

En avant, marche! by Koen Haagdorens, April 2015

A sense of community – this is one of the key concepts that arise when Frank Van Laecke, Steven Prengels and Alain Platel look back at their original fascination with building a production around a brass band. This fascination derives in part from the world as they knew it during their youth and which they found again in the book *En avant, marche!*, which the photographer Stephan Vanfleteren created together with the Huis van Alijn. Those who are familiar with the individual and sometimes varied work of Van Laecke and Platel will know that both these directors are extremely sensitive to both the strength and the fragility of all feelings of collectivity and to the role that music can play. On the basis of this shared sensitivity, it was almost self-evident that they should take the life of a brass band as a starting point. Even more so because the musical director, Steven Prengels, with whom they made the marvellous *Gardenia* in 2010, has a thorough knowledge of this musical world and its repertoire. But the world of the brass band also summons up other associations. Village feuds, affairs, generational conflicts, ambitions and frustrations – stories and anecdotes that could undoubtedly fill an entire theatre season. Van Laecke, Platel and Prengels sought the essence of the story they wanted to tell in this abundance of narrative material.

‘La morte è passata – death has visited’. With this phrase, taken from Luigi Pirandello’s *L’uomo dal fiore in bocca* (The Man with the Flower in his Mouth), the makers apply serious tension to the sense of community that is invariably associated with the life of a brass band. Pirandello’s 1922 play is spoken by a man dying from cancer of the mouth and who, in light of this, pushes away his beloved. A raging monologue by a dying man who seems with every word he utters to want to struggle against the tumour that is eating his mouth away. Van Laecke and Platel introduce Pirandello’s man with the flower in his mouth into *En avant, marche!* as a trombonist who, because of his illness, has to say farewell to his instrument and withdraw to the back of the band armed with two cymbals. A man who is part of a group, but who as a result of his disease is cast into the greatest imaginable solitude: the confrontation with one’s own mortality. There in the back row of the orchestra there is the latent possibility of a new love. But, as in Pirandello’s play, the dying man himself rejects potential lovers. Love is too reminiscent of life. And of everything from which he has to take his leave. So he prefers to cut off all intimate ties and work on a departure that he chooses and orchestrates himself. So, like *Gardenia*, *En avant, marche!* is a story of leave-taking. *Gardenia* is the departure of a group, while *En avant, marche!* is the departure of a member of a group. This appeals to a melancholy fantasy, an ultimate image that is familiar to many: the idea we sometimes dare to have of our own funeral. It is a narcissistic fantasy, with a spotlight on the empty space we leave behind. However narcissistic this image may be, it expresses the desire to be seen and sustained by the community. Or, more precisely, the desire to see our role or function in that community named and honoured. Our place.

It may be that this place is the true stage for this performance. It is where the man meets his successor in the form of an energetic young dancer. As if he were seeing his own youthful self appear. What they share is a love for the sound of a trombone. In this place they make a pact by which the one relinquishes his place and the other takes it over. A unique handover from one generation to the next that seems almost archaic. It is this handover that is so characteristic of the world of brass bands; it makes it seem as if time and mortality have no hold here. It is probably this suggestion of immortality that we find so moving in the compelling sound of a group of brass players. And which leads to their participation in commemorations, ceremonies, funerals, celebrations and inaugurations. To capture it in a single image, imagine a group of brass players at every graveside. As guardians of the wish that nothing should ever be permitted to vanish completely.

A wish expressed everywhere and at all times. Brass bands and other wind bands are found all over the world. So, wherever the piece was performed abroad, the makers of *En avant, marche!* opted to cooperate with a local brass band. The language of the performance is a mixture, as can often be heard in the rehearsal rooms of ensembles and orchestras. It is impure and

corrupted and, perhaps precisely because of this, boundless (this is a commonplace often applied to music). Its ideal is to be a language shaped and used by everyone.