dijk is a choreographer, artistic director, and the founder of the movement method Countertechnique. She recently returned to the Netherlands from Australia, where, since 2012-2018, she was the artistic director of the Melbourne based dance company, Chunky Move. While still working in many countries as a choreographer and a pedagogue, she has recently chosen to make Amsterdam her home base once again.

According to Anouk, there are two central questions that are of importance in Australia. The first concerns the stylistic representation of an Australian identity, and the second, the search of the colonising population to come to terms with the genocide of the Indigenous population.

Anouk explains that there was originally some controversy around her, as a foreigner, taking over the stewardship of an influential company such as Chunky Move.

Why do you think the choice fell on you and not on another Australian?

At the time, there was a need for some fresh stimuli. In Australia, the dance world shares a particular inspirational departure point, which has continued from generation to generation. I think it was a good time for a new vision. Every art form has need for new stimuli, as do the artists themselves, so it's always good to travel and work in other cultures. For me personally, it gave me an enormous boost of new impulses that I could transfer to my work as choreographer, and as a leader, but also as a person.

What did you learn in Australia that you could not learn here?

It was the first time I was in a position to really make a difference to the trajectory of other dance artists, particularly as I was making work for quite a broad audience. Before then, I had my own company anoukvandijk dc (from 1999–2012), in which I could, from the small core of dancers and artistic collaborators, develop my own style. At Chunky Move, the role was much more multi-faceted. I could invite other choreographers to make pieces for the company, we organized developmental paths for dancers, young makers, experienced artists, as well as those who had ambitions to take on artistic leadership. We worked together with local organizations to bring about largescale productions, and in doing so, we could involve many artists.

I expanded the dancers *pool* of Chunky Move and gave choreographers who had not yet had the opportunity to work in a structural organization the possibility to do so. In doing this, the colour and the signature style of the company changed. Before my appointment, it was predominantly a 'white, Anglo company.' I was searching for a more representative reflection of the Australian population – so in came, Tara Jade Samaya, Niharika Senapati and James Vu Anh Pham. They became the face of the company. Joel Bray (Wiradjuri) was also an important performer in the production *Complexity of Belonging* (2014). He was the first Indigenous artist who was given a commission for our yearly choreography program *Next Move*. Another Indigenous artist, Thomas E.S. Kelly, made a solo choreography in *Accumulation* (2018) a largescale work that I directed for the *Art and Design Triennial* at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV). Both Thomas and Joel are now running their own successful organisations. Joel is an in-demand choreographer and Thomas has started his own company Karul Projects.

I made *Complexity of Belonging* together with the German writer/director Falk Richter. We wanted to use personal texts written and developed by the dancers. To do this, Joel had to ask formal approval from his *elders* to give him the right to speak about his, and their background. Both Joel and Thomas would consult the *elders* of their communities during the development of their performances. This is common practice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists in Australia, who are descendants of the first inhabitants of the country.

Further, I was involved in collaborations with large organizations in the city of Melbourne. I came from outside, I was different, and I believe that this made people a little more open. That is the advantage of 'new blood' I suppose. The disadvantage, on the other hand, is that it takes quite some time to make inroads into the community – for them to get to know you and your work, and you theirs – and also to understand how interactions within the relevant communities function. Since my return to the Netherlands, I look at these situations more closely: Where is the conversation now? What are the requirements? Where is the potential? And what can I contribute?

What can you share that you discovered about yourself and your Dutch identity in Australia?

When I moved to Australia, I thought that my English was really good, but that was a disappointment. Many subtle codes and expressions passed me by. My form of expression was also often misinterpreted, without me realising it. If you can't speak your mother tongue, it's not always easy to place expressions in their context, even though it is assumed that you understand everything. That led to some confusion in the early days. It's so much easier to communicate with someone from your own culture particularly in terms of irony or dry humour. You can feel it at once. What I like about the Dutch directness is that we can accomplish an awful lot in a short amount of time. It is difficult in a word-for-word translation from Dutch to English to not be seen as tactless or even course. It's true that in many Anglo Saxon or Asian countries, as well as countries within Europe, you need to be quite careful of your

choice of words. Even if the directness is not totally gone from my way of communicating, I have developed a better compass that allows me to interpret and relate to these situations.

What was the reason that you came back to the Netherlands?

