

## **Dramaturgies of the Naked Skin: Homo Nudus plays Sexuality**

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### **Abstract**

The following article questions the relationship between naked and clothed theatre performers and the resulting sexualisation of the body. Contrary to the emphasis on the genital area—which arguably constitutes the sexualised body in contemporary performance (Karl Toepfer 1996)—I argue for a more comprehensive bodily engagement (with a special focus on the human skin) when it comes to the creation and perception of nakedness. Building on Aoife Monks’ idea of nudity as a corporeal costume, this article looks at three examples of contemporary dance theatre—Dubois’ *Tragédie* (2014); Platel’s *Out of Context: For Pina* (2010); Waltz’s *Körper* (2000)—in order to demonstrate that the performer is not necessarily required to ‘take the pants off’ in order to appear naked. I argue for the active involvement of the performer’s skin (skin ‘openly staring’, ‘enticing’, or just ‘peeping through’) which not only constitutes the naked bodily manifestation but also the sexualisation (or lack of it) of the body in theatre. This body is never passive: on the contrary, while the “real” or “truthful” body is no longer accessible (if it ever was), the performers (with the help of the choreographers and designers) are capable of manipulating and multiplying their bodily reality, which allows them to *play* sexuality<sup>1</sup>-to create diverse corporeal and sexual meanings.

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1 The term “sexuality”, as it is used in this article, does not refer to sexual identity; instead it connotes the sexualisation of the body: sexually suggestive meanings, connotations, and imagery created through and by the body of the performer.

### **Introduction**

In May 2014, I went to see Olivier Dubois's *Tragédie* performed in London's Sadler's Wells. The dancers, nine male and nine female, were naked throughout the performance. In the first half of the performance, the dancers repetitively walked up and down the stage. This had a surprising effect: the naked body became individualised. As a spectator, one was given plenty of time to acquaint oneself with the differences in shape, size, form, colour and all other intricacies and dramaturgies inherent in the naked skins of the dancers. Communally shared nakedness, instead of having a uniting effect, made the plethora of bodily differences much more visible. At the end of the performance, however, the performers unexpectedly entered for their final applause fully, or nearly fully, clothed. The audience had been looking at every bit of their bodies, including the most private parts, for the past ninety minutes, yet the moment the specially codified configuration of theatre performance was over, the performers immediately 'shed the skin' of their naked bodies.

As Dubois's example demonstrates, and as suggested by Aoife Monks in *The Actor in Costume* (2010), nakedness can be seen as a costume or clothing (100) the performer "puts on" and then "takes off" the moment the performance is over. Monks' configuration of 'naked costume' is useful to the present discussion, because, firstly, it challenges the attitude towards the naked body in performance as "real", "truthful" or "universal". Secondly, and while Monks herself does not state so explicitly, it points to the material workings of the performer's skin (in relation to clothing, but also extending to the overall dramaturgy of performance) or, as I see it, the dramaturgies of the naked skin. Monks observes that nudity has a profound impact on the performer's physical presence: the body becomes perceptually dominant, as if 'extra-present' in

performance. Such magnified presence, however, is not a consequence of the naked body itself, but its relationship to clothing which is manifested through the action of undressing (100-101). Consequently, this naked body as costume paradigm, as suggested by Monks, not only challenges the “reality” (the secret beneath the costume) of the performer’s body (101), but also, as I will argue, the perception of its sexuality which, at times, begins to dissipate.

It is no longer immediately obvious what counts as the “naked performer” in a contemporary theatre context. I will question Karl Toepfer’s (1996) position towards nudity when he states that the exposed genitals of the performer works as the main indication of “true” nakedness. Even this indication now comes in diverse formats: full-frontal nudity (as in *Tragédie*), half covered body with only the genitals exposed (e.g. Adrienne Truscott in her solo performance *Asking for it*, [2014] or the work of Narcissister), fully nude body with only the face covered (e.g. Romeo Castellucci’s *Tragedia Endogonia #09 London* [2010]), and alike. Moreover, do the genitals have to be exposed at all? I will apply my theory of *homo nudus* to fully naked bodies, partially clothed bodies, and partially exposed bodies on stage, in order to unpick the relationship between the naked and clothed (costumed) body. This relationship creates diverse dramaturgical configurations of the naked skin and, in turn, impacts the perception of the performer’s sexuality. I will demonstrate that the act of stripping, thus gradually revealing the bare skin, can be perceived as toying with nakedness and will use Alain Platel’s performance of *Out of Context: For Pina* (2010) as an example. This will lead me to a consideration of the body covered in a see-through garment or costume with only the fragments of skin peeping through – slivers of breast, buttocks or belly – as it appears in Sasha Waltz’s *Körper* (2000).

