

DANCE
IN CLOSE-UP

HANS VAN MANEN

seen by

ERWIN OLAF

HANNIBAL



Sarcasmen - V

“The poetry of motion is a phrase much in use, and to enjoy the epic form of that gratification it is necessary to stand on a hill at a small hour of the night, and, having first expanded with a sense of difference from the mass of civilized mankind, who are dreamwapt and disregardful of all such proceedings at this time, long and quietly watch your stately progress through the stars. After such a nocturnal reconnoitre it is hard to get back to earth, and to believe that the consciousness of such a majestic speeding is derived from a tiny human frame.”

THOMAS HARDY, *Far from the Madding Crowd*

The Poetry of Motion,
or The Style of Suspended Time

MICHAEL JAMES GARDNER

Oh, the rigour of simplicity is a joy to behold. Only when it's done right, of course. We can thank Albert Einstein (or not) for setting the bar high and so-out-of-reach when he said: "The definition of genius is taking the complex and making it simple."

What is simplicity's connotation in the realm of this art project? Ballet and photography are exceedingly complex endeavours, and yet both appear effortless, eloquent, graceful and gorgeously simple in the work of the two geniuses on display here – Hans van Manen and Erwin Olaf.

If one is uncomfortable with the word 'genius' for a living artist, then let's agree that the two men are prolific pioneers. They can and should be called masters, even in the long, rich and profound Dutch tradition of the word. They are preternaturally gifted artists with uncompromising standards whose early successes – and the awards that followed – foretold creative paths that each man has pursued for decades, constantly searching for new avenues to express all that's possible in their art.

Let's begin with Hans van Manen. He's a masterful artist, his medium is ballet, and his form is choreography. The instrument of dance he employs is the human body – composed of two feet, two legs, two arms, two hands, one torso, a neck and a head, which has been shaped with talent, tested and trained for years and placed on a stage. It's a form of grace that few ever master. The art of Van Manen's choreography comes from a storied foundation of tradition. For decades, he's stood proudly on the shoulders of history – classic, neoclassical, modern and contemporary – and rewritten his version of the craft. His functional, formalist language has been shaped by his very human mind, which gives his ideas about dance their innovative shape and then sets them to music. We watch in awe.

The images in this art project are taken by Erwin Olaf. He's a masterful artist, his medium is photography, and his form is the creation of worlds – imaginative, surreal and spellbinding. He's an image-maker who is incapable of creating portraits that don't have layers of inner life. Olaf's photographs within these pages depict pure dance poses that can be defined as signature expressions in the Van Manen vernacular. The

title of the art project is important. It's an alert. A warning, in a way. Prepare yourself to enter the dark theatre. Take your seat. Focus as you would before a rising red curtain. *Dance in Close-Up* means that the details are zoomed in, magnified and cropped for our pleasure. The result is that we're rarely allowed to see the full view. To understand this publication is to understand that these are images to be absorbed by the eyes and read with the mind. It's an aesthetic tease that teaches us how to look.

Within these pages, we see fragments of bodies. Sculpted torsos. Outstretched limbs. Athletic extremities. Arched backs. Flexed toes. Searching hands. Grasping. Reaching. Precise forms of touching. Bodies holding bodies and bodies being held. Bodies atop bodies. Fingers pointing, interlaced, intertwined. Toned, tense muscles. Tanned skin. Meticulous forms of dress. Faces revealed often only in profile. The instructions of how and where to look. It's interesting that there are only two pairs of eyes that meet Olaf's lens. The first is from a ballerina who meets the reader's vision with her head upside down. Her back-bending pose is firm and appears effortless. The face bears no emotion. Her gaze is cool. Everything we see is cool in this art project because there is a coolness that exists in both men's work. The second pair of eyes belong to Van Manen, looking at us from behind a pair of glasses. Smoke rises from a cigarette draped at the corner of his mouth. He neither accepts nor rejects the viewer; a look of scorned surprise that doesn't quite betray the expected verdict of whether he's pleased or displeased to see us here. He's an analyst and we are being read. (I confess that I didn't feel worthy, and I apologise.)

