

## Useful Knowledge to Know By Chloé Déchery and Chris Eley

There are three things you need to know about Chloé Déchery. One, she is French. Two, she is a lecturer. Three, she is *not* a dancer.

Alone onstage, Déchery repeats this refrain throughout *Useful Knowledge to Know*, an hour long duet between her and the sounds and images provided by Chris Eley. But the show is less about knowledge, than how it is delivered. Together, Déchery and Eley quote from a collection of frameworks for knowledge, including theatrical forms (dance, storytelling, lectures, and the now-ubiquitous performance-lecture) and languages made up of movements and words (English, French, British Sign Language). The result is a cumulative network of ways of understanding whose forms – if not their functions – feel familiar, like a half-remembered dream.

But this is a troubling kind of dream – the kind in which sense disintegrates before your eyes. There are three things you need to know about her, Déchery insists again. The trouble is, none of them tells us anything. She is a Frenchwoman speaking English. She is a lecturer who addresses us informally. She is *not* a dancer, but she makes the gestures of dance. Perhaps there is a gap between what Déchery says, and what Déchery means, like the story she tells about two lovers who speak different languages. In this story, it is not difference that defeats meaning, but the similarity between words. One lover, for example, understands the business of an ‘affair’ in French; but the meaning of the word in English, breaks the other lover’s heart. The tragedy is not that words have different meanings, but that each person assumes there is only one.

This is a phenomenon that Déchery calls ‘false friends’. She warns us that the ambivalence of false friends makes them dangerous, but reassures us that the story is fiction - an untruthful way to describe wavering truth. Weaving deftly between different kinds of knowledge and use in this way, *Useful Knowledge to Know* dissolves the possibility of one true meaning, which means dire consequences for the very fabric of life and love. It also means that the artists have to stage a kind of magic trick – to produce the problems of language, while retaining the language to speak.

Of course, dissolving one true meaning is not the same as dissolving meaning itself. Déchery’s personal refrain, for example, has a partial relationship to the truth, but it is a relationship nevertheless. One, she is French. Two, she is a lecturer. Three, she is *not* a dancer. Even when her actions step away from these details – through contradiction, perhaps, or irrelevance – the details still frame everything that Déchery does. Is it more or less thrilling to see dances snake through the body of a non-professional? Is it more or less inviting to be greeted, informally, by a woman who lectures to a stiff-seated hall? Once Déchery offers a piece of information, it is impossible to forget. Everything else that happens must be strung back to these ideas, and they create a kind of reputation; an ever-present reputation, which supersedes any claim to truth. They become fact, for the time being, even if it is of a demonstratively non-factual kind.

While *Useful Knowledge to Know* explores the weaknesses of communication systems, then, it also creates a communication system of its own. As well as her refrain about herself, Déchery tells the audience about the rest of the show. She performs gestures that are coming up, and describes the shape of what’s to follow. At one point, she strokes the back of a chair and tells us that she will do ‘this’, ‘later on’. Heavy with physical concentration, her act is rooted to the present. But her words expect the future. This pattern of anticipation is like the structure of an academic essay – in which the introduction outlines concluding points. And it is like some kinds of physical comedy – where the punchline is signalled well in advance. But here, it is performed using speech *and* gesture. The result is a compelling internal logic that both drives forward *Useful Knowledge to Know*, and contains its audience’s attention. The piece constructs its own method of communication, in other words, which not only draws the boundaries of imaginative space, but also keeps the audience inside.

And yet every so often, the performance stops.

Déchery steps towards the audience. The lights rise in the auditorium and we are lifted out of the safety of darkness.

Déchery urges the audience to consider our surroundings – look at the people sitting nearby, listen to the rise and fall of our breath. For a few tense moments, the responsibility of being in this space is thrown to the collection of strangers who came here to watch.

Eventually, Déchery retakes control. The lights dim and she returns to centre stage.

Like other elements that combine to make the show, these moments of near-rupture are repeated. Each time, they break down the 'fourth wall', the imaginary theatrical barrier that separates the passive audience from the active performance onstage. And it is at these moments that *Useful Knowledge to Know* comes closest to complete disintegration. Shifting nervously in our seats, the audience senses the delicacy of this whole performance, and the structures of meaning that are its subject. Déchery is suddenly vulnerable at the edge of the stage, and Eley's visuals are no longer in sight.

What would happen if I ignored the performers? What if I lay on the floor with my fingers in my ears? What really stops me from breaking this experience into tiny, personal fragments, and running away? The architects of the performance have suddenly surrendered control, and now no-one can see what the building was made of.

The answer is as simple as it is small – willing. The audience is sitting here because we want to listen and watch. We are all willing to acknowledge *Useful Knowledge to Know* as a way of communicating, even before we know what it communicates. In this context, what counts as 'useful knowledge' is not that Déchery tells us she's French, for example, but that she is addressing us at all.

It turns out that the duet between Déchery and Eley needs the audience's willing to come to life. It amounts to a kind of faith, or perhaps a reputation, and finally makes sense of the show's tautological title. You might think that knowledge is, by definition, known. But the knowledge that this show refers to is constantly coming into being – not as fact, but as a type of productive communication. That is why, when the performers throw responsibility into the audience they not only threaten the sovereignty of the show, but also generate its power. If communication is based on an act of faith, then the shiver of danger that the performance might collapse, is also the incentive to believe that it will continue. When the lights dim and the performance returns, I lean forward to believe with greater conviction.

By Mary Paterson

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