

DANCE

Peeping Tom bring Moeder to London International Mime Festival

Why a radical dance company is giving a surreal kicking to the theme of parenthood

David Jays



There's nothing soft or curvy here: one of the dancers in Moeder HERMAN SORGELOOS

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Towards the end of her life, the mother of Gabriela Carrizo began painting. “It made her happy,” the Argentine performance artist says. “So I thought it would be nice to bring the paintings to her funeral. I was discussing where to hang them with the funeral director and had this feeling, what am I doing? Tomorrow’s the funeral and I’m doing a gallery installation!”

Like many of Carrizo’s ideas, the feeling simmered away and re-emerged in Moeder (Mother), an unsettling and beguiling piece for her company, Peeping Tom. The second part of a trilogy about the family, it begins with an elderly woman’s death rattle, then becomes increasingly rich and strange, reimagining the family home as an odd art gallery. Sound, produced in a booth at the back of the stage, slides under your skin. Images seep in, including unpredictable gallery guards, singing nuns and furious living sculptures. It’s often funny; other moments carry a primal punch, with loss and terror at the beginning and end of life.

I meet Carrizo in an ornate bar in Brussels, where Peeping Tom is based (though she and her partner in life and art, Franck Chartier, live in Barcelona). The former dancer is made of tall, slender ovals — her eyes scud between gravity and laughter. Belgium was the epicentre of

European contemporary dance when she arrived in 1989. She joined Alain Platel's bold, baggy company, Les Ballets C de la B. "It was a big discovery," she recalls. "I learnt a lot from the confidence and responsibility he gives you. Not telling you what to do, but asking, what do you want? That was a door for me to discover I have something I want to develop."

She and Chartier met at C de la B, and Peeping Tom was born in 2000, as Big Brother was rampant on European TV screens. "Our first performance was set inside a mobile home. It's like being invited into this room, watching people in their intimacy, their inner states."

Already, the company's cinematic sensibility used sound or lighting to isolate intensely private moments. "Like a zoom in cinema, we see what they are feeling or thinking, what is taboo or hidden. We like getting close to something."

That intimacy inevitably reveals the artist herself, especially in *Moeder*, swimming through memory. "Of course, there is something personal for me here," Carrizo says, "but I didn't want to talk about my mother." Even so, the piece inhabits a uniquely middle-aged moment: poised between being a child, a parent, a carer to one's aged parent. "You have different roles," she reflects. "I'm a mother, but at the same time I lived through things with my mother. You feel the turn of time."

Motherhood may be extolled as a warm, nurturing hug, but is more often a state of anxiety. "The word 'mother' is very big," Carrizo says. "It's a lot of things. I didn't want to go down just one line." The set design resists sentimentality. "It's a cold or neutral public space, like a museum, recording studio or maternity ward." There's nothing soft or curvy here. The institution of the family is literally that: a museum, where visitors traipse past family photos. (Portraits of the father gradually edge out everything else.) A repository for memories, it also curates the family dynamic.

Most descriptions of Peeping Tom's work fish for terms like "surreal". Hardly surprising when a recording session becomes a maternity ward in crisis, or a woman woos the coffee machine. "There is always a seed of reality," Carrizo insists. So how did *Moeder*'s many layers come together? "It took four months, working with the dancers," she says. "I give them ideas, they confront them through research and improvisation."

A sound artist visited rehearsals to stimulate ideas, but the sound studio soon became a key visual image. "The first thing we hear is the sound of the mother's heart," Carrizo says. The reverberating boom of sound effects draws us in: we're in the womb, beside the deathbed, enveloped in family.

Carrizo made *Moeder* alone, while Chartier created *Father*. After working so closely with him for almost two decades, she says she felt like a single parent, and looks forward to reuniting on *Children*, completing the trilogy. It may feature actual children, perhaps even the couple's 14-year-old daughter. "Sometimes people work with children, but the point of view is still that of adults. We want to ask children how they see things."

The fabular Peeping Tom was blinded for gawping at Lady Godiva. No such punishment for the company that bears his name: they won an Olivier award in 2015. Yet these pieces boring into the tremors of family are exposing. "It was hard to make *Moeder*," Carrizo admits. "There is a bit of me as a woman artist questioning things, the monstrous fears. Fear of loss,

fear of being without your child or parent. Fear goes through all our creations, in different ways.”

During one post-performance session, Carrizo laughs, an audience member asked, “Are you OK?” It seems a fair question, given this raw emotional bedrock. She certainly misses her parents. “But I remember my sister saying, ‘Now we have to start to create again. You are not going to lie in what you do.’ This stays with me.”

Peeping Tom’s Moeder, part of the London International Mime Festival, is at the Barbican, London EC2, Wed-Sat