

SCHWALBE PERFORMS A TIME - SCHWALBE



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Jasper Delbecke

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Building Up in Order to Break Down

Schwalbe performs a time - Schwalbe

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Under the umbrella title *Schwalbe Performs Everything*, the Dutch theatre collective Schwalbe rounded off a week of Schwalbe shows with the six-hour-long performance *Schwalbe performs a time*. Their newest production was preceded by a reprise of *Save them* (their graduation project from 2008), *Schwalbe performs on their own* (2010), *Schwalbe cheats* (2012) and *Schwalbe is looking for crowds* (2013).

The tension between a crowd and the individual is a constant in Schwalbe's wordless and extremely physical productions. The pumping beats in *Save them* make individuals merge with the group. The music breaks down the barriers that we put up around ourselves as individuals and allow us to join the partying crowd. In the carbon-neutral show *Schwalbe performs on their own*, the collective considers ecological problems while pedalling away like crazy on second-hand home trainers in order to keep the lights burning. In *Schwalbe cheats*, what starts out like an innocent game on the playground soon degenerates into a fight in which the strongest pull every trick in the book to win. *Schwalbe is looking for crowds* is a hypnotizing choreography where a crowd can be protecting and threatening at the

same time. The crowd's whirling dervish motion engulfs the individuals within it but also can make them rise above themselves.

Each new Schwalbe production originates from the previous production(s), says the collective. In Schwalbe's earlier productions, which always focused on the tension between the individual and the crowd, the performers played with time and exhaustion, and the impact that both of these have on the body and on the individual's relation to others. In *Schwalbe performs a time*, it is the spectator's turn to experience the impact of time on the body, and the repetitive actions of previous shows have given way to pure action. In comparison with *Schwalbe cheats*, *Schwalbe performs on their own* or *Schwalbe is looking for crowds*, the audience now faces a huge challenge.

Starting one minute before the stroke of midnight, Schwalbe assembles theatre sets for six hours long. The work that normally is the responsibility of theatre technicians, set designers and set builders is now in the hands of the female members of Schwalbe. The company knocked on doors of theatres throughout all of the Netherlands asking if they could borrow their most favourite or special sets. As a result, a crazy collection of scenography passes in review: a sturdy café meant to recall the 1950s, rusty motorbikes, a shady brothel, a stage paved with tin cans, a field of flowers made out of cut-open plastic bottles, a gigantic penis illuminated by LED lights and a sleeping inflatable baby as big as a whale.

Some sets can be assembled in no time, others require a lot of lifting, pulling and hammering. Big bags stuffed with tin cans can be dumped out quickly, but cleaning it all up takes a lot more work. The sets were chosen not only because of their visual qualities but also and especially because of the different processes that go into their assembly. In *Schwalbe performs a time*, the female members of the company give an ode to all the invisible actions that underpin theatre and that we seldom or never think about as viewers. Here, the rustic manner of working and heavy manual labour that we associate with the assembling of sets is replaced by the quiet, unassuming way in which the scenes are built up. No yelling for a screwdriver or nervous running around to make sure everything is built up and broken off quickly, but instead a heart-warming dedication to putting a set together. The assembling of scenery as a sacred ritual.

Even before arriving, people knew this was not going to be an easy task for them as spectators, so they have come fortified with a full stomach, bottles of water, tea or chips and dressed in clothes that allow you to sit still for six hours. *Schwalbe performs a time* starts at 23:59 on the dot. The lack of dramatic tension does not make it self-evident for people to keep paying attention. Everything happens with a slowness that leads to physical discomfort. A glance around the stands reveals nodding heads and eyelids struggling to stay open. Some people force themselves into a position that enables them to keep watching. Others give up the fight and snuggle in the blankets provided by Schwalbe, taking a power nap between the seats.

As great as the concentration is that the performers must have in order to set up everything routinely and in silence, the effort that the audience must make to sit out the entire six hours is every bit as great. Just as in Schwalbe's earlier productions, words are lacking and images prevail. Every set in *Schwalbe performs a time* is doomed to never do what it was made for: have a theatre performance take place in it. The fastening of the last bolt not only completes the build-up of the set but is also the signal that it can be broken down again, only to vanish into the vaults of the theatre. Each time, one has flicker of hope that the performers will do something with the set. Each time, *Schwalbe performs a time* refuses to answer the question of what play or what company the scenography comes from. Because before you can think of a possible script for a particular set, parts of it are already back in the wings.

The disobedient Sisyphus had to push a boulder to the top of a hill as punishment from the gods. Every time the boulder was at the top, it rolled back down to the foot of the hill again and the impossible task could start anew. Albert Camus (1902-1960) saw in the Greek myth of Sisyphus the absurdity of our lives. Not a day goes by in our lives that we don't waste energy on trivial things. Camus points out that Sisyphus is not bowed down by his punishment, but actually derives energy from it. His pointless work has become a source of energy.

With *Schwalbe performs a time*, the company presents a 21st century version of the Sisyphus myth. The first two hours are a fight against falling asleep and a struggle for concentration. Like with any performance, you try to perceive and understand everything. Schwalbe has used the same factors that confronted the performers in earlier productions – the decline of physical stamina, the testing of endurance, mental spirit – to challenge the audience. In the six hours of *Schwalbe performs a time* you experience this personally. Here, the passage of time can only be seen in the bodies of the spectators, because it seems to have hardly any effect on the performers. The long night can take away none of their determination, whereas that of the spectator seems to ebb away minute by minute in the first two hours. Once you have realized that it is impossible to stay concentrated on everything for six hours, you allow yourself to take a break at the bar backstage, close your eyes for a while or go outside for a breath of fresh air. Just as the gods made the boulder roll back down the hill every time it got to the top, Schwalbe immediately breaks down every set. All the attention we spent on it as spectators was for nothing. Building up in order to break down, watching in order to

ultimately see nothing. Only after you finally dispense with that illusion can you enjoy the poetry that comes from a container load of tin cans or a gradually deflating giant inflatable baby.