

ALLEEN ZIJN - TO FEAR OR TO LOVE?

A personal reflection for Dag van de Maker upon the attendance of Dag van de Maker held on the 18th September 2022 at De Kazematten within the framework of Het TheaterFestival.

Hazel Lam 18th September 2022

Have you ever wondered what solo artists battle with behind the closed doors of studios and residencies? The Dag van de Maker gathered twelve solo makers of various disciplines of the performing arts at De Kazematten on the last day of Het TheaterFestival 2022. Led by Roxette Chikua, Georgina Teunissen and Joren De Cooman representing the sectors of theatre, dance and circus respectively, we shared our concerns and experiences of our trajectories of creating solo live work. Everyone came from various backgrounds and was at different stages of their career, yet we found resonance in certain struggles and doubts. Perhaps, in being solo makers, the questions and uncertainty we have will never be resolved and most likely re-emerge at different times of our careers.

There were some exercises I found relevant and impactful within my own venture. The first one was to visualise a fictional space where we could imagine our next steps based on the ideals. Defining my own space and imagining what my perfect atelier looks like provided ideas as to what I need in my mental and practical space right now. I saw it as an invitation to an inevitable acknowledgement of my past experiences. Informed by our experiences and elaborated by our wishes, we drew out expansive architectural figures onto big sheets of paper. One explanation from a co-participant on having big windows for these buildings was that through the designed 'windows', we are then not only making a space for ourselves but also fabricating a channel through which we are connected to the outside world, the world where our contemporaries can be found. Even when imagining an enclosed space for intimate creations where budding ideas, so delicate and elusive, are being tested and uncovered, the ultimate aim of connecting with others has never been neglected. The possibility of looking out of windows literally and metaphorically appears to be an important factor in maintaining our awareness of others.

Whether being directly related to this drawing exercise or not, the idea of being alone, alleen zijn, was also challenged during the discussion. Can we actually be completely alone? This exercise culminated in the questions of what I need if someone enters my space and who I invite into this space. There was no consensus on how this should be done within the group but the first suggestion was that the invitation would be offered in the beginning when encountering the first obstacle. It would come in the form of either a conversation or a sharing.

As we moved on to what we need concretely, we could not shake off the fact that we need comfort to be creative, which admittedly is by far the most dreaded part of creation. The part where we need to ask for money. 'Ask the universe's permission', someone interjects light-heartedly. The irony of entering an artistic conversation and ending up talking about money and pitching brings us to the full view of the asymmetry of comfort within the cultural industry. While the programmers and authorities have all the financial security of a full-time salary, simple things such as coffee conversations in getting to know each other's work instantaneously present a precarious power dynamic, unless you are lucky enough to be backed up by the artist statute. However, most of us solo makers come from a place of total vulnerability, be it psychological, physical, legal, structural or financial. When can we speak freely about money? Will there ever be complete transparency and do we want it? It seems to be such a taboo to talk about money and the justification of fees and salaries.

Another participant exclaimed that they never made work based on their comfort or happiness. To a large extent, this might ring true to some of us. I wonder if there are artists out there who started as soloists and grew into comfortable positions. How would their work have evolved? The same participant advised that we need to relinquish our egos: 'by ik ben, we should let go of the ik, just keep the ben.' Without misinterpreting them and digressing into a bottomless debate of what is selfhood, we came to ask: 'How is it to be a solo artist?' For some of us, it was equivalent to 'hitting a wall' (the person dramatically mimed the action of throwing themselves onto the brick wall of De Kazematten), while others confessed that it was about the 'judgement from others'. When someone mentioned the subject of 'the bullied child', I was promptly reminded of the necessary condition that vulnerability requires the existence and the observing judgement from others. On one hand, we have been told that we ought to be kind to others, but on the other hand, we also need to address the harsh inner critic that is often one's worst enemy. It is already hard enough to try to create work, self-bullying only adds salt to the wound. But it is not all doom and gloom! Roxette concluded the session and encouraged us that 'vulnerability is magic and it is what moves us'. Perhaps, in this massive sea of doubt in making solo work, what keeps us swimming is not the fear of drowning, but the love of swimming.