Lullabye – Anneleen Keppens

Who takes care of those who care?

15/10/2026 – Tom Rummens – Etcetera

Link to the original article (in Flemish)

Who takes care of those who care? This is the enigmatically phrased question at the heart of *Lullabye*, the dance solo by Anneleen Keppens, which premiered at AMOK, a festival exploring art and care, organised by arts centre KAAP at the site of the Onze-Lieve-Vrouw Psychiatric Hospital in Bruges. At its centre is a mother, the archetypal caregiver. Few care relationships are as profoundly intertwined as that between a mother and her child. In *Lullabye*, this relationship appears as an almost sacred unity of two.

In *Lullabye*, this unity of two is brought to life, while also being explored in all its complexity. On stage, we see Anneleen Keppens, lying in a landscape of colourful fabrics, surrounded by a structure of poles with ropes and pulleys attached to them. It resembles an oversized play mat, a mobile for mothers: a small, private universe, a place of safety and security. Within it, we see all facets of motherhood: play and joy, but also much loneliness, exhaustion and the need for rest and self-care. But what stands out above all is the desire for contact with the outside world, so beautifully evoked in this performance by the audience, seated in a semicircle around and close to the playing area, and by the illuminated walls of the sports hall where the performance takes place.

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Keppens uses a movement language that is subtle yet clearly legible. Drawing on a deep sense of authenticity, she builds her character: you can easily imagine the movement language emerging from life itself. This authenticity is also the best antidote to an overly literal illustration of motherhood, a potential pitfall that Keppens fortunately avoids.

The scenography also makes clear that the mother’s role is connected in all kinds of ways. Every time Keppens makes a rolling movement, she sets another movement in motion elsewhere in the set. This dynamic evokes a paradox: on the one hand, the set is a place of safety and comfort, a cocoon, a private space; on the other, it is a world in which nothing happens without consequences. Every movement sets another in motion; everything has consequences. What does this mean for someone seeking rest?

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In response to this question, her character unfolds and draws the audience into her world. Sometimes welcoming, but at other moments above all contemplative, even protective: watch out, this is my domain, there is only one person who truly understands this space, and that is me, she seems to say. You see a mother sleeping, slowly rolling, a mother seeking comfort and security, and occasionally hiding herself away. My thoughts briefly wander to the Instagram videos of mothers who momentarily withdraw from their offspring by hiding in a bathrobe hanging on a hook in the bathroom.

At this point, Nicolas Rombauts' soundtrack is still a calm backdrop. That will soon change, as the intensity of the performance builds, the beats become increasingly prominent in the soundscape, and the sounds grow more exhilarating. It is at this stage that Keppens introduces the sparse yet highly effective text into the performance. These are isolated words, but they give direction to the choreography: repetition, celebration, complication, interruption, growing growing growing, life and death.

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As the performance progresses, it becomes clear that the care relationship is far more complex and multifaceted than it initially appears. Keppens gradually involves the audience more in the movements. She hands her 'baby' to someone in the audience and asks him to place the child on her back, or she asks two people to join her in rocking a piece of fabric: the lullaby as a song to soothe a child to sleep, the rocking motion that brings calm. Eventually, she goes one step further and asks the audience to rock her.

Here, the performance arrives at its very core, because however deeply personal a care relationship may be, there is always a desire for connection, too. In this central sense, *Lullabye* also tells a story that extends far beyond the mother-child relationship. It is also about people caring for their partners or parents, about informal caregivers and professional care workers. Essentially, every care relationship holds the potential for immense intensity, which can only remain bearable when it does not have to be carried in solitude. I opened this review with the question: who takes care of those who care?

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More than ever, it is important to reflect on this in a society that is crying out for care, more care, in all its dimensions: care for children, but also for mothers and fathers, for neighbours and strangers. Everyone is affected by it, and we never have enough of it. Lynn Berger wrote a wonderful book about this, with the wonderfully concise title Zorg (Berger, L., 2022, Zorg: een betere kijk op de mens, De Correspondent Uitgevers). In it, she argues not only that everyone needs care, but also that everyone is made to give care. And that care encompasses a broad spectrum, from changing nappies to operating on people, and

everything in between, in all the imaginable directions that are possible between people. In other words, care is what makes us human.

That, looking beyond the anecdotes, is precisely the essence of *Lullabye*. In this honest and poignant dance solo, lasting just under an hour, Keppens takes us through all the facets of caregiving, unvarnished yet full of love. Her movement language sometimes evokes a certain lightness, but equally offers comfort, warmth, melancholy and a longing for connection. Everything in this performance is carefully considered, yet also so accessible and recognisable. The performance opens with a lonely mother and ends with an image that honours the collective. These are not opposites; quite the contrary: asking for help and allowing it to be given is perhaps the ultimate expression of trust and the willingness to embrace vulnerability.

(Translation: Tender Ground)