

THE الأعمى **POET**

JAN LAUWERS & NEEDCOMPANY

THE BLIND POET

ON THE LIES OF HISTORY

A Needcompany production.
Coproduction: Kunstenfestivaldesarts, KunstFestSpiele Herrenhausen,
FIBA - Festival Internacional de Buenos Aires, Künstlerhaus Mousonturm.
With the support of the Flemish authorities.

THE BLIND POET

Jan Lauwers & Needcompany

Text, directing, set design Jan Lauwers

Music Maarten Seghers

With Grace Ellen Barkey, Jules Beckman, Anna Sophie Bonnema, Hans Petter Melø Dahl,
Benoit Gob, Maarten Seghers, Mohamed Toukabri, Elke Janssens, Jan Lauwers

Costumes Lot Lemm

Costume Mohamed Bachir bin Ahmed bin Rhaïem El Toukabri

Dramaturgy & surtitles Elke Janssens

Lighting design Marjolein Demey, Jan Lauwers

Sound design Ditten Lerooij

Sound Ditten Lerooij/Marc Combas

Technical manager Marjolein Demey

Technique & production Marjolein Demey, Kurt Bethuyne

Technical set construction De Muur, X-Treme

Logistical support Irmgard Mertens

Costume assistant Lieve Meeussen

Trainee director Lisaboa Houbrechts

Trainee technicians Pablo Pérez Albalaejo, Ludovicus Grevendonk

Dramaturgical introduction Erwin Jans

Dramaturgical adviser Jef Lambrecht, Lucas Catherine, Taha Adnan

French translation Olivier Taymans

English translation Gregory Ball

German translation Rosi Wiegmann

Photographer Maarten Vanden Abeele

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Anna Komnene, Alexiade, 1148

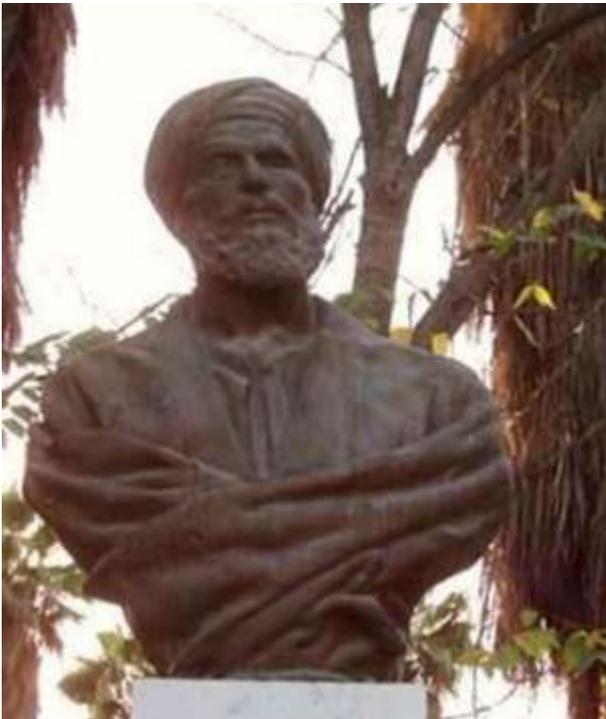
Maybe it would be better to change one's nature into something that lacks all feeling, rather than to be so sensitive to evil.

**Royal decree in 1567,
Andalusia**

We, the Christian kings,

We decree that no one shall speak, read or write the Arabic language in public or in private, but must speak, read and write and have contact with each other in our own language. No one may hold a dance party or nocturnal party with Arabic music on Friday afternoons, Sundays or holidays, at weddings or at the publication of the banns or in any other way on any other day. It is determined that from now on women must leave their faces uncovered ... and also visitors to bathhouses are in the wrong; those who wash the arms, hands, elbows, face, mouth, nose, ears and legs are in the wrong, and certainly those who also wash their genitals...

**Statue of Abu al'ala al Ma'arri, February 2013,
at Ma'arat al-Nu'man, south of Aleppo, Syria**



Jan Lauwers wrote 'The Blind Poet' in close cooperation with the composer Maarten Seghers. Jan Lauwers starts out from the performers' family trees and is writing a new story based on their various nationalities, cultures and languages. He goes back a thousand years to ponder the notion of identity in today's multicultural Europe. Lauwers quotes the work of Abu al 'ala al Ma'arri, a blind Arab poet who spanned the 10th and 11th centuries, and Wallada bint al Mustakfi, an Andalusian poet from the 11th century. Their work describes a time in which women held positions of power and atheism was commonplace, when Paris was just a small provincial town and Charlemagne was a famous illiterate. History is written by the victors. By men. How much has the history we know actually been determined by lies, chance encounters and events along the way? About strong women who throw stones and end up at the stake. About a crusader in armour that's too small.