In order to rethink nudity and sexuality as they occur in

contemporary dance performance,<sup>1</sup> I will shift the focus from the highly contested genital area towards the rest of human corporeality, especially the performer's skin. The material workings of the body and their interrelationship with one's sexuality are alluded to in recent feminist, queer and dance discourses. Elizabeth Grosz suggests that the erotic and libidinal zones are expanded all over the body, not just the genitals (139). Rob Cover applies queer theory in order to criticise Western genital classifications and calls for the understanding of sexuality that 'pervades all elements of the subjective and performative body' (68). Finally, Judith Lynne Hanna in her literature review of sexuality in dance points to the prevalence of 'secondary sex characteristics' like a 'large phallus costume, disrobing within a dance, or lifting a skirt' (213). Building on these observations as well as the emerging costume discourse, I will argue that the material skin, which, as Claudia Benthien aptly put, can be considered a synecdoche for the human being (17), is intimately involved in the overall naked spectacle created. It is, first and foremost, the skin that our gaze "touches" once we are faced with the naked body in performance. It is also the skin that forms immediate and complex relationships with other skins, costume, lighting and scenography. The skin's role is not homogenous: depending on the degree of undress (the creative decision of choreographer or designer), the skin appears as openly staring,<sup>2</sup> seductively enticing, or just peeping through the clothing – thus constituting the dramaturgies of the naked skin.

It is through this, often complex dramaturgical involvement, and not only through the genital exposition, that one perceives glimpses of the performer's sexuality in *Tragédie, Out of Con-*

1 While nudity occurs in nearly all types of theatre, due to the limits of this article and in order to present a deeper insight into one particular genre, I will only draw on the examples from dance theatre.

2 Michel Serres entertains the idea of 'skin having eyes' in his philosophical contemplations on human senses, see Serres (37).

*text* and *Körper*. I will take this argument further by suggesting that, while involved in the naked spectacle, the material body does not remain passive. Ann Cooper Albright suggests that ‘at the very moment the dancing body is creating a representation, it is also in the process of actually forming that body’ (3). The performer’s ability to not only form, but also manipulate, alter, and multiply the bodily reality implies an active play of sexuality through which diverse sexual meanings are created.

### **Nakedness as a Corporeal Costume**

Ruth Barcan sees the phenomenon of nudity as highly ambivalent. Depending on particular cultural, religious and visual traditions, it can be perceived as a ‘noble or degraded state’, carrying ‘positive’ (nudists or naturists equalling nakedness with health) or ‘negative’ (sign of poverty or mental instability) connotations (2). The most common association of nakedness, however, is that of sex and ‘in popular imagination the link [between the two] is almost automatic’ (Barcan 3). In popular culture the shift towards the sexual is usually performed through the visual representations of the naked body and, first and foremost, it is the human skin that immediately draws the viewers’ attention (or, rather, is thus deliberately portrayed that it draws the attention to itself). Among many other popular manifestations of nakedness (in film, pornography, music industry, etc.), consumer advertisements designed by Tom Ford serve as excellent examples. The skin is provocatively exposed (with the private parts still covered) in his 2007 advertisement depicting a red-nailed, open-mouthed woman squeezing a bottle of men’s cologne between her breasts. In a 2005 advertisement for ‘Youth Dew: Amber Nude,’ the female model’s skin only teases the viewer by “accidentally” peeping through what appears as a silk sheet draped around the body. Finally, in 2014 advertisement for the

fragrance 'Neroli,' the naked skins of male and female models are closely intertwined and touching each other, evoking the sensuous and haptic associations of the body. In all of these cases, Ford's visual designs, labelled 'controversial'<sup>1</sup> and 'hyper-sexualized'<sup>2</sup>, constitute the sexualisation of nakedness through the deliberate display and visual-haptic manipulations of the naked skin. As I will argue later on, very similar manipulations (or dramaturgies) of the naked skin can also be found in contemporary performance. Contrary to Ford's advertisements, however, they create much more complex meanings that do not always result in the overt sexualisation of the body.

