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«Butch Tribute» by Marte Sterud (to the left) and Ann-Christin Kongsness (right).
Black Box teater 2021. Photo Marin Håskjold

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“For those who have no God”

Sterud/Kongsness, an artistic duo who identify as a 'queer community' all onto themselves, present «Butch Tribute», a dance performance investigating myriad butch identities. How to break away from stereotypes, while celebrating and honoring the butch identity? «Butch Tribute» carefully open up this question and disappears before answering it.

Tekst: Ilse Ghekiere

BUTCH TRIBUTE

Made and performed by: Ann-Christin Kongsness av Marte Reithaug Sterud

Music: Kari-Helene Blystad, Ragnhild Nelvik Bruseth

Lighting design: Elisabeth Kjeldahl Nilsson

Costume design: Alva Brosten

Produced by: Hanne Frostad Håkonsen

Black Box teater, Octobre 6th 2021

It has been a while, maybe 18 months by now, but here we are, sitting shoulder to shoulder, close and without mouth masks on, our seats nicely

squared on the stage, watching Sterud and Kongsness in suits, ever so elegantly, descending from the stairs. The opening is grand but also somewhat held back. Once the music goes, the duo goes. Step touch, step touch, step touch. Inviting, seductive, playful. My eyes (or is it a gaze) sweeps over the bodies on stage, then over the faces from people in the audience sitting around me. I see smiles, bodies rocking along. Step touch, step touch, step touch. *I am feeling you baby*, says the song.

Queer mission

Dance as study, investigation and exploration is present throughout *Butch Tribute*. In its three parts, *Flørt*, *Roserand* *Flanneldrøm*, Sterud/Kongsness reflect on their dance training and how movements, and most likely imaginations too, are shaped by what they refer to as 'dance techniques with female ideals'. They don't shy away from this background nor do they depart from the potential hell that comes along with gender conforming pedagogies.

Instead they integrate these dance techniques and their own acquired skills for what they are, while also exploring physical qualities of 'female masculinity' in a dance for two.

Butch Tribute follows Sterud/Kongsness' previous works, *Soft Manifesto* (2015), a dance performance inspired by the notion of androgyny, and *Skeiv dansekunst* (2018), an ambitious project that grew out of a series of conversations in which Sterud/Kongsness attempted to map and document the history and status quo of queer dance in Norway. This last project comes to mind when watching *Butch Tribute*, and more specifically, a text written by Kongsness and published in KOREOGRAFI* called *Queer Dance Histories*. In this text, the Norwegian choreographer Steffi Lund says that «Where gay men are overrepresented in the dance field, lesbians have been correspondingly underrepresented» and that she feels it is her «responsibility to provide the representation she's been missing on the Norwegian scene for dance.» *Butch Tribute*, without a doubt, adds to this queer mission.

Otherness

The second part of *Butch Tribute*, which is titled *Roser*, clearly wants to break with its introduction of a 'Dandy' representation of butch. Here, a new set up is proposed and the audience is led from the stage to the tribune. This reorganization comes abruptly and pulls me somewhat awkwardly out of the performative zone I was just in. In *Roser*, a second window is opened on the embodiment of butch. In contrast to the first part, this one is characterized by (what looks like) leather jackets, rock music and a gusto for spectacle. The solid and power driven movements are frontal and in your face; the bodies shake and pulsate; always keeping a minimum of restraint. Watching this explosive energy; arms swinging, fists in the air, I am thinking of all the lesbian and trans activist throughout time who have made life on earth, not only for themselves, but also for gays and women, at least a little more livable.

As I write this, I notice how careful I am with words and their *defined-ness*. I want to practice care when giving words to others, as in: I don't want to *other* the myriad of butch identities, especially since this is what Sterud/Kongsness attempts to address—namely, and I quote: the «marginalization and erasure of butches» and the «risk of being perceived as stereotypes». Thinking of the word 'stereotype', it is hard to *not* immediately associate it with something negative. When we speak of individuals or groups, stereotypes do not only label and limit one's expression, they can also harm. At best, we'd like to see them gone entirely, wouldn't we? That said, and I feel this is something *Butch Tribute* plays with, there is an interesting, if thin, line between naming and labeling as a means of control (mostly performed by the outside) and labeling oneself as a gesture to identify with, and give visibility to, a community. Narrowing down one's own complex identity for the sake of the

support and even survival of the other – who is a *kind of you*; it's a compelling thought, a sacrifice worth considering.

This leads me, strangely and not, to *Normal Dance* by Antonia Baehr, a performance I saw a couple of years ago and which was described as a «trio for three butches who are butches, but at the same time they are many other things».*** I am not going to lavish praise on Baehr's brilliance as an artist here, but what was so particular about this work was its sincere, and hilarious ambition to «strive to integrate itself into the avant-garde of contemporary dance» while also putting three untrained performers on stage who were clearly not used to this kind of exposure. I remember thinking it was a bold move, including the potential risk (on behalf of the audience) of fetishizing both 'the butch' *and* the untrained dance body. This kind of risk is, in my reading, not present in *Butch Tribute*. It's a relief to see that Sterud/Kongsness don't go for what is sometimes referred to as 'authenticity'. As in, they're not throwing their private selves on stage. Instead, they stay close to what the community Sterud/Kongsness currently identifies with, which is being two queer women who are inspired by butch culture and who also happen to work with dance and choreography. This relation and balance seems to make for a 'good distance'.

'A couple'

It is only during the last part of *Butch Tribute*, where the two merging bodies dressed in flannel plaid shirts, that I suddenly think of couple dance as a constellation and how odd it is to suddenly think of the two people on stage as 'a couple'. I appreciate this closing part for it takes more time to develop; something I missed in the first two parts. But here the intimate atmosphere, and the closeness and tenderness between Sterud/Kongsness gets to me in a way that romantic films can; involuntarily, embarrassingly and overwhelmingly (I might be mistaken, but from what I hear the two people next to me, maybe a couple, are now either crying or giggling, or both).

Why Sterud/Kongsness choose in *Butch Tribute* to highlight these three realms of representations and embodiments of 'butch' and not others, is still not entirely clear to me. However, needless to say, images of butches *in*, or *as*, a romantic or friendly communion in mainstream culture are rare (when we see a butch on the screen in love, it is most likely with her/their counterpart of the *femme* lesbian). And again, I am not interested in narrowing down the representation of butch in the last part of *Butch Tribute* to 'a couple in love' or 'desire between two people', but as Maggie Nelson points out in her last book, *On Freedom*, «a lot of what we treat as heterosexuality [might be] actually just desire; straight people and culture don't own it».**** I still need to digest this idea, but maybe it holds some truth, as in: breaking stereotypes is also, somehow, allowing stereotypes. In the end, I hope we can insist that desire can mean many things. Or, as the chorus from «Vrimmel» by Anne

Grete Preus tells us at the end *Butch Tribute*: A hymn for those who have no God/And do not expect a hereafter heaven/But who takes the day into their own hands /And throws themself into /The great bustle of life.***** (Published 10.08.2021)

Footnotes:

* <https://www.skeivdansekunst.no/>

** KOREOGRAFI (2018) <https://www.choreography.no/about.html>

*** <http://www.make-up-productions.net/pages/productions/normal-dance/about.php>

**** Maggie Nelson, *On Freedom. Four Songs of Care and Constraint* (2021), p. 96-97.

***** Own translation of the the song «Vrimmel» by Anne Grete Preus