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"I Am Not an Animal"

Jan Fabre's Parrots and Guinea Pigs

Marvin Carlson

Animal acts and the appearance together onstage of human and animal actors have a long and rich history, but a 2002 work by the leading Belgian choreographer Jan Fabre opens up a new dimension of such activity. *Parrots and Guinea Pigs*, which I witnessed on tour that year at Le Maillon in Strasbourg, France, is a complex dance meditation on relationships and interactions between humans and animals, and upon the disturbing implications of recognizing that the phrase "performing animals" might legitimately be extended to the humans who are so often concerned with keeping themselves outside this category.

The title *Parrots and Guinea Pigs* already suggests some of the strategies of Fabre's work. Both parrots and guinea pigs are primarily associated with human surrogation, parrots "standing in" for humans vocally and guinea pigs physically. The piece begins with a fairly conventional "animal act": a talking parrot, introduced in a downstage spot with its presumed trainer who encourages it to "speak," concentrating on the loaded question "Who is the master?" Even in this opening image, basic themes of the production are struck, particularly the animal/human tension, since the woman trainer is dressed in a costume echoing the bright colors of the parrot and trimmed with elegant plumage. These two figures will preside over the rest of the performance, primarily in front of a mirror upstage center. The trainer with her megaphone serves as a kind of mistress of ceremonies, while the parrot itself provides a running commentary of squawks, whistles, and broken phrases, all echoed from time to time by actors, to provide an unpredictable,



Figure 1. The trainer in Jan Fabre's *Parrots and Guinea Pigs*, with Anny Czupper, Els Deceukelier, Palle Dyrvall, Genevieve Lagraviere, Heike Langsdorf, Lara Martelli, Anna Rispoli, Geert Vaes, Kurt Vandendriessche, Helmut Van den Meersschaut. Le Maillon, Strasbourg, France, 2002. (Courtesy of Troubleyn © Wonge Bergmann)

but steadily operating "animal" sound track to the production.

The other major aural element is a series of songs that provide background for most of the dance sequences. All of these songs, in English, deal directly with animal/human relationships, and the one most often used, with the parrot as a kind of physical intertext, is the rather silly ditty by Leslie Bricusse from the 1967 film *Doctor Doolittle*, "If I Could Talk to the Animals," which begins: "If I could talk to the animals / Just imagine it / Chatting

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with a chimpy chimpanzee. / Imagine talking to the tiger / Chatting with the cheetah / What a neat achievement it would be.” The other key musical accompaniments provide variations on this theme. The first, “Let’s All Sing Like the Birdies Sing,” a popular tune from 1932 by Robert Hargreaves, Stanley Damerell, and Tolchard Evans, does not stress communication, but simple imitation, the human version of the parrot’s mimicry: “Let’s all sing like the birdies sing, / Tweet, tweet tweet, tweet tweet [...] / Let’s all warble like nightingales, / Give your throat a treat. / Take your time from the birds, / Now you all know the words, / Tweet, tweet tweet, tweet tweet.”

The third signature song emphasizes a central theme of this work, the common interest in sexuality shared by humans and animals. Here the central song is Jewel Akens’s “Birds and the Bees” (1965): “Let me tell about the birds and the bees / and the flowers and the trees / and the moon up above / and a thing called love.”

The relationship between animals and humans lies at the heart of this production, but it is a deeply troubled one. On the one hand, the production as a whole works on every level to conflate human and animal communication and activity, as we can see from the three signature songs. Visually this conflation is emphasized by the parrot/trainer duo that presides over the production, by the full-body animal costumes often worn by the dancers, and by animal-like gestures and movements during several of the dances. Within the production, however, the dancers themselves—at least when they are appearing as humans, not animals—try desperately, and not at all successfully, to maintain a clear animal/human distinction. This tension is most clearly expressed in the penultimate sequence, in which the company gathers upstage around the parrot and the trainer lady, who together tell them a kind of parable bedtime story, “The Parrot and the Merchant,” about a parrot who aspired to become a human being. The human actors scornfully reject this possibility. Almost as if learning to speak, or picking up language in the manner of the parrot, they slowly piece out the sentence “I—am—not—an—animal,” also a quotation from the 1980 film *The Elephant Man*. Then,



Figure 2. (top) Sexual activity, more rutting than flirting, goes on in much of the production with the “animals,” both the large doll figures and the men. Jan Fabre’s *Parrots and Guinea Pigs*; Le Maillon, Strasbourg, France, 2002. (Courtesy of Troubleyn © Wonge Bergmann)

Figure 3. (above) Human actor dominated by “animal.” Jan Fabre’s *Parrots and Guinea Pigs*; Le Maillon, Strasbourg, France, 2002. (Courtesy of Troubleyn © Wonge Bergmann)

gaining the rhythm of it, they move down to the footlights, screaming out this phrase in increasing frenzy until they collapse from exhaustion. Darkness falls and the trainer again appears in an upstage spot, uttering a gnomic refutation: “They are nourished, like me. They expire, like me.”

