

About romance

Interview by Nadin Mai, founder and curator of the Tao films VoD platform . Tao films is a new distribution service for films which are worth slowing down for.

www.tao-films.com

-

First of all, I'd like to ask you a general question, Karel. What does romance mean to you?

It is an abstract concept: romance. For everyone it is completely different. Doesn't it also speak to everyone's imagination?

For me, romance is a condition rather than a situation. Romance is both a mental and physical state, at the same time. It is a form of pleasure within myself. The pleasure romance can bring is even more intense if I can share it. The greater the intimacy is when the romance manifests, the more intense it can feel. Romance is soft. Romance is a sort of self-embrace. Romance is also aesthetically pleasing for me. I can not see romance without a certain form of aesthetics.

The form that someone else gives to romance tells much about the other. This intrigues me a lot, those forms that are given to romance. They are all very personal. It is a special richness which I can appreciate tremendously in someone else. You can also come together in the form of romance that you share.

Romance is very important in my life. Romance pops up in moments that I have hope or feel faith in something, or someone. Romance can always happen and can be everywhere. It's not that I always have to initiate it myself to experience it the most. It may just happen, beyond my control. The feeling of romance is the most powerful when it happens to me (just like most other beautiful things in life). If it happens to me, other aspects and qualities of my life become more precious. I can feel myself so special and calm, at those moments. And rich. The most power within romance, I think, lies in the fact that it is ephemeral.

You probably know why I asked this question. The romance in your film is everything but...in any case, it is not the kind of romance our viewers would imagine. It is an ambiguous romance.

First of all it starts with the title. The title carries a thrill. I like that. Something that is not consistent, within the logic of those words together. I always play with the expectancy towards my creation. I always try to create a conflict in the expectation of the viewer. What should he or she look for? What should he or she understand? What should he or she feel? I love active viewers, whether they are watching my films, or my theatre/dance work. Spectators may not feel at ease, and need to be tossed between understanding and feeling, and the ambiguous space in between. That's the power of art, I believe.

There is a similar conflict in the characters in the film. I like to depict the conflict IN the human being, and not merely the conflict situation between people. Thereby, there are all of a sudden two interests happening in the performer; an inner and an outer imagination and behaviour. I believe that inner conflict is always the first engine of the actions and behaviour of the bodies in my work. So my bodies are able to just be what they are. They are fed from the inside, with inner friction within themselves. The conflict between them and the other is immediately more layered. They don't have to start playing (acting) a (written) conflict with others. They just have to react.

It touches me that you used the words ambiguous romance. In the film, I wanted to go for the kind of romance that came with the two bodies. It is their form of romance. How they express it specifically. That does not mean that it is my form of romance. Sometimes people do ask me that question. Well, maybe by the context in which they are, it could be my form of romance. There is always something biographical in my work. As an actor, my own body becomes the parameter to think and feel in a certain context in which characters are located. From there I create my images. From there I can write, depict and communicate; through the bodies of others. I totally trust those bodies. I can rely on them in order to give myself some distance towards what I would like to put my finger on. Using other bodies creates space towards an interest, and allows me to create my own perspective.

But remember my motto: nothing really happened as it is told. Secretly: there are no actors in the film, the main characters are embodied by dancers. I was looking for young bodies that could act with their bodies. And that was hard to find among the younger generation of actors. So I decided to work with dancers. The focus to tell the narrative was the body. All the movements in the film look very normal, but they are totally choreographed in a careful way. I love the hyperrealism of it.

Bare Romance puts the male and female body centre stage. It reminded me a bit on the use of the semi-nude body in theatre. Can you please tell us a bit more about your fascination to put the body on screen?

Since I graduated, I have worked seven years as an executive performer, totally depending on the imagination of other people's minds, until I felt I had to start making work myself, in addition to performing. I did that because it was the only way I could offer myself an answer on the question who I really was/am as a performer. Was I an actor, or a dancer? I work in both sectors. People always like to put me in boxes. They determine how they look at me. While I'm just who I am. All of them are watching the same body. Only the (their!) context is different. It's their words that determine that they see me in a different way. The content – my body - was/is unchangeable. That fascinated me. I became interested in the silence between words or movements, because I suspected the sincerity, and true identity of the performer manifests between the acts of talking or moving.

I started to research identity and body. What does the body of a dancer or actor tell? And to what extent does the body define identity? The basic question leads to a triptych: a film (Bare Romance), a drama text (De zoon [the son]) and an essay in which I write out my methodology on the performing artist's body (De anatomie van het identiteitsloze lichaam [The anatomy of the identity-free body]).