The Western spectator's perception of nudity in dance theatre differs from that found in popular culture. The latter type of nudity is no less problematic and is critically examined by Barcan (2004) through her encounters with nudists, strippers and the pornography industry and Phillip Carr-Gomm's (2010) insights into nakedness as it appears in the contexts of religion, politics and sport. The main difference between the nudity types and our perception of them, however, lies in the situatedness of the body – its particular environment. And while these environments often overlap and influence one another, the theatre remains a very specific and highly regulated environment. For the sake of clarity and in order to distinguish between the naked body of everyday (and other) environments and that found in dance theatre, I will refer to the latter as *homo nudus*. Andreas Kotte provides a useful theoretical model which emphasises the codification of theatre when he suggests that:

Four different sequences can be distinguished that help to articulate the transitions from life to theatre (...).

1 See <http://www.marieclaire.co.uk/news/celebrity/160319/tom-ford-reveals-controversial-ad-campaign.html> (accessed 7/2/2015).

2 See <http://www.thefashionlaw.com/in-the-world-of-high-fashion-sex-sells/> (accessed 7/2/2015).

1. neither emphasized nor with reduced consequences
2. emphasized, but not with reduced consequences
3. not emphasized, but with reduced consequences
4. emphasized *and* with reduced consequences

Only number four describes scenic sequences that generate and vitalise theatre forms (37-38). Kotte's seemingly simplistic model implies that, in order to establish a successful (and vitalised) form of theatre, the performer has to be situated within the scenic sequences where one's physical actions, while often arising from those of everyday, carry a special *emphasis* (the performer is on display, observed by the audience, with deliberate actions arousing interest) with *reduced consequences* (the re-enactment of sexual movements like humping does not – yet – result in an actual sexual act). Once positioned in such scenic sequences, the performer's body simply cannot escape codification. In case of nudity in dance theatre, this body turns into a *homo nudus*: it is emphasised and specially codified, constituting an aesthetic construct that forms part of the overall scenography (achieved by the choreographer and designer).

Monks suggests that 'when we watch the actor undressing, we see a series of bodies emerging, which are determined by their relation to clothes' (101) and with each layer of clothing, with each fragment of naked skin revealed, a different body is displayed. Moreover, the clothing or absence of it directly influences the situatedness and perception of these bodies. For Monks, none of the bodies that emerge through undressing signify the "actual" body. Instead, they constitute a series of costumes (or, as I argue, aesthetic constructs): 'the costume of nakedness, the costume of skin or the costume of the traditions of the nude female [or male – JV] figure' (101). My interest is centred on the corporeal 'costume of skin', namely, the role skin plays in the performative and often sexualised act of shedding and putting on clothing.

'Naked costume' is not a contemporary idea and it stems from the ever-evolving historical attitudes towards the naked body. An excellent example of nudity resulting in *homo nudus* as a corporeal costume are Victorian *tableaux vivants*. The presentation of the real nude was prohibited, therefore, as Tracy C. Davis observes, Victorian designers 'invested considerable ingenuity in creating costumes that simulated nudity' (323). Often arranged in poses resembling the works of the Royal Academy or Parisian Salon (Davis 328), the groups of men and women stood completely still while being gawked at by the excited audience. Due to such "simulation", the naked body, while absent beneath the clothing (usually a body-stocking), is nevertheless ambiguously exposed. Similarly, Francis Sparshott remarks Balanchine's choice of costume (close-fitting sheaths of black and white) made the body 'a sort of austerity of the flesh': covered, yet also visible as a result of its approximation to nakedness (304). Paradoxically, clothing embodies nudity, and subsequently nudity itself becomes a corporeal costume.