Rehearsal picture © Bea Borgers



**When the mind is uncertain,
It is overwhelmed by the world,
A weak man kissed by a whore.
When the mind has become self-assured,
Then the world is a respectable lady,
Who rejects her lovers' caresses.
Abu al 'ala al Ma'arri (c. 950)**

'The poem above is written by the blind Syrian poet Abu al 'ala al Ma'arri. The idea of 'The Blind Poet' arose when I was visiting the great mosque in Cordoba. In the middle of this unique building with its three hundred columns, the Catholic church knocked down a number of columns and stuck in a cathedral. This cathedral looks small and pretty ridiculous in the middle of the sophisticated 'Moorish' architecture. I stood there looking in astonishment at all this historical bungling.

Cordoba was the capital of that world. Between 300,000 and 1 million people lived there. Women held positions of power and translated Plato, and atheism was common. It had several libraries and more than 600,000 books and much more besides. By comparison, the largest city in the Christian world was Paris, with about 30,000 inhabitants. The largest Christian library had 60,000 books and Charlemagne was illiterate.

What does this actually mean? Why does history always lie and deceive us? History is written by the victors. By men. By the few who tell the masses what to do.

In 11th-century Cordoba women were men's equals. Islamic women at least. The Christian women found them too bold, too dangerous.

This Cordoba story is only one of the many examples of how history comes back to us. 'The Blind Poet' journeys through history via the family tree of all Needcompany's members. In this way we found that everyone had a link or similarity to everyone else. One of my forefathers was an armourer at the time of Godfrey of Bouillon and went on a crusade with him. They travelled through Germany, where Grace Ellen Barkey's ancestor received them as a mayor.

**With God I aim for honour and glory, and proudly go my own way
To my lover I offer my cheeks, and my lips I give to whoever wants them.
Wallada bint al Mustakfi (Cordoba, 1000)**

How much has the history we know actually been determined by lies, chance encounters and events along the way?

About strong women who throw stones and end up at the stake.
About a crusader in armour that's too small.'

Jan Lauwers



Massacre in Antioch, Gustav Doré

عبدالله



VISIONS OF A BLIND POET

The world is not to blame

Therefore why blame the world?

Abu al'ala al Ma'arri (973 - 1057)

Since *Isabella's room* (2004), Needcompany's productions have focused on the group: that fragile network of conscious and unconscious, visible and secret relationships between relatives, friends and strangers. Jan Lauwers' recent theatre parables all have the same underlying plot: a group or a community is knocked off balance by an outsider or an unexpected occurrence and is forced to redefine itself. The question of the possibility or impossibility of coexistence is the main issue in Lauwers' plays. This is most explicit in *Marketplace 76*, in which a small community is struck by a great calamity, and is left traumatised and disrupted. It then goes in search of a new source of life.

The blind poet appears to deviate from this pattern. Whereas *Marketplace 76* is set in public space and raises questions of collective identity, *The blind poet* focuses on individuals. Lauwers has abandoned the parable for the portrait, swapped the story of a group for the story of individuals. For seven of the actors in the company – Grace Ellen Barkey, Jules Beckman, Anna Sophia Bonnema, Hans Petter Melø Dahl, Benoît Gob, Mohamed Toukabri and Maarten Seghers – Lauwers wrote seven portraits, seven identity cards, each beginning with the same phrase: 'I am...'. They are affectionate tributes to his actors. He literally hands over the stage to each one in turn, and thus also gives them the audience's full attention. But just as his parables unfold as social narratives, these individual portraits open a window on the broader context of history. Lauwers took the seven actors' family trees as the basis for his 'identity cards'. In some of the portraits he delves deep into the troubled history of the world through the stories of the actor's ancestors, while in others he sticks to the disjointed human, all too human, family histories. It does not really matter exactly where fact becomes fiction and where the fiction then again tells the truth, where the writer's imagination plays tricks with the biographies of his actors. Nor that the actors identify with their forefathers and seem to have led their lives. Identity is always also a question of longing, construction and fantasy. Lauwers breaks time and space down into surreal, grotesque, kitsch, tragi-comic images: 'We are sailors and world travellers who live in an anti-time', says one of the actors. An anti-time full of unbearable lightness, humour, banality, clichés, profound seriousness and deep love.