The film became an inquiry for the codes of film as a medium. What do bodies tell us on a screen and how do I as a maker define my view on this, from the perspective of the silent, narrative body?

The drama script searches for the thinnest writing style provoking a specific way of performing. How does one write a script that gently enforces a performer to only one way of performing and, moreover, that results in a physical way of performing.

The essay finds its origin in my experience as an instructor at the Royal Conservatory of Antwerp (Belgium), where I teach acting to dancers and movement to actors. In an environment where I observe and analyse so many bodies, the notion of the identity-free body urged on me: I had to find out what a performer, dancer or actor, needs in order to be genuine on stage. The essay summarises the track a performer passes through, resulting in a pure, thinking body. This has become my objective for my classes and creations. This became my methodology.

I think what highlights the importance of the body most is your use of silence. There is very little dialogue. Music starts to come in only very late in the film. Your use of silence also emphasises a sort of tension between the two protagonists.

As I have already cited, I believe that a performer manifests itself in silence, before or between the act(ing). There is the authenticity, a state, a corroding. Words come only in handy if you just want to make an effort to be understood, if your physical act is not powerful enough, or is misread by the other. But actually, I believe we only talk so we're not feeling alone with what manifests inside ourselves. You try to share thoughts and feelings with someone who is not you. But by talking you actually go away from yourself, you will never understand yourself better by explaining. Because you put your content in the perspective and history of the other. Actually you just go away from yourself by giving words, while giving your feelings a meaning.

If I am putting a body in a frame (in a film or in a performance; somewhere I put light on the body, I give it focus), I am more aware of what I am not showing. Because what you don't see, that's where the viewer's imagination starts to work. That is why I have to know at first what I want to communicate. In order to colour against it. What I show is always a small aspect of what is really manifesting in the world I created. Each image I make, carries a lot of emotion and context (for myself in the first place). Otherwise I don't know how I have to use my bodies in that picture. I try to share my emotion and context till it vibrates in that other body. The performing bodies take shelter. Our worlds come together. Important also is that my emotions don't oversell. It propels me in making an image. There needs to be a lot of emotion and loudness and meaning first, to be able to take back, hold it and create tension. In the first place I always keep in mind that my viewer should be able to get his or her own space for imagining their own context and emotion. But therefore you need to give them the right body to mirror that. It is all about energy.

Once my image is created, it becomes a fact. And then it exists, and I don't want to push other meanings on top of it. Then it is ready to be shared with the viewers. I only play with the order of my images. I love to guide them in a certain direction of interpretation I gave it myself. The rest is the job of the viewer. It is not my story anymore. All that the meaning of the bodies in the film could colorize (text, music, camera movements, etc.) was peeled off, and are seriously constricted. I do not like art forms that underline emotions you should feel, or are 'spoonfeeding' a viewer.

Film is a voyeuristic medium, which I adore. The camera is there to get something from the bodies. As a viewer you are immediately involved somewhere. Many times, as a viewer you are literally physically present between the bodies. The camera is usually literally in between the characters. That creates automatically a psychological tension or desire in an audience. This way of using a camera is focussing on the head of the characters. The camera is going closer to the head of the performers to point out the conflict of the main character in the scene. So it happens in the regular cinema. In my film the bodies are almost always together in front of the camera. The camera is hardly between them. That was my way to create tension on a physical, empathic level. It creates a different focus, namely at the level of the body itself.

"Just feeling is enough" - This statement struck me. To me, it almost seemed as if both protagonists weren't really sure whether they wanted to feel something. Feeling makes one vulnerable, and Bare Romance shows this tension between the desire to feel and the fear of becoming vulnerable. Can you perhaps elaborate a bit on this and tell us what the origin for this film was?

First of all... If you are short on using words, you create a potential that every word or sentence becomes a statement. But that is never my intention. The fact that that specific sentence struck you, tells something about you, I think. It also indicates to me that a viewer still seems to need a few

words to find out if they are watching the 'good' way. It moves me that every viewer is highlighting another sentence of the film. Are they giving me some words back to test if they interpreted the 'good' way? I do not know. I think that's also not important. As I said, for me a personal interpretation of an art work is something else then sharing the same emotions. That is also very ambiguous.