Western theatre no longer relies on simulations of nudity because, as Toepfer demonstrates in 'Nudity and Textuality in Postmodern Performance', since the 1960s nudity has developed various strategies of the naked body display.<sup>1</sup> Toepfer also argues for the Western spectator's voyeuristic desire to catch the glimpses of the other's private parts by suggesting that nakedness in theatre commonly refers to the 'exposure of the most erotically exciting and excitable sexual identifiers of the body' (76) – the genitalia of the performer. And while he admits that such argument has its difficulties, because some nude performances intentionally obstruct the view of the performer's sexual organs (by using clever lighting), the unveiled genitalia remain the sign of "true" nakedness (76). It

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<sup>1</sup> Toepfer distinguishes between mythic, ritual, therapeutic, model, balletic, unscripted, inscribed, obscene, and pornographic strategies of nudity display in theatre (78-89).

follows that due to the emphasis on the most intimate parts of the body, the naked performer immediately acquires sexual connotations that arise from the audience's desire to look at the fully naked body. As Toepfer put it, the exposed genitals are 'the most complete 'proof' of the body's vulnerability to desire and the appropriating gaze of the Other' (76).

However, if one applies Monks' 'nakedness as a corporeal costume' argument, Toepfer's emphasis on the genitals as the "true" sign of nudity becomes questionable. Even with the genitals exposed, the naked body of the performer remains a specially designed bodily manifestation, a *homo nudus*, rather than a representation of "true" nakedness. And while Toepfer's argument that the exposed genitalia's ability to "shock", "incite", frighten, disgust, or otherwise produce intense emotional turbulence' is a consequence of the collapse of distinctions between the "real" and 'the "imaginary" body of a "character"', where the sexualised "real" takes precedent over the fictitious (77), rings true in some early cases, it is highly questionable in the contemporary configurations of nakedness. Once the initial "shock" factor at the sight of exposed genitalia subsided (and, I would argue, the shock and disgust Toepfer describes was – and sometimes still is – caused by Western society's insistence on covering the genitals as well as conventions in certain genres rather than the sight of the "real" body), the naked body of the performer remains yet another aspect of theatrical codification.

### **Dramaturgies of the Naked Skin**

As I indicated previously, the abrupt change from fully exposed to covered body in Dubois's *Tragédie* strongly suggests that in this case nakedness was used as a costume. And instead of embodying, as Dubois claims, the essential state of humanity or the 'humanity laid bare' (Winship), thus "baring" the truth and tragedy situated

at the core of human existence, it embodied a slightly different “tragedy” – the naked body’s inability to “bare it all”. Paradoxically, the clothed body which appeared only for a few moments during the curtain call seemed to convey different meanings (the performers looked directly at the audience, thus openly and freely – not deliberately – “laying bare” their individual, dressed bodies),<sup>1</sup> while the naked body remained a manifestation of the strictly choreographed and aestheticised *homo nudus*. And it is precisely this inability to “bare it all” that makes the nudity in dance theatre not only an interesting case study, but also problematises the sexuality of the naked performer.

In case of *Tragédie*, the body is (supposedly) fully visible in all of its sexual “glory”. In turn, the performer’s skin openly stares at the spectator. This stare is performed through the visual, but also, and most importantly, corporeal qualities of the skin. Whereas Sparshott argues that the naked dancer’s body acquires “negative” connotations because it appears as ‘one unwieldy surface’ or a ‘pallid mass’ (306), I believe that the undressed skin can become actively involved in the overall dramaturgy. The lighting design by Patrick Riou and the set design by Dubois himself expose the moving and sweating skin of the dancers: the illuminated skin shakes together with the shaking breasts and swings together with the swinging penises; its diverse colours complement the minimalist scenography; and the strobe lighting accompanied by loud music towards the end of the performance reverberates within the frantically moving bodies. Through such unquestionable involvement, the skin also provokes moments of projected tactility in the viewer: she becomes more acutely aware of her own body. Such dramaturgical configurations of the naked skin set a perfect scene

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<sup>1</sup> I am not alone, Judith Mackrell in her review of *Tragédie* remarks on this particular moment as ‘thought provoking’: a moment that allows the audience to see the performers ‘anew’, see Mackrell 2014.

for the exploration of performers' sexuality as perceived by the audience. Paradoxically though, in case of this particular *homo nudus*, once the idea of the corporeal costume is introduced, the exposed genitalia gets lost within the intimate folds of the naked skin and the performer's sexuality begins to dissipate.