The portrait of Grace Ellen Barkey and her forefathers takes us to Indonesia, China, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium: 'I am a multicultural wonder. Grace Ellen Barkey. Multiculturality.' Mohamed Toukabri keeps it simple: 'Hey Grace, you may be a multicultural wonder, but I am the purest monoculture. Pure blood flows through my veins. Through the Muslim veins of Mohamed Toukabri. Just feel it. Perfect monocultural Muslim skin, a perfect monocultural Muslim body.' The family tree of Maarten Seghers, the

heir to forty generations of armourers, takes us to the First Crusade (1096-1099) led by Godfrey of Bouillon. The Norwegian actor Hans Petter Melø Dahl cannot be anything but a Viking, and his wife Anna Sophia Bonnema is a Mennonite from Friesland. Cultural clichés make their appearance too: 'Frisians can drink better than Vikings'. Benoît Gob's family tree takes us no further than the Delhaize supermarket and the brothels of Liège: 'My father drank more than all those Vikings and Crusaders put together. My father didn't need a boat to conquer the world. He floated out onto the river Maas in an empty beer barrel.' Anna Sophia Bonnema also appears to have links with China through her ancestor Ferdinand Hamer. No one knows why he went to China, but his boat was in the Sunda Strait between Java and Sumatra in August 1883 when the volcano Krakatoa erupted with unprecedented violence. The shockwaves in the atmosphere were so powerful that they went round the globe seven times. Natural disasters always have been globalised: 'The dust from Krakatoa is sucked up into the stratosphere and flutters down onto countless bodies and links everyone together. That's why I am everyone and the world is me. And that's why it's good to talk only about ourselves. Because that is the true history. That is the true love. Everything else is a forgery.'

It is a nice thought: I am everyone and the world is me. But it is not thought that dominates these present times. On the contrary, the spectre of the 'beast of identity' haunts Europe, and not only Europe. The dictionary defines 'identity' as 'unity of being, total correspondence, uniformity of the person'. This makes identity sound like a haven of peace and harmony. Yet the French-Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf talks of 'murderous identities': 'Initially it looks as if it stands for a legitimate aim, but suddenly it becomes an instrument of war. The shift from one meaning to another is imperceptible, happening almost of its own accord, and sometimes we fall for it.' Maalouf knows what he is talking about: from 1975 to 1990, his native country, Lebanon, was torn by a bloody civil war in which numerous ethnic groups and religious factions fought each other.

Cultural identity is claimed as a 'heim', a 'house', a 'home'. But as Freud remarked, our house is also the setting of the 'unheimliche'. There is something fundamentally 'unheimlich' in culture, something that cannot be domesticated. That is why a culture is never a place where we can feel completely at home, a 'domus' in which we live as members of the same family, the same tribe, the same blood. Far right, racist and fundamentalist ideologies try to redomesticate culture – which is always inhabited by the different and the other – to form a pure 'family' space, a space that has never existed and as an ideal is only possible by means of violence and exclusion: 'Homo redomesticus, having gained a position of power, sows death in the streets, screaming: 'You don't belong in my house! He takes the guest hostage. He pursues everyone who migrates. He puts them in his cellars, reduces them to ashes deep in his lowland plains.' (Jean-François Lyotard). The beast of identity bears many monstrous names: from the destruction of Jews at Auschwitz to the ethnic cleansing of Sarajevo, from the Rwandan genocide to the horror of Islamic State. But the beast of identity also manifests itself in smaller guises, in banal clichés and prejudices, in forms of everyday racism and exclusion. When cultural differences are raised, the jokes follow soon after: a Dutchman, a Belgian and a Moroccan are sitting in a café. The Dutchman says: '...' Are these outlets for unease, anxiety and inner turmoil? How much foreignness can we cope with? Or the reverse: how foreign are we to ourselves? The true foreigner is inside us. How could we drive it out without destroying ourselves?