Nadin, you've given a very beautiful summary: feeling makes one vulnerable, and Bare Romance shows this tension between the desire to feel and the fear to become vulnerable. You can feel something or know something, and that is why you also have to understand something or do something, in order to create a balance for yourself. That is the perpetual imbalance between head and body. Everyone endures this, particularly if love is concerned. If that imbalance handles (sexual) identity, you can't do anything other than trying something out, forcing yourself to be vulnerable, in order to feel or understand what you are thinking or feeling. The act of doing is important for yourself, not the output. The output reflects only towards the other. And so act the two characters in the film. She has a man, and wants to feel many other men to find out if the one she is with is the one. The ring she wears is a reference to her history. He has doubts about his sexuality, whether he is gay or not. Feeling a woman is the only way to find out. You don't get any other history of the characters. Even the places they share have no (common) history. They want to find some personal answers, by using each other, and therefore feeling is just enough.

Do you think (their) romance is only selfish?

You say on your website that you take sexuality as a subject, not as an object. There is always a fine line between subject and object when it comes to the body. How do you, as a filmmaker, make sure that the viewer does not misunderstand you? Can you make sure at all?

Sexuality lies within the behaviour of a body. The fact that someone is gay, for example, is for me a side issue. It is not the theme, not the object in my creations. The body and its person are my focus, my object, my theme. Building your identity around being gay is not interesting. Being gay is only a motive for that person. Your identity is not gay, but you're a gay person. Unfortunately it is often vice versa in the media.

As a maker you can access the body as an object or as a subject in relation to the narrative. (When you create two images, it happens already: there is narrative. Even though I don't always want to create a narrative, I can't escape it.) It is a thin line: in the end, you see the same body in a story, of course, but the way towards the output and the content of it is so different. A world of difference for me. A difference of image making!

In my work I use the body as object. In the first place, I focus on the object in one image. I am not yet busy with telling an overall story. The order of my images will make a story at the end, yes. But I see the story as an extra tool to communicate my images with, as a layer on top of my images. I am interested in the behaviour of a body as content in a context; not in creating stories as a content, where the body is a part of. The body is the object, the story is the subject.

In the end, as a viewer you see a story, yes. In the end, the body explains a story. But it is not my story, I do not make the story myself. For me it is about a gay person that is affected by time and things that happened in a certain order, and it is not about being gay in a moment in time. That switch is so interesting! 'My' bodies are used as an object, as pass-on-bodies, who - at the time that they are viewed - are treated by the viewers as the subject of their own story. Viewers create the story by themselves. Viewers always need to relate to a story, in order to read a body. For me, the

body is an object who behaves, when they are exposed and watched they become instantly subjects. But that does not mean that I treat them as subjects. Not at all.

Do you understand the difference I want to explain? It's hard to put in words. I have faith in why I take so many efforts to make my images the way I want them to be. Just because I want my art works to speak for themselves. If I can mirror myself with my performers, so can my performers mirror the audience. And the funniest part is that the audience thinks they saw me in the reflection of my work. Nothing really happened as it is told. The moment your work comes in the context of watching, all the clearness disappears and it becomes ambiguous.

In a way there is always place for an ambiguous misinterpretation in my works. I take that as a compliment. I use my job to share something that is important at some point in my life, using the medium that communicates the content in the most clearest way. I want to convey something to people, reaching out a hand. I don't want to be busy with convincing them on how I think. That is not my priority. Who am I to tell them what the truth is? You may not work for your audience as an artist, in order to create something they want to see. Then you are not true to yourself. I work for myself, to grow as performer and filmmaker. And happily people give their stories back to me. A work speaks to a public, which places a different perspective towards what I made. I like that. The work creates a dialogue with the people. Their point of view highlights new aspects in my work towards upcoming creations, and inspires me to develop myself.

What is your next project?

Currently I work further on the topic of the body as object and subject, in a short performance I make for a literature festival in Bruges (Belgium). I am sharing thoughts about the relationship with my own body and intimacy as a performer with some male sex workers in Antwerp. Out of this written correspondence I'll create a text, and I will work with a dancer to embody everything towards an intimate performance.

This summer, I start with the creation of a full evening performance DE WAKER (THE WATCHMAN). It will be an ode to the silence and the solitude of a loving and watchful man in a city today. To what extent does he need another body to project his love, so that he may feel that love? A performance between fiction and reality, about watching, starting from intimate physicality, and with the museum and the (theatre) space as the object of research.

The rest of the year, I want to finalise the scenario of my new film. I feel ready now, after two years of writing, and it comes nicely together. At last, the urge is there and that is a good sign. So I'm looking forward to this! The film deals with a sex therapist and his unacceptable behaviour towards one of his clients. With the new film I explore on a deeper level the inner friction in a person (mind – body) and what/how society thinks about that, and especially how it effects the behaviour of that man. The film has the title EASY TIGER.