

REPEAT AFTER ME

a family experience in the field of contemporary dance

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One day my father and I sit in a cafe. He tells me that he has just met my ex-girlfriend. He looks at me. I look back. After a while, I see his eyes redden and water, and I am moved – onto a plain that opens up between us: vast, empty, and arid. My father follows me, and together we dance, stumbling, quivering, floating ...

Last year in November, *Repeater – Dance Piece with Father* premiered in sophiensaele in Berlin. It is a duet between my father, who has never danced, and me, the choreographer son. In June 2006 my father asked me as with every year whether I wanted to come around to his parents' house to harvest the cherries from the tree in the orchard. As with every year, I didn't have time. As a result, I started to think about how he and I could spend more time together, productive time similar to harvesting cherries but not dependant on a particular season. I came to the conclusion that the easiest way to do so would be to integrate him into my schedule. Which meant making a piece together. He is in pension and has time, and he was courageous enough to agree without hesitation. The application at the Berlin senate got accepted. Co-producers joined in. Spending time together could begin.

We had about one year for four occasional meetings before we entered the final production process of five weeks in autumn 2007. First we had to get used to being physically near again after about 25 years. Touching my father felt strange. Watching him dance was a sometimes embarrassing, sometimes moving experience. Sharing weight and other exercises challenged my father's trust. And he had to get used to the fact that in dance-making there are a lot of moments, when the next step or even the general direction of the project is unclear: during the first meeting he asked me for the reasons and aims of each exercise, with me mostly unable to answer. So, for the next meeting I decided to do something with him that I knew as little about as he did. I bought a book by the (god)father of modern dance, Rudolf Laban, describing his eight movement qualities for amateur dancing: *pushing, wringing, gliding, beating, whipping, dabbing...* and *quivering and floating*. In the second meeting we then went through each of the qualities, first reading the text, then improvising alone and in duets, and finally discussing the experience.

During one of the duet improvisations my father ran out of movement ideas and sought inspiration in my dance by copying it. While he did so, I realized how a line of tension ran from the thumbs along the top-sides of the arms all the way up to the shoulders and even to the throat area, in both my father's and my body. Through his learning dancing from me I learned how I had been learning from him all my life already. Which seems a banal insight at first. After all, kinship of features and of behaviour among parents and their children are one of the most popular themes at family reunions. But I was and still am astonished by the acute intimacy of shared tensions experienced inside the body rather than of shared features or habits observed from the outside. I (physically) understood how enmeshed my father's and my (physical) relation had long been already. I guess while exploring *quivering* with my father, I experienced the mutual constitution of individual and world, referred to by Merleau-Ponty as *chair* – flesh, the enmeshment of perceptions, feelings, sensations, thoughts and actions in the world.

But it is not only through the similarities that family bonds and kinships are experienced. Also the differences between the generations create relationship. The fact that I don't relate to my body the same way my father does to his, is not only based on our two different professions: wholesale merchant and choreographer. It also has to do with my desire as a son to surpass my father and do things differently: One of my personal tasks during dance training was to work on my lack of crosslateral movement patterns. At the time, it seemed to me that my habitual patterns were too homolaterally oriented, most of the time pushing into space with my whole left or right side rather than crosslaterally reaching into space (as you do when taking a leap over a small river, for example).

In the piece, there is a series of positions based on photographs of football players in action. My father and I used to play sometimes and watch football together a lot – a memory of a bonding experience, physical and emotional at the same time. Most patterns in football are crosslateral, as the players often run into empty spaces, reach for the ball or powerfully shoot it towards the goal. But even when trying it with the ball, my father had difficulty in using a crosslateral pattern in his body. Most of the time he would end up in a homolateral position, looking more static than the photos of the professional players suggested. I marvelled at the stubbornness of my father's pattern and asked myself how it could have gotten so strong in my father's body, while I had managed to layer it with crosslateral patterns in my body. And I started to wonder whether there is a connection between the physical crosslateral reaching patterns and the emotional reaching out of one's house and away from one's parents, into the world. And if so, what would the football experiences then and now say about my father, about me and about our relationship? One possibility I have been pondering since is, that a strong homolateral pattern in someone's body might suggest a very strong emotional bond of this person to his or her parents. But, of course, this is my father's business and a further exploration of this issue might be the point of his and my conversation.

Confession is not at stake here as much as it wasn't with the piece. My interest has not been in re-telling the tales of father and son or in finally touching and solving the taboos between us. I have rather been interested in exposing our physicalities to each other just as much as to the audience and thus weave a carpet of sensations, perceptions, feelings, actions, and movements, rendering family issues tangible rather than visible and allowing for the audience's empathy rather than their entertainment through anecdotes. Although we encountered some conflicts during the process, I was not interested in working on their representation for the stage. I feared the dangers of producing psychodrama with the amateur that my father is, not trained to reproduce emotions. But I also expected that tracing our physical patterns would reveal more than telling anecdotes and re-enacting old conflicts. Inspired by a quote that dramaturge Jeroen Peeters had found in the beginning of the process of *Repeater* in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*, we attempted to create a kind of "laconic dialogue that fathers and sons can undertake without awkwardness or embarrassment", in our case a dialogue in movement.

But as any, such a dialogue has its limits. And they don't only have to do with the physical limitations of a 69-year old man or with the problems of staging an amateur. They also stem from my involvement in the very matter that I want to choreograph – the relationship between my father and I. Once it was he who taught me how to

relate to the world. Now it is me who shows him how to dance and perform. This reversal has created a chiasm that I still find hard to tackle, as its crossing seems to mark the blind spot of my father's and my involvement with each other, in life as much as in this project. After the performances, many people ask whether the work on the piece has changed anything in the relationship between my father and me. Probably they mean whether the project has shed light on any of the blind spots and maybe even resolved them. Well, it hardly has. Some issues might have become clearer. There were even positive surprises such as my father's newly discovered talent to dance and to perform. But the blind spots and taboos remain, even if they have slightly wandered along the retina or canvas that is made up by our family relation and forms the backdrop for the piece.

Luckily, it has never been my aim to change our relationship. I really just wanted to spend more time with my father and explore what Pirkko Huseman called *Verwandschaft der Bewegung – kinship of movement*. How do my father and I relate in a dance? What are the differences in our respective repetitions of each other? In what ways is our kinship kinaesthetic? And how can this become aesthetics or rather: choreography? Stumbling, quivering, floating...

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