'You shall not suppress a foreigner, nor oppress him, because you yourself were a foreigner in the land of Egypt.' This unmistakable message in Exodus, the second book of the Bible, was intended for the Jews, and reminds them of their history as exiles in the land of the pharaohs. These words refer to the possibility that in certain circumstances everyone can become a foreigner and thereby be entirely dependent on others'

hospitality. Grace casually remarks that 'I too am a boat refugee,' thereby referring to one of the great European tragedies of the present time. In Hans Petter's story of watching a young boy drown because he was too drunk and stoned to jump into the water and save him, we once again encounter the image of the boat refugees who in the last few months have been trying to reach Europe from North Africa in inhuman conditions and have thereby lost their lives. Paul Valéry once called the Mediterranean Sea a 'civilising machine' because of the great civilisations that have developed on its coasts over the centuries. But this same sea is now in danger of becoming a gigantic cemetery in which even Europe, as a political and moral project, may soon bury itself. The Mediterranean Sea has become a wall by which Europe closes itself off from a part of its history. The future identity of Europe is being played out on its southern borders. In the dead eyes of the asylum-seekers who are washed ashore we see the reflection of the utopian Europe, the Europe of the ideals of the Enlightenment, of tolerance and human rights. But we refuse to look into those dead eyes. The boat refugees are the last Europeans who still believe in the task and the promise of Europe. They could put us, the now cynical citizens of Fort Europe, in touch with the great ideals of European history once again, but we no longer want to hear. We have become too old. Too tired. After all, we can't take them all in, can we? We can't save the whole world. And as a result of this reasoning, countless men, women and children now lie on the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea without anyone ever knowing their name. But the 'extras of history' are returning: 'They always come back to the surface again one day or another', as Anna Sophia Bonnema says. What is excluded or pushed away always returns. The Other cannot simply be denied. The dead are never completely dead. As we can already hear in Marketplace 76, 'The time has come when the dead will have some fun'. One day we shall have to give an explanation.

According to Amin Maalouf, everyone has just one identity, but it consists of many facets and backgrounds. He therefore suggests that in addition to 'examining our consciences' we also 'examine our identities'. It looks like the genealogical method that Nietzsche propagated: the further you go back into the past, the more layers you will find from which your identity is composed and the more 'impure' you become: 'Everyone, without exception, has a heterogeneous identity; you only have to ask yourself a few questions and you come across forgotten fault lines and unexpected byways, and you discover that you are complex, unique and irreplaceable.' Maalouf also uses this excellent image: 'A person's identity is not a patchwork, but a drawing on a tightly stretched skin; only one part need be touched for the whole person to vibrate with it.'

Why not view *The blind poet* as a theatrical form of Maalouf's 'examination of identity'? Not as an attempt to find the singular source that explains everything, but, on the contrary, to continue discovering new branches and unexpected connections. More and more ancestors. More and more sides of the identity. Jan Lauwers himself says that he got the actual idea for the production from viewing the Mezquita in the Spanish city of Cordoba. The Mezquita is a unique building on the site where the Visigoth church of Vincent of Saragossa once stood, which in its turn was built on the foundations of a Roman temple. In 711 the Moors captured Cordoba and a mosque was built on this site. Since the Christians recaptured the city in 1236, the building has become the cathedral of the diocese of Cordoba. Work has been done on the building over the centuries, and nowadays both the Moorish and the Christian influences are clear to see. When one touches one of the cultural identities of this building, one makes all the others vibrate in parallel.

The Mezquita in Cordoba takes us into the midst of a period that was crucial in European history but which is little known and is often misunderstood: the confrontation with Islam between 711 and 1492, the period of the Moorish domination of Spain (Al-Andalus), the Crusades and the Reconquista. When, as from the

seventh century, Islam built up its extensive empire at lightning speed, scholars in such cities as Baghdad and Isfahan started preserving, translating and commenting on Greek and Roman scientific writings and continued doing so for almost six centuries. This translation work and the scientific research it stimulated had a huge impact on European cultural and intellectual life, which at that time was far behind the Islamic world. Al-Andalus assumed an almost mythical aura as a period characterised by religious tolerance, multicultural coexistence and intellectual exchanges between Jews, Muslims and Christians. The truth is subtler than this, but it is a fact that the scientific, intellectual and literary life of Islamic culture was at an exceptionally high level. Unlike Christianity, Islam stimulated the search for knowledge. There are the well-known words of the prophet Mohammed: 'Gather knowledge, even if you have to go to China to do so'. When Europe was in its 'dark' Middle Ages, Islamic culture was enjoying its heyday. But the influence of Arabic and other scholars from the Middle East and Andalusia was controversial. Petrarch outspokenly referred to 'Arabic lies'. And the role of Islamic culture as a bridge between classical antiquity and the European Renaissance is still not fully recognised. To give just one example, some still jump too easily from Ptolemy (2nd century), who saw the Earth as the fixed centre of the universe, to Copernicus (16th century), who developed a heliocentric system. The theories and insights of the Arab scholars that lie between the two are often minimized, whereas recent research has shown that Copernicus extended the theories of such Arabic scholars as Ibn al-Shatir and al-Tusi. The medical manual by Ibn Sina (Avicenna) was also a standard work at European universities until 1600. The same applies to books in the fields of optics, chemistry, architecture and algebra. At a certain moment, Arabic, together with Latin, was the most important means of communication between European scholars and scientists.

