

Ave Nue: hail, walk, watch, bow

By: Jochem Naafs

In three weeks Steve Paxton re-envisioned his performance *Ave Nue* together with 10 SNDO (School for New Dance Development) students. A very short period for such a project. So what did it bring us? The starting point of *Ave Nue* was not the movement, it was the space: a long hallway dissected in parts by pillars. Colourful pillars. Paxton decided that in stead of a gradual green-to-white hallway, which was used in the original piece in Brussels, he wanted the pillars to have the colours of the rainbow. This is the first major difference between *Ave Nue 1985* and the re-envisioned *Ave Nue 2009*.¹

I visited the performance twice, during the dress rehearsal and the premiere. This article reports my experience of the piece by reflecting on both these performance and the rehearsals I visited in the weeks before. My aim is not to compare the two performances I saw, or to compare the 2009 version with the original one. I will try to give an overview of what *Ave Nue* was and has become.

Hail to the *Ave Nue*

Ave Nue started in Brussels in 1985. Four months before the first performance. Steve Paxton, Jan Reyckaert and others started working in an old military building, the Dailly kazerne, in Schaerbeek, Brussels.² A long hallway was their stage for a performance based on football stills and everyday movements. The movements accompanied by live cello and pre-recorded music and framed by screens and sections of light, and an ever changing relation between audience and performers because of the moving rostra. A few years later the building was torn down and for a short while the painted pillars have been in direct sunlight. Only some reviews and a video registration of the performance remain.

The video imagery is dark, black-and-white and very, very flat. Depth-perception is hard in video anyway, but because of the nature of this performance in particular it is near impossible. The dancers in the back look like small action figures out of a sports collection. The slideshow images and the physical bodies seem to merge together into one tensed construction. The footage is intriguing and fascinating, but after watching the video registration I was filled with questions more then answers. What would it be like to see this performance in real life? Can a moving body in space become so two-dimensional? Is the

¹ For more information on the project visit <http://paxton.the.wiki.ahk.nl/wiki/doku.php>

² *Ave Nue*. Choreography: Steve Paxton. Production: Kaaitheater. Kaaitheater Festival, Théâtre de la Balsamine: May 1 till 12, 1985.

movement of the rostrum perceptible? And what is the role of the large hand in the performance?

Walk the *Ave Nue*

24 years later Paxton starts working in the Bagagehal of Loods 6, Amsterdam. 15 students³ and a team of technicians, teachers, writers, and producers start with him. This time there are two giant hands. The hallway is two meters wider and about 10 meters shorter, but has almost the same look and feel as the one in Brussels. There are no photo scores of sports players this time. Paxton started, as mentioned above, with the space. He stressed that the perception of space and depth will be the main issue. *Ave Nue* calls attention to the act of looking.

The rehearsals for *Ave Nue* derive from two points. The first are technical trainings based on *Material for the Spine*.⁴ Paxton developed these techniques over the last twenty years and presented them to the SNDO students in the first week. These techniques have one thing in common; they are focused on the spine and try to make you aware of this part inside your body that you actually cannot feel.

The space of the Bagagehal is the other starting point. The first couple of days the students and Paxton have been looking at each other in space. These sessions created awareness; of the consequences of the space for the way you can move, what movement does in a stretched space like this, and what it is like to be watched at from two opposite angles. The technique workshops started of in a studio at the AHK, but were soon continued at the Bagagehal to unite the two starting points. The students started to create scores for duets in couples: One watching the other dance and selecting fractions, followed by the other watching and selecting. In this way they collected material for the performance. In the end Paxton distributed the collected material over solos, duets and sextets.

The performance *Ave Nue* is made up out of these fragments of movement combined with ad hoc light and sound improvisation. What a dancer does where depends on where he is at that moment. What light is on or off depends on where the dancers are. *Ave Nue* is an. The preparing weeks provided some new questions and made me ask the same questions again. How does the improvisation of specific scores and arrangements work on an audience? How do these data conjoin into a performance that emphasises the depth of the space?

³ Students from the School for New Dance Development (SNDO) and the Amsterdam Master of Choreography (AMCh) (Amsterdam School of the Arts, AHK) and the MA Theatre Studies of the Utrecht University.

⁴ The DVD-rom *Material for the Spine* by Steve Paxton is officially released on February 17, 2009 at the Centre national de la danse and is edited and produced by Contredanse, Brussels: 2008.

What will the role of the two hands be? What would it be like to see this performance in real life?

Watch the *Ave Nue*

The audience is invited to take place on one of the two rostra facing each other. I see two bright yellow pillars on either side. The performance starts with the dancers placing two translucent screens in front of the audience. In between the screens a large hand gives birth to another hand. Gently taken care for, the newborn is placed on the mother's belly. Exit hands, exit dancers, exit screens.

Meanwhile the two rostra started moving backwards. Very slowly the stage is getting bigger and two new pillars appear, still yellow but with an orange touch. I knew the rostra would be moving and I noticed the new pillars, but the ride is smooth and almost unnoticeable without active verification. The dancers form a line and start an intriguing wave of movements; crossing, circling, swirling, spiralling. They seem to be the floating vertebrae of a flexible spine. Although the spine itself is hardly moving, except for getting longer, all the vertebrae seem to have their own independent life. This apparent independence is typical for the whole of *Ave Nue* and is an effect of the improvisation of scores.

During the entire performance the rostra keep on moving and the stage is getting deeper and deeper. The space is emphasised by the lightning used in *Ave Nue*. Each section has got its own lights and so has each set of pillars. The lighting not only determines what you can see, but also how you see it. It prescribes your ideas about the relation between dancers, the colour and the mood of the space, and the time of the day. By illuminating the blue pillars in the far end it is dawn, if the red pillars right in front of you are lighted up, it is dusk.

One of the main goals of Paxton was to make the dancers appear as if they lost their third dimension. Unfortunately I was not tricked the first night and was afraid that this aim would not be reachable. Maybe it was because I switched sides, or perhaps the timing was just better, but on the opening night I was amazed by the simple but effective trick that did the job. By illuminating the section just in front of the dancers, while the dancers are in a dark section at least 11 meters away, they appear flat. Your eyes just cannot adjust to it. All the movements seem to stay in one plateau.

Take a bow on the *Ave Nue*

One very present element of *Ave Nue* I have not discussed yet. There must be a section in this article on the hand(s) in *Ave Nue*. Why? Already as I was watching the video registration of *Ave Nue 1985* I was surprised about the existence of

what seemed to be a white baseball glove in the performance. It made me curious of what Paxton's idea was with it. When I saw the tryout I was shocked about the redundant and literal presence of these giant puppets. What were they doing there and why do they mess with the beautiful and serene presence of the white dressed dancers?

Fortunately it finally clicked the next night. With the improved timing of both dancers and light technician and the further distillation of the material the function of the hands dawned on me. By fitting in the literal and narrative story of the hands Paxton gives the performance a degree of lightness and casualty. Both the performance and the audience get some air. Not everything has to be abstract and vague and not everything can be. The small gesture of a history empties your mind and makes it possible for the spectator to construct just about anything.

Without the slightly chilly breeze caused by the hands *Ave Nue* would be a warm, beautiful and serene performance during which the audience would peacefully fall asleep on the moving rostra. The presence of the hands, emphasised by the manipulative bow that caused the lights to dim one by one, kept the audience awake and sharp-eyed.

About the author:

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