As always with Olaf, the visuals create seductive, intoxicating stories. The incredibly precise lighting adds layers of tone, shadow and depth. But here, he's trained his lens on Van Manen's austerity – the pristine and purposeful poses. It's as if we are onlookers in their conversation about how to tell a story with movement, how to translate that movement to choreography, and how to capture the story on film. Simply look at what the body can do with this shape, this specific form and sculpted line. Think about what it means when it's curved and folded

like this. Body as a tool and body as an instrument. There is a peculiar geometry in the way that the photographs are cropped as though what we see are sketches of a painting to be filled in. The infinity of the unfinished. We see Van Manen via Olaf showing us their toolkits, the gestures of body language like a painter's collection of brushes and colours. We are witnesses to the shape in the studio of what is to come on stage.

It's interesting to see Olaf's imagery devoid of props and sentiment but full of a different type of set-up. The stories that are imparted to the reader arrive through what the dancers express, absent of exterior flourishes found in the world. *What is there, is there.* And there is a lot. The compositionally precise arrangements of kinetic bodies in assured poses present without hesitation the meticulous ideas of two men who seem incapable of accidents and, at the same time, astonishingly confident what they are capable of. How grateful we are for what they've shown with the strength, grace, vigour and form of these elite bodies.

Dance in Close-Up is dynamic, and it offers a dazzling, sensual display of details. If there is a contradiction to be discovered, it's that choreography is the art of movement, and photography is the art of freezing a moment in time. It's a dance of stop motion. Every movement, every gesture, every twist, turn, bend, gaze, flex seems dictated, justified and oh-so-right. The dancers don't even *seem* to be breathing. The immaculate costumes, coloured and impeccably styled to perfection, are enough to take *our* breath away. Almost all the time, the images are gasp-worthy. A ballerina's sheer black skirt curves mid-pose as she balances, legs bent, on top of her feet. It's absolute perfection. Three pairs of exquisitely aligned pink heels with flawless legs and peekaboo skirts are dream-inducing. But, to say that these photographs are beautiful misses the point. There are lessons to be learned. Take, for instance, the portraits of Van Manen from the front and the back with his arms outstretched like an angel. Ready to take flight but grounded to the earth. Try the pose yourself and see what it reveals within you. Like the nude male dancer, who we see from behind, erotically dressed in a sheer bodysuit, doing the same. There is drama and message inherent in style, shape, form, function and clarity.

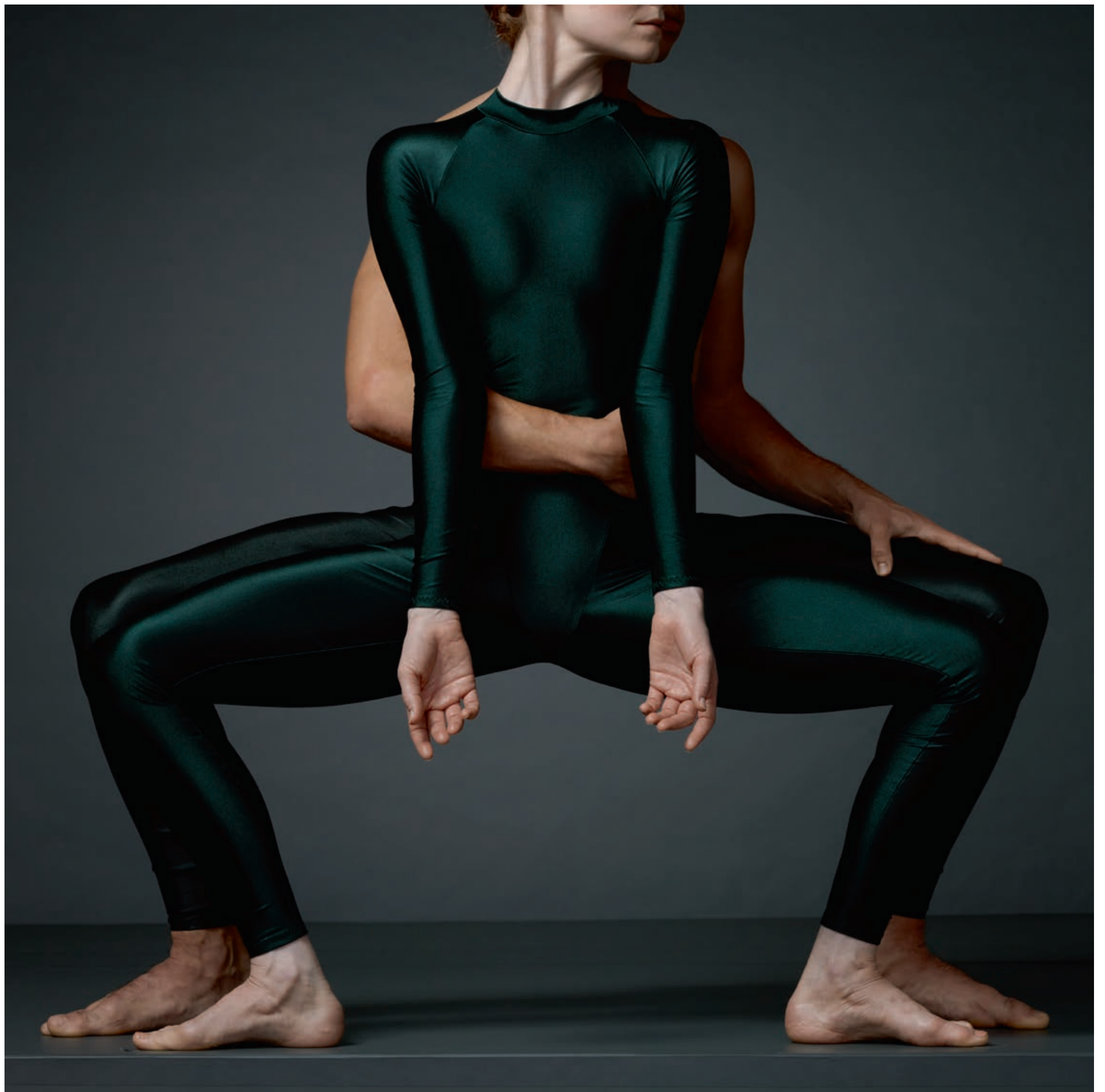
About the word 'clarity'. *Dance in Close-Up* provides a new definition of the word – clarity sharp enough that it could cut glass. Or a clarity that perhaps is glass – even if not fully transparent – which allows us to try and visualise the perfection and embodiment of technique.

