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WALLFLOWER QUARANTINE

THEATER

August 28, 2015 – Noorderzon, Moesstraat 7, Groningen

★★★☆

Enchanting slow theatre

By Joost Ramaer – seen August 28, 2015

Jo Fong has been busy as the audience enters and sits down. She flies with swinging arms over the flat floor inside the U-shaped stage, excitedly talking with Greg Akehurst, who sits in a corner of the room with a laptop, trying to find the music Fong's asking for. Late visitors bashfully stand at the entrance of the hall. "Please, do come in," Fong says with a flourishing arm gesture.

Wallflower, by Manchester-based British company Quarantine, had its world premiere at Noorderzon festival in Groningen. *Wallflower* doesn't really begin. It just happens. Makers Richard Gregory and Renny O'Shea began nearly a year ago on a new show with the working title *shit happens*, with the idea that all our dreams and plans are sooner or later disrupted by unexpected events. "That's what forms us into individuals" Gregory says.

Somewhere during that process he asked all the performers to try and remember every dance they had ever danced. What was intended as an exercise was so successful that the group went with it. The result is *Wallflower*.

A *wallflower* is someone who is never asked to dance. It's a silly title, really. The four "actors" are not exactly 'wallflowers'. Three of them are professional performers and the fourth, the only amateur, has a stage presence unlike the others. The crowd on the sidelines is not the wallflower, because they aren't waiting to be asked to dance.

It does not matter. Dance as the medium for individual personal histories yields fascinating results. James Monaghan, the only man in the quartet, shows us how his mother danced to Tina Turner while she was cleaning the house. As a young boy, he watched her from the stairs - he wasn't allowed down to where she was cleaning. But seeing her move was contagious. James joins her, and in no time they sway together on the floor, the ban forgotten.

Nic Green tells about a night with a close friend from her teenage years. They rocked in their simple drunken dance. In parting, the boy suddenly declares his love for her. She slams the gate in his face. "I loved him, but he had ruined it between us."

Such universal, highly recognisable stories are interspersed with moments from Fong's professional practice. Somewhere in the middle of the floor she has stuck a cross of black tape, to show you how De Keersmaeker trained her to pirouette in to a certain point on the dance floor. In Groningen, she lands just next to the cross. "Hmm," she says, "in the world of De Keersmaeker, that is not good enough."

There are also times when (too) little happens. When Akehurst cannot find the right music, or when the performer can't remember enough of the dance that they've just started. Especially Fong - often left on the ground, slightly twisting her body. **Wallflower** is *slow theater* that requires some patience from the public, but no one ran away during the world premiere in Groningen.

The performers take turns to write the archive, one sitting amongst the audience. All the dances that arise during each performance are documented thus. After the premiere audiences could look at the up-to-date archive, left out for inspection. One dance per page, with typed notes along the lines of "David Bowie song, Nic can't remember which. She moves from side to side and shakes her bum a bit."

With every show new dances are added. Each show is different to the last, since a different dancer archives, another dancer joins the performance and because all three repeatedly elaborate on associations with one another's memories. As James Monaghan brings out the dance with his mother, the chances are that the dancer after him also remembers a dance with a relative. The same applies to the public: the paths that the dancers take determine what memories they evoke in their spectators.

The result is a fast, full-flowing treasury. Before Groningen, the four performers had dug out about 580 dances from their memories, says Sonia Hughes proudly. Sonia is not a professional performer, "but she is a great dancer," says Richard Gregory. "When she enters a club, she immediately stands out." At one point, Hughes cannot help it. She puts down her notes, comes in and does a live impersonation of Gladys Knight.

The speakers sound Knight's mighty voice. Hughes sings along with her - here and there uneven, with the occasional false note, but Hughes swings like hell. Before our eyes, she transforms. We barely hear the recording but we hear and see Gladys Knight in Sonia Hughes, an ordinary woman who happens to love dancing. It's that which makes *Wallflower* into a magical experience.

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Translated by Hannah Hiett.

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