Lauwers takes this Islamic vibration in European identity seriously and makes it resound clearly in the performance. Among others, he quotes the blind Syrian poet Abu al'ala al Ma'arri (973-1057) and the poetess Wallada bint al Mustakfi (1001-1091) of Cordoba and makes references to philosophers and scientists: 'I know the great thinker Ibn Rushd, who is known here as Averroes, whose books Thomas Aquinas buried because they were too dangerous for the people. Or Ibn Firnas, who made the first aeroplane six hundred years before Leonardo Da Vinci... Or is it one truth, indivisible and unrelated to time? But then what is this truth? Because that's what it's all about: truth. History is a lie that fills us with shame.' says Mohamed Toukabri. One of these lies of history is the matter of the Crusades. The military undertakings of the Western Christians in Palestine between 1095 and 1271 can best be described as an early example of the European expansion that was set in motion when, in the tenth century, an end had come to the invasions of Europe by the Vikings, Moors and Huns. The warlords who subsequently lined up against each other and the inhabitants were now united by the conviction that the holy sites in the Holy Land, which Christendom considered to be its rightful property, had to be liberated from their Islamic rulers, who had held them since 638. This is not the place to deal with the political and economic causes of the Crusades, but of course they were not such an idealistic 'liberation of the Holy Land'. In his book *The Crusades through Arab Eyes* (1986), Amin Maalouf describes the Crusades from the Arab perspective: and it was not a pretty sight.

Coincidence or not, almost all the family trees of the actors in *The blind poet* crossed each other's paths at the time of the Crusades! What the actors discover in their family trees is not exactly something to be proud of: just about all their forefathers were cannibals: 'We had had something else in mind. We could neither read nor write and we ate children. During the siege of Antioch in 1097, the Christians ate the children of the Jews and Muslims. It was the only meat we could find. Our horses were too precious', according to Maarten Seghers. Hans Petter Melø Dahl puts it like this: 'We look for the bigger picture. The hysterical history of the man-eaters and the forgotten wars. My ancestors were cannibals. That's all that needs saying.'

Lauwers' broad image of history is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's interpretation of Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*, showing an angel with its eyes wide open, mouth agape and wings spread: 'The angel of history must look like this. He keeps his face turned to the past. Where we see a chain of events, he sees one great catastrophe, which ceaselessly piles rubble upon rubble and throws it at his feet. He would like to take a rest, raise the dead and put the debris back together again. But a storm is blowing up out of paradise that catches in his wings and is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him unstoppably towards the future, to which he turns his back, while the rubble in front of him rises towards the heavens. This storm is what we call progress.' This is the history of mankind: catastrophe, cannibalism and hysteria.

Can we still meet each other as humans in these ruins of history? Our cities have become the world's 'contact zones', zones where cultures and individuals which until now have been separated by geography, history, race, ethnicity, etc. are forced to live together. The philosopher Rudi Visker distinguishes three positions that can be adopted towards the other, but then rejects them and goes in search of a new angle. He successively distinguishes the multicultural, the transcultural and the ironic position. While the multiculturalist locates the truth in cultural 'rooting', and in the equality of all cultures, for the transculturalist it is to be found precisely in cultural 'uprooting' and the possibility of freeing oneself from one's own tradition (for example in a cosmopolitan attitude to life). In Visker's view, both these positions are ultimately linked to a form of fear. The multiculturalist is afraid of losing his individuality in the confrontation with the other, and therefore makes cultures equal, but at the same time entities that are mostly enclosed within themselves and isolated from each other. The transculturalist is afraid of this solitude and for the purposes of dialogue and interaction is prepared to give up his cultural individuality. Visker reproaches both for trying to raise every issue except that of themselves. That is precisely what the ironist does. The ironist casts doubts on his own truth because he sees that the other has a different truth and takes it seriously. Because of this self-doubt, the ironist always remains interested in others' truths. What Visker appreciates in the ironist is that he sees the lack of truth as a quality of every truth, not only of his own or only that of the other. But Visker reproaches him for still conceiving of this shortcoming against the background of something that is not there, but actually could have been there. This is the reason why the ironist continues zapping from one truth to another, as if he were convinced that it must after all be somewhere. The lack of truth is the starting point for Visker's own definition of his position: I only respect the other's humanity when I accept that he, like me, bears a deficiency. It is a deficiency that I cannot replenish and which my deficiency cannot replenish, nor is it a deficiency that caused my own. The encounter between 'I' and the 'other' is ultimately an encounter between two deficiencies. It is only this 'common' deficiency that makes the encounter possible. From here we also arrive at a different definition of what culture is: not an impressive construction to be proud of, but a 'construction of embarrassment' that enables us to handle our deficiency. Not proof of superiority, but a modest and failed attempt to solve the riddle of existence.