It's not perfection that aims to please just for pleasure's sake. It's not a surprise that there are no smiles to be found in the pages of this book. Only one image comes even close: a male dancer has a Mona Lisa smirk on his face as he grips his thick belt with one hand and unzips his fly with the other, a fantasy flash of smooth, flawless nude skin. This is a sexy, sly nod to the provocateur nature of Van Manen and Olaf. (A clenched fist rising from the triangle crotch where two legs meet seals the deal.) Each artist heightens the other man's senses and invites us along for the ride.

Van Manen and Olaf know well that a body alone in a space transmits stories and two bodies ignite a chemical reaction. One body is charged. The second provides the spark. What I learned from this art project was cemented by its final photographs – the series of portraits of Van Manen's hands. The bare essence of what you need to express anything is something that you already possess. It can even be your hand. See how this expressive body part becomes the foundational tool of an artistic practice based on movement. It's enough to make Bruce Nauman blush. Body as a tool. Body as an instrument. You just need to learn to use it. Pay attention. And what comes after is a portrait of the two men bowing. If you didn't know it: this publication is a performance. Their collaboration is the artistic poetry of motion. A heightening of consciousness of *such a majestic speeding derived from a tiny human frame.*

Michael James Gardner is an American author and editor. He's a frequent collaborator with the Axel Vervoordt Company and has written various art books, including *Living with Light* and *Dancer – Wim Vanlessen*. His essays and articles have appeared in numerous literary journals and magazines.









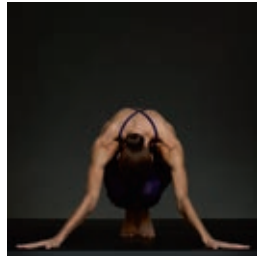
Grosse Fuge - VI



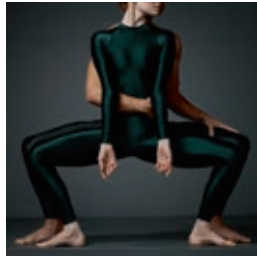
Grosse Fuge - II



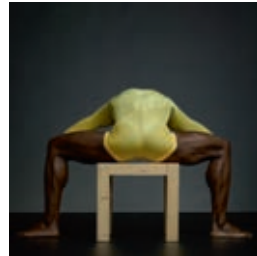
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1981
Salome Leverashvili
and Timothy van Poucke
Costume design:
Hans van Manen



