



Moving to his own beat

Philosophy meets performance in Daniel Linehan's karaoke dance mash-up

Tom Peeters

Choreography for seven dancers, messing around with the classics of literature and philosophy, presented as a karaoke evening. In short, that's the newest chapter in the interdisciplinary curriculum of the American dancer and choreographer Daniel Linehan. Since his 2008 move to Brussels, where he studied at Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's PARTS dance school, Linehan has been constantly mashing up styles and disciplines. "I really value dance, choreography and the research of the body, but when I make something that's only dealing with the body, its shapes, space and movement through space, I can only be self-referential," he explains. "But I want my dance to involve the outside world."

By mixing dance with other art forms, such as video, photographic image, text and even singing, Linehan has always been researching the relationship between the field of his own expertise and this outside world. "My definition of dance and choreography is expansive," he says. "I feel free to use many different media to see how they interact with the body and even change the quality of the body. It helps me to break my patterns, both in my body and in the other dancers' bodies, as well as my patterns of thinking."

In *The Karaoke Dialogues*, soon to be performed in Brussels and Antwerp, the venue is filled with television screens. They are both on the stage and behind the audience. The dancers relate and move to the rhythm of the text they read on them, even though this sounds a bit abstract. "A consonant has a certain kind of feeling and quality that produces a different physicality to an open vowel," Linehan explains. "The words also mean something, evoking certain images that we are interpreting."

"I've put the text in such a way that

it has its particular rhythm and timing, like on a karaoke video," he continues. "The words on the screen kind of dictate the rhythm of the sentence. The text is in a format of something that goes through time, making it similar to dance moves."

A normal karaoke show exploits the shared culture of pop music. Linehan picked a different form of shared culture: novels or essays from classic writers such as Kafka, Cervantes and Plato. "At first I was just looking for striking dialogues in their work. I didn't have a fixed theme in mind," he says. "But while doing research I found that I was most drawn to texts that referred somehow to a legal procedure, either establishing law or committing a crime, investigating the crime or the passing of a verdict." So law became – surprisingly, even to the choreographer – the main link between the different texts. But why would you combine karaoke with texts about law? "I realise it doesn't sound like the most exciting and popular topic. But people have always been fascinated by trials and crimes. On the other hand, there's a reason why these classics have survived. They have a universal appeal and are still relevant."

Take *The Republic* by Plato. The dialogue written around 380BC deals with the theme of establishing law. "One extract says everyone should stay in their own station and trust the experts to ensure the smooth functioning of society," Linehan says, connecting the ancient writings to the situation in Europe since the financial crisis. "Didn't we also have to trust the financial experts and the technocrats, because the situation was 'too complex to handle' for the common people?"

This link with the law started to make even more sense when Linehan realised that the procedures he follows as a choreographer – starting with very abstract movements,

just using rhythms and sound for inspiration, and ending with the creation of something very concrete – is quite similar to the application of law. "Here you also have to figure out and translate a very formal law or strict rule into something concrete."

"The relationship between the law and choreography is that both have limitations that dictate what you can do," Linehan says. "But within these limitations there's always a certain freedom. Dancers may have to be in certain places at certain times, but for me it has always been interesting to find where the dancers make choices in the moment, even if their movement in time is choreographed." With this freedom of limitation we arrive at the very centre of the choreographer's work, prominent in his earlier solos and works for small groups and expressed in last year's book *A No Can Make Space*, which the author will present during the Kunstenfestivaldesarts in a lecture performance on 22 May.

Made in close collaboration with deSingel, where he is *artiste associé*, and the Flemish designer Gerard Leysen from Borgerhout-based graphics studio Afreux, again Linehan was challenging himself to do something in a form he's unfamiliar with, now trying to show similarities between the process of making a dance choreography and designing a book.

To make sense of certain fragments you have to flip the book around. Sometimes the top of the page is separate from the bottom, enabling you to mix and match different texts. "Making these different designs and layouts creates a certain interaction, a dance, between the reader and the book."

Ever since his 2008 arrival in Brussels to study at PARTS, Linehan has embraced the possibilities of the city. "Before, in New York, I had to work many hours a week at a restaurant



in order to pay the rent. I didn't have enough time to devote to my artistic research," he says.

"After graduating I didn't feel the need to go back because a lot of exciting things were happening just around the corner. Here I have better opportunities to find residencies and show my work, whereas in New York there wasn't such an inspiring cross-cultural dialogue going on between

different scenes."

Though it's always been a hunt to find residencies, co-productions and financial support for new projects, recent partnerships with deSingel, the Lille Opera – where he has a residency – and Sadler's Wells in London have made it easier to concentrate on the creative process.

"In Lille I could start working on a larger scale, swapping the intimacy

of small theatres for larger venues. In deSingel I started a choreographic workshop and even worked with a bunch of unemployed people, which was really outside what I normally do, but I need such experiences to keep me inspired."

The Karaoke Dialogues is in English with Dutch and French surtitles

► www.dlinehan.wordpress.com

21-24 May

Kaaitheater

Square Sainctelette 20, Brussels

30 May

deSingel

Desguinlei 25, Antwerp



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Daniel Linehan's *Karaoke Dialogues* puts literature in the mouths of dancers