

UMBILICAL CHORD

Claudia Garbe's *Wiegenlieder*

Wiegenlieder, an open air dance performance by Claudia Garbe, explores motherhood, care work and privilege from a queer-feminist perspective. The piece was premiered in Berlin at Uferstudios in July 2022.

Upon receiving an invitation from Claudia Garbe to record her impressions and reflections on the performance, Beatrix Joyce wrote the following text.

It may be that the romantic maternal image of yore still holds sway in the sense that the potential of a woman should be exhausted and care work should be simultaneously idealized and undervalued. It is therefore necessary and timely to think of motherhood not as nature's fulfillment of life but rather as cultural and historical construct – to demythologize motherhood and care work and recognize everybody's state of dependence as human contingency.

- Johanna Withelm, Give me your bones (2022)

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Motherhood, for today's emancipated womxn, comes with a ream of both societal and personal demands. Mothers nowadays are not only expected to care for their children and the household, but also have a booming career, swarms of friends and infinite amounts of fun. Fun, fun, fun. Work, work, work. Baby, baby, baby. Where does one begin, and the other end?

Choreographer Claudia Garbe dismantles and reconstructs motherhood in her most recent work *Wiegenlieder*. The outdoor performance, featuring a set design comprised of air mattresses, departs from lullabies written by Brecht in the 20th century. The songs are reinterpreted by three dancers, all mothers themselves, backed by a choir and 20-odd melodicas. Garbe explores the role of the mother – is it a service, a burden, or a gift? In what ways can mothers deviate from the norm and express other, lesser-known parts of their identity? And what stories do they have to tell?

ALS ICH DICH IN MEINEM LEIB TRUG¹

A defining feature of the performance are the plastic, toy-like melodicas that are all connected to an air mattress pump, which serves as a kind of “motherboard”. Each melodica plays a different chord from one of Brecht's lullabies, of which the notes are fastened in place with sticky-tape. As they are all connected by tubes in a kind of intricate family tree, I am reminded of an organism, a body of breath, played by the performers. During one scene, three performers pick up one of the melodicas, each roughly the size of a newborn baby, and nestle them in their necks. Crying, burping, sleeping softly;

the flow of the dancers' exhalations shape the sounds of the keys while they pat them, rub them, comfort them. "There, there, child" say the mothers. The melodicas wheeze back.

The dancers breathe into the tube, running from their mouths to the melodicas. I wonder, does it represent the umbilical cord? The umbilical cord is the cord connecting the placenta, the organ that develops during pregnancy, and the baby in the womb. It is this bond in utero, that has perhaps led to some of our entrenched understandings of the bond between mother and child as sacred, as a primordial relationship of love out of which all other relationships spring. But here, the three dancers tug at the cords, threading them around their necks, blowing and biting into them, as if teething – they play together, imitating each other, joining up when they find an especially satisfying game. The bond feels a little less sacred now. But no less strong.

ALS ICH DICH GEBÄHR & BIS ICH DICH GROß KRIEGE²

The three mothers are as intimate with each other as a mother is with her newborn; sometimes their three bodies merge together in vibrating piles, other times they chase each other into climactic bouncing, humming and exclamations. They complete each other with changing rhythms. The highly physical experience of childbirth is abstracted into movement and emotions which alternate between moments of urgency, elation, frustration, exhaustion and release. I have never birthed a child. But as I am invited on their fearless journey through pain, pleasure and absurdity, I almost feel like I have.

Stories start to emerge. Experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and early stages of motherhood are jumbled up along with Brecht's lyrics. The dancers are supported by a choir that ricochets movements between them, like a child might imitate gestures while growing up. In a central scene, one of the performers sits on the air mattress, the other two clutch her head. They rub her cheeks, pull at her skin, give her a consolatory tap under her chin. Is it that moment when a mother, putting on make-up, is trying to have a moment for herself but is distracted by a tinkering infant? Or is it rather a depiction of

childhood, with a child being shaped and moulded by its mothers? From child to mother, and mother back to child. It could be either, it could be both.

WAS IMMER AUCH AUS UNS WERDE³

The mothers finish by climbing into the audience and offering their personal accounts of motherhood in their families. Alongside my fellow audience members, I am temporarily introduced into their private worlds, that remind me that every mother has a story, as does everyone with a mother. As a childless adult, these stories touched me, as I considered my own relationship to my mother and I realised how different stories of motherhood could be. We might not all have had a child, but we all have (had) a mother. Mothers are brave. Mothers are strong. Some mothers have taken their care, love and all of the complexities and playful discoveries that come with their role to the stage. I feel connected to them and to my belly button, where the umbilical cord between me and my mother once ran.

¹ WHEN I CARRIED YOU IN MY WOMB

² WHEN I GAVE BIRTH TO YOU & UNTIL I RAISE YOU

³ WHATEVER BECOMES OF US

Titles taken and adapted from Brecht's lullabies and used as a structure throughout the performance.