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Déjà vu - I
1995
Floor Eimers
Costume design:
Keso Dekker



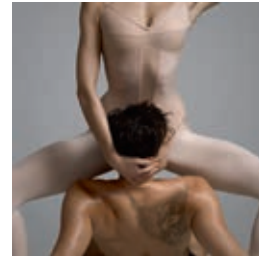
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1996
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Kammerballett - III
1995
Daniel Robert Silva
Costume design:
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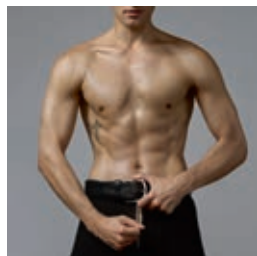
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and Erica Horwood
Costume design:
Keso Dekker



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Grosse Fuge - VI
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Nancy Burer
and Semyon Velichko
Costume design:
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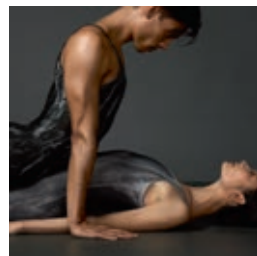
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Semyon Velichko
Costume design:
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Costume design:
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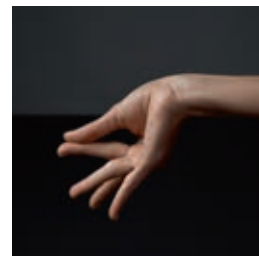
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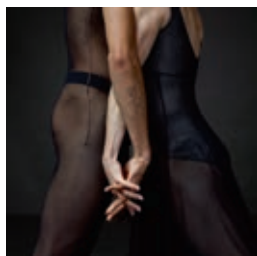
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Six Piano Pieces
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Jing Jing Mao
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Costume design:
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Two Pieces for HET - II
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and Constantine Allen
Costume design:
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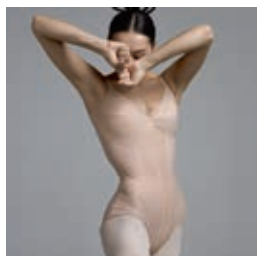
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Costume design:
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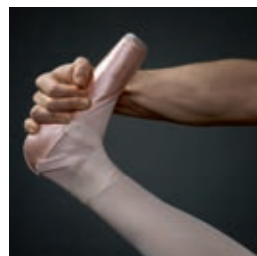
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Costume design:
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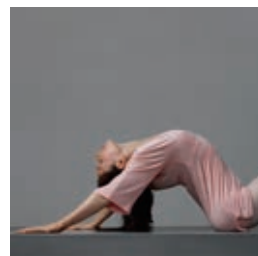
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Nancy Burer
and Semyon Velichko
Costume design:
Hans van Manen



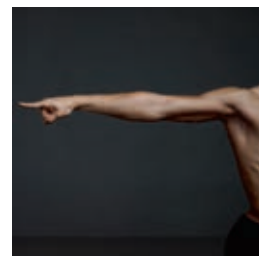
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Grosse Fuge - IV
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Nancy Burer
Costume design:
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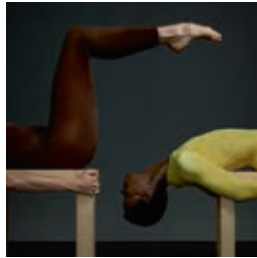
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Trois Gnessiennes - II
1982
Giorgi Potshishvili
and Elisabeth Tonev
Costume design:
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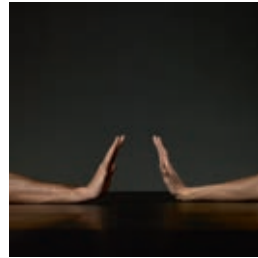
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Twilight - II
1972
Maia Makhateli
Costume design:
Jean Paul Vroom