The question that is rarely asked in the accounts on nudity is how naked does *homo nudus* have to be in order to constitute the corporeal configuration of nudity? Depending on a particular social, historical and cultural environment, "to be naked" in theatre can carry rather conflicting connotations. The aforementioned Victorian *tableau vivants*, despite being fully covered in close fitting fabric, were seen as a representation of nakedness. In the contemporary context, as indicated previously, nudity comes in diverse shapes and formats. This "naked diversity", however, is marked by clothing (or costume in theatrical context). Costume is one of the most immediate objects that *homo nudus* relates to because it is often the first material reality physically touched by the naked skin. Moreover, it is through the intricacies (absence, presence or ambiguous presence) of clothing that we make sense of the naked body beneath. Rosie Wyles (2010) applies semiotic analysis to examine theatre costume, giving precedence to the visual elements and meanings they create. Other scholars have recently expanded costume discourse and work with Joanne Entwistle's concept of clothing as a 'situated bodily practice' (Pantouvaki 186), thus emphasising not only the visual but also material aspects of costume. Donatella Barbieri (2013) looks at the archived costume and argues for the costume as a materiality which is in itself performing. Sofia Pantouvaki (2014) also sees costume as a 'performative act(ion)' (180) which, however, is not only a material but also 'lived and experiential entity' that interacts with the overall dramaturgy of the performance (187). She then applies her take

on costume to examine wearable technologies as a possibility for technologically advanced embodied interactions in performance. Similarly, Siobhán O’Gorman (2014) argues for theatre costume as an embodied reality that can be manipulated by theatre-makers in order to ‘rupture seemingly seamless genders’ (156). And it is precisely this idea of costume as a material and embodied reality which is also malleable (and how this malleable reality influence our perception of nakedness and sexuality) that I want to build on in the present discussion.

Contrary to the full exposure of *Tragédie*, the performers in Platel’s *Out of Context: For Pina* are never completely naked. Designed by Dorine Demuynck, their minimalist costumes (in the form of briefs and bras) stay on throughout the performance. Moreover, from time to time they cover the rest of their bodies with large orange blankets. Nevertheless, an aspect of nudity, while not immediately obvious, is certainly implied – largely in the actions of stripping and dressing again, which work as a framework for the entire piece. At the start of *For Pina*, the performers sit amongst the audience wearing everyday clothing. Subsequently, one by one, they begin to climb onto the stage. The moment of crossing the boundary between the auditorium and the stage already constitutes an act of bodily transgression and provokes different meanings: this person is not an audience member but a performer; the performers are wearing everyday clothes, yet the moment they step on stage, their clothing becomes a costume; moreover, the transgression does not stop there, one by one, the performers begin to slowly remove their clothes, neatly fold them on the floor, and simply stand there in their underwear which also becomes a costume.

What Platel’s performance openly displays (and what happens behind the scenes in Dubois’s work) is the transient process which constitutes the making of *homo nudus* – the act of literal and

metaphorical undressing. Furthermore, by manifesting, emphasising and reiterating the act of undressing, *For Pina* simultaneously exposes the interaction between the strategies of concealment and revelation of the body. The performance “undresses” and reveals the performers’ bodies previously concealed amongst the audience; these bodies instantaneously become specially emphasised and visible, yet their naked materiality remains concealed underneath the casual clothing; the act of stripping begins to reveal the naked skin, yet the genitals remain concealed; during the performance, the large blankets are continuously draped over and then removed from the performers’ bodies which works as a continuation of the concealment/revelation dialectic. One observes an intricate interplay between the clothed and naked body as well as the toying with the possibility of all-revealing nakedness which is never fully achieved. As a result, the materiality of performer’s skin becomes emphasised and seductively enticing, and the performer, through the actions of veiling and unveiling, begins to playfully flirt with the audience.

While not openly staring as it did in the previous example, the skin is actively involved in the stripping spectacle. The deliberate manipulation of clothing entices the viewer. Paradoxically, the main reason for this enticement is the “invisible” genitals. Not everything is present because the naked skin is firmly “framed” by the underwear, and the resulting (genital) absence works as a hindrance which increases the desire to see it all. Therefore, Platel’s performance, through the naked skin’s interrelation to clothing, continuously toys with the (unattainable) contingency of the naked spectacle which undoubtedly resembles the workings of striptease.