There were different reasons. I have travelled a lot and worked in various cultures, other than Europe: Australia, New-Zealand, China, Taiwan, Russia, America. This is when you realize that no matter where you are, you are always Dutch. And that is quite beautiful. The Netherlands has so much to offer, we should be proud of that. I noticed that while 'you can take the Dutch girl out of Holland, but you can't take Holland out of the Dutch girl. I am from here, and I have had many opportunities here that have enabled me to develop. Now I'm interested in fostering new connections as well as helping the next generation of Dutch artists to further develop their potential. The Netherlands is also very centrally situated; if I am working in Germany or America, then I am reasonably close by; my daughter will study here and my mother lives here as well. These are also important things in my life.

As well as helping younger artists, what ambitions and hopes do you have now in Holland.

There are various things at play. My movement training, Countertechnique, has gotten a lot of followers worldwide. It all began in Amsterdam with my then company, anoukvandijk dc, in a backwater studio in the Pijp from which it grew exponentially. When I left Holland lots of people were saying, 'we think it's important that this gets passed on.' So I developed the first teacher training (CTTT) in 2012. This expanded in Australia, and a whole new generation of dancers became involved. Some of the Chunky Move dancers have become *teachers*, but there are also now many from other countries. We now have 35 certified teachers who give classes all over the world. Now back in Europe, I would like to begin a new phase in the development of Countertechnique, one in which we develop a more elaborate program so that it can be taught with more focus and continuity, less dependent on sporadic availability.

As well, we are working on the implementation of Countertechnique in the curricula of various academies in America – but I can't say much over that now – let's say, we have many plans.

You said that you were able to bring more colour into the company in Australia. How do you see the situation of colour here in the Netherlands?

I am trying to orient myself as to the developments here, so it's hard to be concrete, other than to notice that the process of awareness is also clearly still ongoing. In the last year we have begun to look at Countertechnique from the perspective of our own 'whiteness' and question how we could give form to inclusivity and diversity.

Countertechnique has teachers spread over the world and many are working from various cultural contexts. Since the pandemic, we have been giving online classes, and this has enabled us to reach dancers for whom, given their geography or their financial circumstances, have had less likelihood of access to our classes. We are now looking to further these initiatives and develop communication methods so that more dancers feel welcome to participate in classes in which they are seen, heard and respected. We're striving for an inclusive working atmosphere where people can feel free to develop at their own pace. We are also working towards a more diverse representation of our teaching staff. We need to follow this trajectory with care, small steps. It's not easy but it's something we need to do.

With the experience you have of the cultural debate over diversity and inclusion from an Australian context, how would you compare that to the Netherlands.

I don't think I have been here long enough yet to really be able to comment on the situation here, but I can see that just as in Australia, important steps have been taken. Australia is an immigration country, where 30 percent of the population is born elsewhere. This means that they need to find a way to develop a new identity together, with all the complexity this holds. Having equal opportunities is really important, and that goes together with the relationship with First Nations people (in the form of reconciliation), something that is very much at the forefront of discussions. This means that discussions around sensitive themes such as appropriation are taken very seriously. Here, these types of issues are looked on by some with some scorn; their importance has not yet made an impression.

You have been a leader in the arts from some time. How would you describe artistic leadership as it was ten years ago compared to now?

Ten years ago, I would have mostly been thinking about the potential of my work. Now, I see it from a much wider perspective: how much can I make a difference to as many people as possible. I am interested in how I can contribute to the development of the dance form and the dance artists and how this can inspire the public to see the world with other eyes. In my experience, exciting collaborations can bring about unexpected and rich insights that challenge and expand those working together, as well as the viewing public. There are so many possibilities. That's how I see artistic leadership.

What difference would you personally like to make?

That people believe in themselves more. That they can find a way to work from an individual mindset as well as a collaborative one. In the movement practice of Countertechnique the goal is to enable dancers to function as dancers for longer with more knowledge and more pleasure. This also has an effect on how they work together and become

leaders, as choreographers, artists, rehearsal directors, mentors, teachers. In this sense, Countertechnique is much more than just a technique that teaches you to dance better.

How do you want people to see you?

I have no idea how people see me. Maybe my work says more about who I am now. I think that my work has become purer. I do come from the land of Mondriaan, the rigid skies, the straight lines, the dance landscape that grew from the work of Hans van Manen. I always rebelled against this rigidity of form and I was on the lookout for a more baroque style, something with frayed edges; a place where I try to give form to life that I see with all its unruliness. I think I have become a lot calmer in my work now. I allow more stillness and time to enter the work. My work approaches the complexities of our condition with simplicity and sparsity. I think this is where I am now as a choreographer. And what I would like to give to the public: I am looking for the vulnerability and humanity in the dancers; so that they are more recognisable and more tangible – something that you can feel and understand without necessarily having experienced or felt it before.

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Translation: Anny Mokotow