History as a catastrophe, culture as a construction of embarrassment, man as a deficiency: 'We are all refugees or cannibals. Eat or be eaten. History teaches us that.', says Jules Beckman. Yet this is not Lauwers' final word. That word, strange as it may sound in this context, is 'love'. The love that Lauwers talks about in all his plays is the vigorous 'yes' spoken by Molly Bloom in the final chapter of James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* (1922). This chapter is one long, uninterrupted monologue that ends like this: '... I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish Wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my

arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.' It's a nice coincidence that she here compares herself to Andalusian girls and is kissed beneath the Moorish Wall. This 'yes', says Joyce, is a feminine 'yes'. This is also very clearly the case in Lauwers' work. Since *Isabella's room*, the archetype of the mother goddess or holy whore has been a thread running through his productions. She is the icon of an unconditional hospitality who enjoins us to give our house and ourselves to the stranger, without asking his name, without any compensation, unconditionally. It is the attitude of an absolute 'yes', an absolute openness to anyone or anything that presents itself, prior to any determination, anticipation or identification, regardless of whether it is a matter of a stranger, an immigrant, a guest, or an unexpected visitor, regardless of whether it is a man or a woman, even regardless of whether it is a human, animal or divine being, and ultimately regardless of whether it is a life or a dead thing.

There is also a notable number of mentions of women, mothers, love and lust in *The blind poet*: 'I offer my lover my cheek and my lips I give to whom I wish.', says Wallada of Cordoba, as spoken by Anna Sophia Bonnema. 'My mother offered her cheek to her lover and she gave her lips to those who paid.', is what Benoît makes of it in his story. 'I am Anna Sophia Bonnema. I am all women. I am the loving mother without a child. I am Lucrezia but I will not commit suicide, I am the amazon Penthesilea who loves Achilles, I am Sappho, the tenth muse, I am Madame Curie, seeing her arm wither. I am Corday, who cries that she has saved a hundred thousand people. I am Zarçamodonia, who cuts off the head of a man who wants to take off her headscarf.' Beside the dust from the eruption of the volcano Krakatoa – the catastrophe – it is this vigorous, hospitable 'yes' that flutters down over countless bodies and thus connects everything to everything else and makes the world one single indivisible world.

P.S. This is what Wikipedia has to say about the Mezquita in Cordoba: 'Because the construction of the cathedral took a very long time, it incorporates several different building styles. In addition, the cathedral also has a positive effect on the construction: this makes the Mezquita more resistant to earthquakes.' As a result of several interlocking building forms, in other words of its stylistic 'impurity', the construction was made stronger. This is perhaps a fine metaphor for the coexistence of several cultures as a reinforcement of the whole of mankind against upheavals to come.

Erwin Jans

THE BLIND POET

PERFORMANCE CALENDAR

First night

Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Kaaitheater, Brussels	12, 13, 14, 15 May 2015
KunstFestSpiele Herrenhausen, Hanover	13, 14 June 2015
Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, Frankfurt	19, 20, 21 June 2015
La Biennale di Venezia, Teatro alle Tese	5 August 2015
FIBA, Festival Internacional de Buenos Aires	23, 24, 25 September 2015
TNT, Terrassa Noves Tendencias, Terrassa	1 October 2015
Europäisches Theaterfestival Eurothalia, Timisoara	10 October 2015
Konfrontacje Teatralne, Lublin	18 October 2015
Theaterfestival Spielart, Munich	25 October 2015
Scène Nationale de Sète et du Bassin de Thau, Sète	5, 6 November 2015
Teatro Central, Sevilla	20, 21 November 2015

[Click here for the complete list](#)