Waltz’s *Körper* is another example of dance theatre performance which further illustrates the complexity of *homo nudus* and the resulting (equally complex and sometimes rather ambigu-

ous) sexualisation of the performer's body. During one particular sequence, Waltz's dancers take a handful of each other's skin in order to lift them up. The dancer is then briefly carried by the folds of the material skin, which at that particular moment resembles a layer of fabric that can be firmly gripped, stretched and pulled away from the body. As well as being manipulated as a material layer-becoming-costume, the skin is also in continuous interrelation with clothing, designed by Sylvia Hagen-Schäfer. She covered the naked body of one female dancer with a see-through garment, thus turning her into a *tableaux vivant* in reverse: fully exposed, yet at the same time concealed. Other bodies (male and female) are dressed in semi-revealing costumes, and one catches the glimpses of peeping breast, buttock or genitalia. As Monks observes, with each new layer of costume added, removed, or missing, a new performer-body is displayed. Most importantly, due to this continuous multiplication as well as "stretching" their corporeal skins to the limit, the body becomes, to use Kotte's terminology, specially emphasised yet always already with reduced consequences. Instead of aspiring to reveal the "real" naked body, Waltz's performers display the body that merges with its costume almost completely – a specially arranged material construct. Because the "real" is no longer attainable, the body's sexuality becomes equally ambiguous. And while the costume might (sometimes very playfully) allow the dancer's naked skin to peep through the clothing, we are no longer certain if the sexualised exposition really took place because the skin has become an indistinguishable part of the corporeal costume itself.

### **Homo Nudus *plays* Sexuality**

Throughout this article I argued for *homo nudus* to be considered a corporeal costume which problematises the singularity of the

performer's corporeality in contemporary dance performance. The performances I briefly touched on expose such ambiguity situated in the performer's relationship to nakedness. In Dubois's case the bare skin of the performer was endowed with costume-like qualities, and in Platel's performance the body was further ensnared into the concealment/revelation masquerade that constitutes the making of naked spectacle. Finally, the naked performers in Waltz's piece proved to be permanently caught in the codified design of theatre, with the "real" body lost amidst the corporeal folds of their costume. As a result, I believe that *homo nudus's* sexuality can no longer be seen simply as the exposed genitalia of the performer. Contrary to Toepfer's suggestion that the visible genitalia is immediately appropriated by the spectator's gaze, I have suggested that the naked performer is involved in a much more complex process of *homo nudus playing* sexuality.

The naked body of the performer, as Monks suggests, always "reaches out into the world", namely the specially arranged environment of theatre (105). To "reach out" indicates that it does not remain passive, but instead is actively animated in the viewer's perception (and imagination): the body appears to form intimate interrelationships with the objects and other bodies around it (and, as Albright claims, thus begins to form the body itself), in the process of which it creates a number of dramaturgical configurations. In other words, through the act of reaching out, one observes the performer as *playing* with the naked dramaturgies at hand, with the sexualisation of the naked body being only one of these dramaturgies. Contrary to Toepfer's argument, the mere revelation of performer's genitals does not immediately expose a sexualised subject. Instead, *homo nudus* (in the form of fully naked, partially covered and partially exposed body) seems to create different, codified, playfully deceitful, and often ambiguous sexual and non-sexu-

al configurations. Because the performer exists within the specially emphasised reality with reduced consequences, the skin is deceitfully (in case of *For Pina*, enticingly) situated in between the corporeal (shaking, sweaty, porous body) and the costume-like. Through the acts of dressing and undressing the performers continuously multiply their bodily reality, and while the resulting concealment of the “real” body can be perceived as disappointing (Monks 118), I believe that it also constitutes a potential for new corporeal and sexual meanings.

Consequently, every new dramaturgy of the naked skin, every *homo nudus* one encounters onstage, offers a challenge to the spectator. Instead of promising the same genital exposition, thus sexualised and vulnerable to our desire, with the help of the choreographer (or director) and designer, specially codified theatrical strategies and “tricks”, the performer is able to constantly re-configure the naked body. This body is capable of being on a full display yet at the same time completely concealed; bodily present yet also absent; while maintaining its own sexuality, to momentarily acquire the sexuality of the other, and in the process fill the performance space with multiple, ever shifting corporeal phantasms of *homo nudus*. The performers allow their naked bodies to *play* with the specially arranged corporeal and sexual ambiguity, and as a spectator, one is provided with the pleasure to view and make sense of the naked dramaturgy created.

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