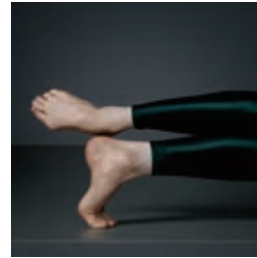
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Timothy van Poucke
Costume design:
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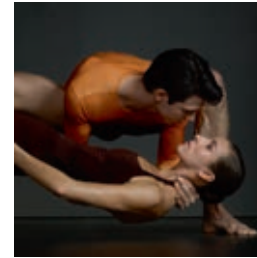
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Kammerballett - I
1995
Daniel Robert Silva
and Floor Eimers
Costume design:
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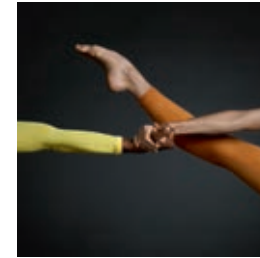
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1995
Floor Eimers
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Costume design:
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Kleines Requiem - V
1996
Erica Horwood
Costume design:
Keso Dekker



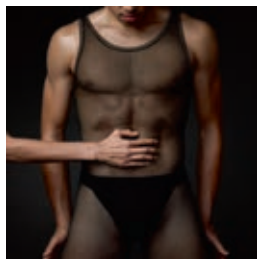
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Kammerballett - V
1995
Floor Eimers and
Martin ten Kortenaar
Costume design:
Keso Dekker



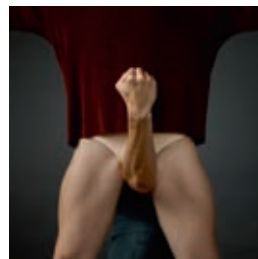
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Kammerballett - II
1995
Daniel Robert Silva
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Live - I
1979
Luiza Bertho
Costume design:
Keso Dekker



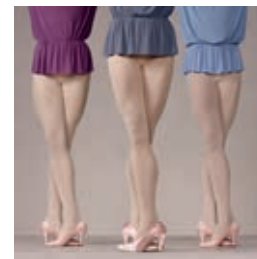
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Two Pieces for HET - IV
1997
Luiza Bertho
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Costume design:
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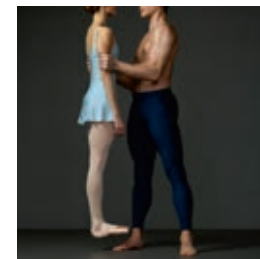
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1986
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Costume design:
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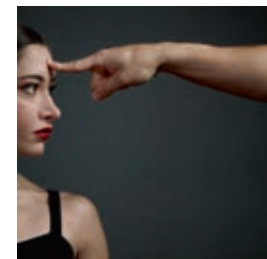
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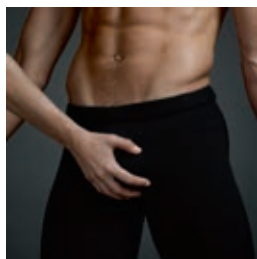
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Pose - I
1982
Elisabeth Tonev,
Koko Bamford
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Costume design:
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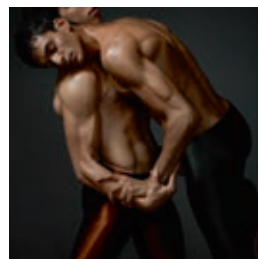
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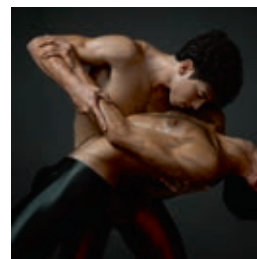
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1981
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and Timothy van Poucke
Costume design:
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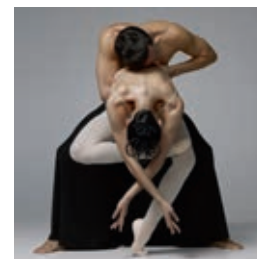
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Costume design:
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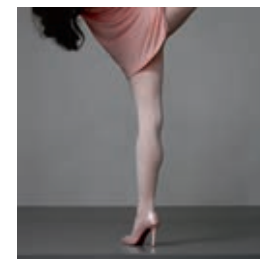
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Costume design:
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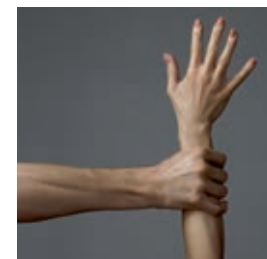
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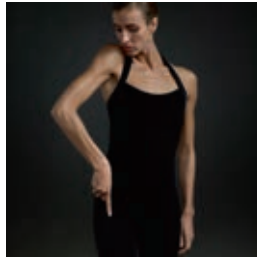
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Grosse Fuge - I
1971
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Costume design:
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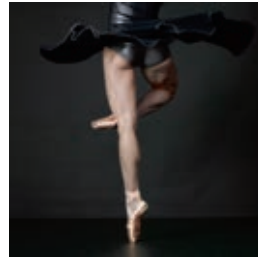
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1972
Maia Makhateli
Costume design:
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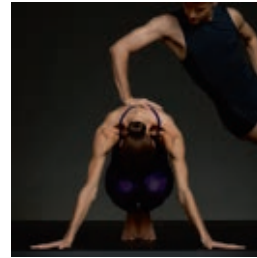
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and Artur Shesterikov
Costume design:
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Floor Eimers
Costume design:
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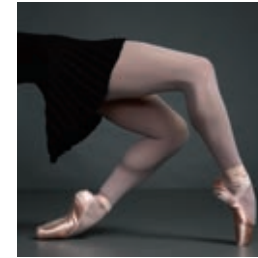
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1997
Anna Tsygankova
Costume design:
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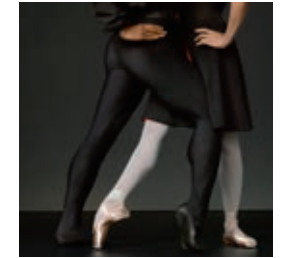
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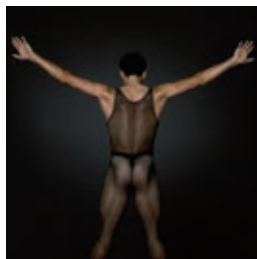
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Costume design:
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1981
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Costume design:
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5 tango's
1977
Young Gyu Choi
and Maia Makhateli
Costume design:
Jean Paul Vroom