This “like me” (*comme moi*) might be taken as the underlying theme of the production, which, as I have noted, continually conflates human and animal activity. The first major dance sequence features all the female members of the company, their “animality” stressed not only by their total nudity, except

for bags over their heads, but by their movements, each hopping, strutting, or jumping about in clear imitation of animal locomotion. Accompanying them are musical and visual themes that will recur throughout the production: the song “Talk with the Animals” and projections on the side and back walls of animal bodies in laboratories and slaughterhouses. Following this dance, the first “animals” appear, dancers in huge padded costumes suggesting giant nursery toy animals—a frog, a baby chick, a mouse, a guinea pig, a rabbit, a monkey. One verse of “Talk with the Animals” seems now to emerge as particularly important: “If I could flirt with my furry friends. / Man as an animal. / Think of the amazing repartee.” Sexual activity, more rutting than flirting, goes on in much of the production. In general the women attempt, rarely with any success, to civilize and control the various “animals,” both the large doll figures and the men. In one sequence the men, echoing the opening dance of the women, dance nude, except for the large animal heads. Even after the women remove these heads, they continued to act “like animals,” simulating the movement of copulation and shaking their genitals at the audience despite the continued slaps, admonitions, and attempts to cover them by the women, all to the lyrics of “Talk with the Animals.”

In a scene most closely evoking an animal laboratory, the empty costumes are placed on tables around the stage and abused, physically and sexually, by the human dancers, male and female. This produces a number of bodily fluids—real sweat, as well as semen, blood, and urine that may or may not be real—which are assiduously collected in bottles and hung on various hooks suspended above the acting area. As the evening goes on, more and more of these “specimens” are collected, from human and animals alike, and hung amid the growing ceiling of bottles, another reminder of the physical commonality of the two. In a later reversal of this scene nude humans are placed on these same tables to be prodded, tormented, and abused by controlling “animal” figures who nevertheless eventually cradle and cuddle their suffering human “pets.” Holding up their drooping human “pets,” the animal owners now try to encourage them to



Figure 4. Nude humans are placed on laboratory tables to be prodded, tormented, and abused by controlling “animal” figures, who eventually cradle and cuddle their suffering human “pets.” Jan Fabre’s *Parrots and Guinea Pigs; Le Maillon*, Strasbourg, France, 2002. (Courtesy of Troubleyn © Wonge Bergmann)

“speak” like parrots, but this speech continues the defiant attempt at division: “I—am— not—an—animal.”

The final sequence of the production provides one of the most powerful expressions of the animal reality of the human dancers. There is no music, but the final words of the trainer, “They are nourished, like me. They expire, like me,” are picked up as a chant by the entire company, all now dressed in their bulky animal costumes. Each repeats the words in his or her own rhythm, with “like



Figure 5. The actors slowly crawl out of their costumes, like larvae emerging from cocoons. Jan Fabre’s *Parrots and Guinea Pigs; Le Maillon*, Strasbourg, France, 2002. (Courtesy of Troubleyn © Wonge Bergmann)

me” (*comme moi*) most frequently repeated, and the additional phrases only occasionally added. As they are chanting these words, the company moves frantically but in an uncoordinated manner, less a dance than a kind of running in place. The dance and chant go on and on, lasting between eight and ten minutes. The stage is never in full light, but across the continually moving bodies of the dancers play the film clips, already several times seen, of the animal laboratories and slaughterhouses. From time to time one or more dancers will fall to the stage, apparently exhausted by the activity and the weight and confinement of their bulky, full-body costumes, but they then get up and continue. At last all collapse, some still twitching and thrashing a bit. After a moment all slowly crawl out of their costumes, like larvae emerging from cocoons, strip off the sweat-soaked undergarments they were wearing, and either wring them out over their glistening bodies or lick the sweat from their own limbs. Thus the last of the production’s

bodily fluids are collected and the audience is given a final and most graphic reminder of the fact that at this basic physical level, the ground of dance itself, what they have been watching was the work of (in the most comprehensive and laudatory sense) “performing animals.”

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The Salon of Becoming-Animal

Edwina Ashton and Steve Baker

All performances in alien kinds of bodies [...] share a kind of double-negation: the person is not the species he is imitating, but also he is not not that species.

—Rane Willerslev (2004:638)

This is a reflection on the process (and experience) of making something, rather than an account of the completed project itself. Edwina Ashton and Steve Baker had been invited to contribute to the group exhibition *Animal Nature*, which was shown at Carnegie Mellon University’s Miller Gallery in Pittsburgh from August through October 2005. Initiated by artists Lane Hall and Lisa Moline and curator Jenny Strayer, *Animal Nature* aimed “to create an open, experimental ‘laboratory research’ model,” not least by encouraging the display of work

that might upset traditional distinctions between creative production and academic critique (Hall 2005).

Ashton and Baker had not collaborated before this, but Ashton had been making performance-based video work with animal themes (and in animal costumes) since the mid-1990s, exhibiting in galleries in Europe and North America, and Baker had been writing about work of this kind since the late 1990s, notably in *The Postmodern Animal* (2000a). *The Salon of Becoming-Animal* was driven by a shared enthusiasm for the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, especially their elaboration of the concept of “becoming-animal” in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988:232–309).