WORK FOR THEATRE

JAN LAUWERS & NEEDCOMPANY

- 1987 Need to Know**
Opening: 24 March, Mickery, Amsterdam
- 1989 ça va**
Opening: 18 March, Theater am Turm, Frankfurt
- 1990 Julius Caesar**
Opening: 31 May, Rotterdamse Schouwburg
- 1991 Invictos**
Opening: 18 May, Centro Andaluz de Teatro, Seville
- 1992 Antonius und Kleopatra**
Opening: 14 February, Theater am Turm, Frankfurt
- 1992 SCHADE/schade**
Opening: 21 October, Theater am Turm, Frankfurt
- 1993 Orfeo, opera by Walter Hus**
Opening: 23 May, Bourschouwburg, Antwerp
- 1994 The Snakesong Trilogy - Snakesong/Le Voyeur**
Opening: 24 March, Theater am Turm, Frankfurt
- 1995 The Snakesong Trilogy - Snakesong/Le Pouvoir (Leda)**
Opening: 11 May, Dance 95, Munich
- 1996 Needcompany's Macbeth**
Opening: 26 March, Lunatheater, Brussels
- 1996 The Snakesong Trilogy - Snakesong/Le Désir**
Opening: 6 November, Kanonhallen, Copenhagen
- 1997 Caligula, No beauty for me there, where human life is rare, part one**
Opening: 5 September, Documenta X, Kassel
- 1998 The Snakesong Trilogy, reworked version with live music**
Opening: 16 April, Lunatheater, Brussels
- 1999 Morning Song, No beauty for me there, where human life is rare, part two**
Opening: 13 January, Lunatheater, Brussels
- 2000 Needcompany's King Lear**
Opening: 11 January, Lunatheater, Brussels
- 2000 DeaDDogsDon'tDance/DJamesDJoyceDeaD**
Opening: 12 May, Das TAT, Frankfurt
- 2001 Ein Sturm**
Opening: 22 March, Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg
- 2001 Kind**
Opening: 21 June, Het Net, Bruges
- 2002 Images of Affection**
Opening: 28 February, Stadsschouwburg, Bruges

- 2003 No Comment**
Opening: 24 April, Kaaithheater, Brussels
- 2004 Isabella's room**
Opening: 9 July, Cloître des Carmes, Festival d'Avignon
- 2006 All is Vanity**
Opening: 8 July, Théâtre Municipal, Festival d'Avignon
- 2006 The Lobster Shop**
Opening: 10 July, Cloître des Célestins, Festival d'Avignon
- 2008 The Deer House**
Opening: 28 July, Perner-Insel, Hallein, Salzburger Festspiele
- 2008 Sad Face | Happy Face, A Trilogy, Three Stories on Human Nature**
Opening: 1 August, Perner-Insel, Hallein, Salzburger Festspiele
- 2011 The art of entertainment**
Opening: 5 March, Akademietheater (Burgtheater), Vienna
- 2012 Caligula**
Opening: 17 May, Kasino, (Burgtheater), Vienna
- 2012 Marketplace 76**
Opening: 7 September, Ruhrtriennale, Jahrhunderthalle, Bochum
- 2014 Begin the Beguine**
Opening: 1 March, Akademietheater (Burgtheater), Vienna
- 2015 The Blind Poet**
Opening: 12 May, Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels

[Click here for an updated list.](#)

PUBLICATIONS IN BOOK FORM BY AND ABOUT JAN LAUWERS

- LAUWERS, Jan, *Leda*, Bebuquin (Antwerp), a coproduction with IT&FB publishing company, Amsterdam, 1995.
- VANDEN ABEELE, Maarten, *The Lucidity of the Obscene*, Needcompany in cooperation with IT&FB publishing company, Brussels/Amsterdam, 1998.
- LAUWERS, Jan, *La Chambre d'Isabella* followed by *Le Bazar du Homard*, Actes Sud-papiers, Paris, 2006.
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PRIZES

- Mobil Pegasus Preis, Internationales Sommertheater Festival Hamburg, for the best international production, *ça va*, 1989.
- Thersitesprijs, Flemish theatre critic prize, 1998.
- Obie Award in New York for the play *Morning Song*, 1999.
- *Kinematrix Prize* for Digital Format, International Film Festival Venice 2002, *Goldfish Game*, 2002.
- Grand Jury Honor for Best Ensemble Cast, Slamdance Film Festival, *Goldfish Game*, 2004.
- Le Masque, prize awarded by the Académie Québécoise du Théâtre in Montréal, Canada, for the best foreign production, *La Chambre d'Isabella*, 2005.
- Prize awarded by the Syndicat Professionnel de la Critique de Théâtre, de Musique et de Danse in France, for the best foreign production, *La Chambre d'Isabella*, 2005.
- Culture prize awarded by the Flemish Community 2006, theatre literature category, for the *De kamer van Isabella* and *Ulrike* scripts.
- Grand Prix – Golden Laurel Wreath Award for Best Performance / MESS Festival Sarajevo, for *Isabella's room* (2009).
- Decoration of Honour in Gold for Services to the Republic Austria, 2012.
- Golden Lion Lifetime Achievement Award at the Venice Biennale, 2014.
- Golden Laurel Wreath for Lifetime Achievement Award / 54ste MESS International Theatre Sarajevo, 2014.
- Premio Mayor, Premio Teatro del Mundo, category "Translations", for the translation by Micaela van Muylem of the *Sad Face | Happy Face* trilogy, University of Buenos Aires, 2014.

