

# La Opinión

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## Spiegel's Mirror

*Belgium's gifted choreographer brings a career retrospective to Los Angeles*

Para Debra Levine, especial para Espectáculos

Brussels-based experimental dance-theater Ultima Vez burns a heady fuel of furious physicality and raw emotion. With this weekend's Los Angeles performances of "Spiegel" (German for "mirror"), the troupe's 45-year-old founder/choreographer, Wim Vandekeybus, marks twenty years of vivid and powerful multimedia dance making.

Spiegel's on-stage kingdom is a dangerous planet where social alienation rules. Dance-duets resemble wrestling matches, as couples pull at each other's limbs, mount one other, and even butt heads. Swung about, tossed to the floor, kicked and stomped upon, the dancers exude tense sexual antagonism. Is this body-battle taking place on planet Earth?

Dubbed the Flemish School (doubters call it "Euro crash") this is not cool, American-style modern dance that scrupulously avoids emotional content. It emerged from Belgium's fertile arts-laboratory of the 1980s of which Vandekeybus is considered a key proponent and a must-see artist.

Music—both avant-garde and rock—powers Ultima Vez performances. Composer-performers Peter Vermeersch, Thierry De Mey, David Byrne, Marc Ribot, and Eavesdropper all contribute to Spiegel's high-volume sound score. Film/video is always present in the work of Vandekeybus, who is also a photographer/filmmaker.

To prepare the two-decade retrospective, Vandekeybus gazed into the mirror's mirror, finding in its reflection unexpected timeliness.

"Twenty years ago, I was obsessed by three ideas: catastrophe, instinct, and survival. This was visionary in the 1990s. Because people were comfortable then; they leaned back in their chairs and felt pretty good," he says.

"The world has changed since," Vandekeybus says. "We all live in fear of attacks on society. The illusion of security we worked hard to achieve has been destroyed."

"I've always challenged this pseudo-security, using the body and its uncontrolled movement to illustrate the possibility of chaos and catastrophe. People need to rely on their instincts to survive."

"Spiegel's sense of vulnerability makes it very contemporary," he says. "You never know in this dance what will happen next."

Yet Vandekeybus is far from a fatalist: "The good thing about art is that it's neither moralistic nor realistic. It's abstract and it only suggests. Art is about emotional recognition. I want my audience to think: somehow I understand the spirit behind this."

"Spiegel" is built from excerpts of six prior dance-theater pieces, most notably "What the Body Does Not Remember" (1987) which launched Vandekeybus onto the world stage, winning him accolades in New York and a "Bessie" dance and music award. A second excerpt is from "In Spite of Wishing and Wanting" (1999), based on a childhood memory. Born in a small Belgian town near Antwerp, Vandekeybus accompanied his veterinarian father on his rounds. "I rode horses as a child. When it rained and my mother wouldn't let me ride, I played pretend-horses at home." Vandekeybus himself will appear on the Royce Hall stage in the fascinating, nuanced role of a horse-man.

Vandekeybus, who speaks fluent Spanish, has a special relationship with Spain: “I was in Spain doing a long, extremely violent performance with Jan Fabre (Belgian multidisciplinary artist with whom Vandekeybus began his career). After five hours, less than half of the audience remained. I felt Spain had a lot of energy and talent—but nothing was really happening. I thought I should go back to Spain, and so I did,” he says.

In 1986 Vandekeybus gathered a group of young, inexperienced Madrid dancers and provocatively called his first production *Ultima Vez*, a name whose meaning has not stuck. “The fact that I began my creative work in Spain affected me a lot,” he says. “I like to work in environments where I am not so safe, where I am not socially connected.” He eventually married a Spanish dancer and their 13-year old son speaks fluent Spanish at home.

*Ultima Vez* is truly an international troupe, according to Vandekeybus: “We audition dancers from Korea and Iceland. Eastern Europeans—Slovaks, Czechs, Hungarians, Romanians—are showing up with their amazing Russian ballet training. Every country is different. Spain has great dancers, but few good actors. In Italy, everyone talks, but they don’t dance so well. And in England no one moves very much at all.”

And the Americans? “The U.S. is still under the spell of the post-modern giants: Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown. For Americans, form is content; whereas, for me, form is only a tool. Without the Americans I wouldn’t be here, but I am part of this art form’s evolution. American modern dance was initially exported to Europe. Now it’s time for European dance to come to the U.S.”

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#### PULL QUOTE

*“My passion is creating new work. But you cannot deny your past,” says Wim Vandekeybus, noting his twenty years as a choreographer of difficult confrontational dances. “I admittedly struggle with the desire to destroy everything.”*