

The Incorporation of The Other

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by Antje Landmann

Many people would love to build barricades: against immigrants, for example. Or against viruses. But the seeming intruder can also be used to vaccinate, as choreographer Helena Waldmann will show in her new work “Der Eindringling” (The Intruder) at Pfalzbau. For that, she drew inspiration from kung fu. A combat-dance with Baroque singing.

When a martial artist wants to learn how to strike properly, his opponent protects himself with a foam pad, a focus mitt. One can overdo it though: the Berlin director Helena Waldmann armours one of her three dancers with so many pads – on the back, around the hips, on the head – that he becomes immobilised. “Totally over-padded, we call it during rehearsal,” says the 57-year-old. “Too much protection is no protection. Our society is very good at building such barriers. Like demanding a plaster cast at the doctors for a graze on the finger.”

One automatically pictures US president Donald Trump wanting his wall against immigrants. The mind wanders to Great Britain where they’re intending to close their borders again after Brexit and ends up at Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) who warn of “foreign infiltration”. Even at the playground, the Berliner finds examples: where she observes helicopter parents putting helmets on their children on slides and catching them at the bottom. “One must have the chance to experience danger in small doses. If one knows the foreign or the attacker, one can handle it better.”

Actually, what the director is describing here is the effect of vaccinations, and indeed in her new work, premiering at Pfalzbau on 8 June, she forges a bridge from politics to medicine, from nation to body and from martial arts to Baroque singing. The starting point was Jean-Luc Nancy’s book about his heart transplant, “The Intruder”. And the autopsy of a dead body she was allowed to witness, which fascinated her so much that this time she wanted to engage in anatomical theatre. The public and theatrical dismembering of bodies began at the beginning of the 14th century and later on steep stands around the dissecting table were built for this spectacle. Helena Waldmann wants to bare the layers of the body on stage by means of light and image technology, and for this she uses the latest craze from Asia: a holographic fan, used all over for advertising.

The works which the dance director has shown at the Ludwigshafen Pfalzbau or which she has produced there have been mostly provocative and complex: she makes Iranian women dance in tents, under the sharp eyes of the censors; she makes a ballerina masturbate in “revolver besorgen”, because she also sees in dementia the freedom of intemperance. She condemns the conditions in Far Eastern sewing factories and draws parallels to the precarious conditions for artists over here. Sometimes she works with Kathak dancers, sometimes with acrobats – and again and again with contemporary dancers.

This time she chooses the Chinese martial art kung fu to illustrate the principle of attack and defence. Its power is known from Bruce Lee films. Its aesthetic qualities were demonstrated by the directors of “Matrix” or “House of Flying Daggers”. What interests Helena Waldmann about Wing Tsun is above all how it uses the opponent’s energy to make both parties stronger. “The opponent is no longer something negative. One just needs to know them.”

When the other is being incorporated, when one seems to reach into the other one’s body, it is shocking but also erotic. “Sexual intercourse is also a form of intrusion and a beautiful incorporation of the other,” Waldmann says. That’s how children come into being, and this one can again translate onto nations: “To avoid inbreeding one needs foreign semen. Body and nation need to open up in order to survive.”