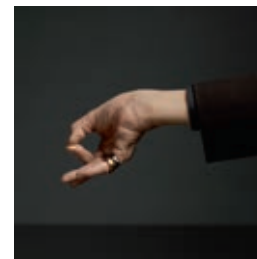
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1997
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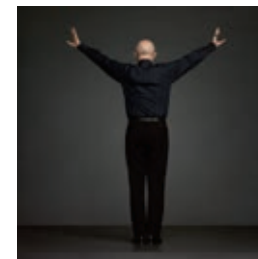
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The right hand
2022
Hans van Manen



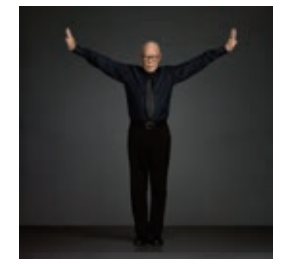
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2022
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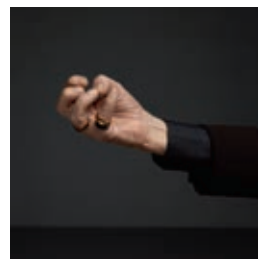
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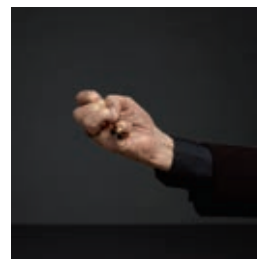
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arms - Front
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Clenched fist - III
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Thinking about Robert
2022
Hans van Manen



Hans van Manen and Erwin Olaf - Bow

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ERWIN OLAF:
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PUBLISHER:
Gautier Platteau

PRINTING:
die Keure, Bruges, Belgium

BINDING:
Van Mierlo, Nijmegen,
the Netherlands

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Wilcovak

WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO:

Ted Brandsen, Henk van Dijk, Het Nationale Ballet, Holland Festival, Hans van Manen Festival, Galerie Ron Mandos, Anna Tsygankova, Artur Shesterikov, Conor Walmsley, Constantine Allen, Daniel Robert Silva, Edo Wijnen, Elisabeth Tonev, Erica Horwood, Floor Eimers, Giorgi Potskhishvili, Jing Jing Mao, Koko Bamford, Luiza Bertho, Maia Makhateli, Martin ten Kortenaar, Nancy Burer, Nathan Brhane, Salome Leverashvili, Semyon Velichko, Timothy van Poucke and Young Gyu Choi

ISBN 978 94 6436 627 3
D/2022/11922/07
NUR 653



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BOOKS

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