



The Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker.

Tina Ruisinger

# How to Turn 50 Gracefully: With Civil War Battles on Naked Torso

For Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, it all started with an old Joan Baez record.

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO

**T**HE Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker is happy to talk about the responsibility that she and her peers have to find new ways to attract audiences to dance performances. Just don't ask her how to think about her work. When this question was put to her during a telephone interview from Brussels, where her company, Rosas, is based, there was a small gasp, and then laughter.

"No, no, no," she said. "It is against the very idea of performance, to come with ideas."

Since 1982, when "Fase," a four-part dance set to the music of Steve Reich, established her as a rising force in experimental European dance, audiences and critics have lavished her musically sensitive, rigorously structured yet emotionally rich choreography with praise.

On Tuesday, American dancegoers will get their first chance to see Ms. De Keersmaeker perform "Once," which runs through Sunday at the Joyce Theater. Its only other stop in the United States will be at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis next month. Ms. De Keersmaeker said she was both "curious and anxious" to perform the solo, from 2002, for American audiences. Her expectations stem from the work's score, which is the entire 1963 album "Joan Baez in Concert, Part 2," one of the few records in her house when she was growing up in Wommel, Belgium. "Baez had a huge audience all over Europe," Ms. De Keersmaeker said. "But still, what she was standing for is really linked to certain periods of American history. It relates to thoughts about the past, the present and a wish for the future."

"I was raised with the first man on the moon and the killing of Martin Luther King and every-

thing that was going on in the 60's," she continued. "It was definitely part of my very small personal story, and somehow this record had an important place in it." But over the years Ms. De Keersmaeker, now 45, forgot about the album.

As Rosas' 20th anniversary neared, she began thinking about choreographing a solo for herself. Then one of her sisters gave her the long-lost album for her birthday, and she realized almost immediately that she would use it for the new piece.

She stressed that the 75-minute solo is not addressed specifically to America. The resonances, though, are unmistakable, from the music to film clips of battle scenes from "The Birth of a Nation," D. W. Griffith's 1915 film about the Civil War that will be projected, in part, onto her naked torso.

\* She begins the solo dressed in a navy T-shirt and a matching slinky, backless dress designed by Anke Loh. Over the course of the performance, shirt and then dress are shed, a decision that Ms. De Keersmaeker said "indicated itself" as a way of "opening and giving yourself in a very direct way."

The work begins in silence. Kicking off her shoes, Ms. De Keersmaeker steps onstage and moves to the center, facing the audience. "Once," she says, and then nothing for several minutes as, in silence, mouth working as if trying to

## ONCE

### JOYCE THEATER

Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker will perform Tuesday through Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. at the Joyce, 175 Eighth Avenue, at 19th Street, Chelsea, (212) 334-7479.

she slowly works her way into stung, geometric gestures and lunges. The vocabulary is straightforward, even streamlining Ms. Baez's lyrics, which scroll on a screen at the back of the stage.

Fluid and precise, her gestures so act as pantomime for Ms. Baez's lyrics. Most part, however, they are abstract, evocative, suggesting alternative layers of meaning. A sense of weary defiance bleeds through as her index finger extends to point accusingly at the audience for a moment, or her torso slurs in on itself as if unable to continue. What she does.

In an essay on the Rosas Web site, Diez, a dramaturge with the Kunsten Festival des Arts in Brussels, quotes the folk singer: "The antidote for despair." As the solo plays, mostly without interruption, Ms. De Keersmaeker's dancing increasingly necessary response to looming violence on the stage.

"I've always had a very simple and a love for dance," she said. "I believe in a language more than ever."

Ms. Baez's language fits her, too. As one of two who describes herself as "a romantic person," Ms. De Keersmaeker says she is hopeful that "something else will come out of how frightening the speed and the nature of the problems we're facing."

"There are a number of things set to come out of these songs, which I really do believe in, maybe things that were proper to a certain time, which would be considered utopian or naïve," she says. "I don't think it's ridiculous to express a feeling that love, compassion and justice are values which are worth more than ever to do