

Dancing behind bars

Female prisoners from Flanders and Brussels take up 'European Prison Dance Challenge'

By De Rode Antraciet

In the spring of 2018, the Finnish Vanaja prison launches the 'European Prison Dance Challenge'. With a choreography that is created, performed and filmed in the vicinity of the prison grounds, the participants dare other female prisoners all over the world to make a dance video of their own.

Non-profit organisation De Rode Antraciet from Belgium accepted the challenge and engaged the international dance company Ultima Vez. Choreographer Seppe Baeyens translated the challenge into a dance project with prisoners from three Flemish and one Brussels based prison. The result? A dance movie in which 24 prisoners (re)discover their femininity on the soundtrack of Nilufer Yanya's *The Florist*.

Women from the prisons of Ghent, Berkendael, Hoogstraten, and Antwerp took part in a trajectory of eight workshops. With the help of Baeyens, they searched for the right movements to express themselves. The choreographies that resulted from this practice were subsequently recorded and edited into one piece by filmmaker Pascal Poissonnier.

The video clip portrays in a very intimate way what it's like to be a woman in prison. The participants highlight certain items they are confronted with during their imprisonment or which are lacking inside the prison walls. Also, the project emphasizes the necessity of values that can connect and empower. Values that are equally important in case of a return to society. **"It is so nice to meet someone who takes time to listen to me, someone that values my opinion to boot,"** one of the participants says.

Seppe Baeyens, choreographer: **"During the workshops, I searched for movements together with the women: what is movement? What are you expressing? Where's your femininity? The women had to get used to that amount of attention, to someone that listens and wants to work with what is being said. As the group dynamics got more solid and the trust in each other grew, the participants started looking for what exactly they wanted to express and how they wanted to do that."**

Pascal Poissonnier, filmmaker: **"This has been an exceptionally rewarding and exciting project to be part of. I was very pleasantly surprised by the commitment of the participants. Everything was recorded very spontaneously, there was room for minor mistakes, the documentary approach was very important to me. It makes the result more interesting and perhaps more honest as well."**

De Rode Antraciet, the non-profit organisation that accepted Finland's invitation, in its turn passes on the dance challenge to another country. Els Tijskens, managing director: **"By answering Finland's call, we wanted to take up a meaningful challenge and to emphasize the importance of sports and culture in prison. The result is -both in human and in artistic respect- a strong plea for more interaction between prisoners and free society."**

FURTHER INFORMATION

European Prison Dance Challenge, **Belgium**:

<https://youtu.be/fFWRPgOW9CQ>

European Prison Dance Challenge, **Belgium** – The making of:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJogS0YxBdk&t=2s>

European Prison Dance Challenge, **Finland**:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYUUnqBfVWg>

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