JAN LAUWERS

Jan Lauwers (Antwerp, 1957) is an artist who works in just about every medium. Over the last twenty-five years he has become best known for his pioneering work for the stage with Needcompany, which was founded in Brussels in 1986. From 2009 until 2014 Needcompany has been artist-in-residence at the Burgtheater in Vienna. Over the years he has also built up a substantial body of art work which was shown in an exhibition at BOZAR (Brussels) in 2007. Jan Lauwers is awarded with the 'Decoration of Honour in Gold for Services to the Republic Austria' (2012). In 2014, he has been rewarded with the Golden Lion Lifetime Achievement Award at the Venice Biennale. He is the first Belgian to receive this prize in the theatre category.

Jan Lauwers studied painting at the Academy of Art in Ghent. At the end of 1979 he gathered round him a number of people to form the *Epigonenensemble*. In 1981 this group was transformed into the Epigonentheater zlv collective which took the theatre-world by surprise with its six stage productions. In this way Jan Lauwers took his place in the movement for radical change in Flanders in the early '80, and also made his international breakthrough. Epigonentheater zlv presented direct, concrete, highly visual theatre that used music and language as structuring elements. Their productions were *Already Hurt and not yet War* (1981), *dE demonstratie* (1983), *Bulletbird* (1983), *Background of a Story* (1984) and *Incident* (1985). Jan Lauwers disbanded this collective in 1985 and founded *Needcompany*.

NEEDCOMPANY

Jan Lauwers *needs company*. He founded Needcompany together with Grace Ellen Barkey. They together are responsible for Needcompany larger-scale productions. The group of performers Jan Lauwers and Grace Ellen Barkey have put together over the years is quite unique in its versatility. Their *associated performing artists* are MaisonDahlBonnema (Hans Petter Dahl & Anna Sophie Bonnema), Lemm&Barkey (Lot Lemm & Grace Ellen Barkey), OHNO COOPERATION (Maarten Seghers & Jan Lauwers) and the NC ensemble, which includes the inimitable Viviane De Muynck. They create work of their own under Needcompany's wing.

Since Needcompany was founded in 1986, both its work and its performers have been markedly international. Its first productions, *Need to Know* (1987) and *ça va* (1989) – which received the Mobiel Pegasus Preis – were still highly visual, but in subsequent productions the storyline and the main theme gained in importance, although the fragmentary composition remained.

Lauwers' training as an artist is decisive in his handling of the theatre medium and leads to a highly individual and in many ways pioneering theatrical idiom that examines the theatre and its meaning. One of its most important characteristics is a transparent, 'thinking' acting and the paradox between 'acting' and 'performing'.

This specific approach is also to be found in his adaptations of Shakespeare: *Julius Caesar* (1990), *Antonius und Kleopatra* (1992), *Needcompany's Macbeth* (1996), *Needcompany's King Lear* (2000) and, at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg, *Ein Sturm* (2001). After directing *Invictos* (1996), the monologue *SCHADE/Schade* (1992) and the opera *Orfeo* (1993), in 1994 he started work on a major project called *The Snakesong Trilogy*, which signalled his first full emergence as an author: *Snakesong/Le Voyeur* (1994), *Snakesong/Le Pouvoir* (1995) and *Snakesong/Le Désir* (1996). In 1998 he staged the reworked version of the whole *Snakesong Trilogy*.

In September 1997 he was invited to take part in the theatre section of Documenta X (Kassel), for which he created *Caligula*, after Camus, the first part of a diptych called *No beauty for me there, where human life is rare*. With *Morning Song* (1999), the second part of the diptych *No beauty...*, Lauwers and Needcompany won an Obie Award in New York. In May 2000, at the request of William Forsythe, Lauwers created, in co-production with Ballet Frankfurt, the piece entitled *DeaDDogsDon'tDance/DjamesDjoyceDeaD* (2000).

Images of Affection (2002) was created on the occasion of Needcompany's 15th anniversary. Jan Lauwers presented three monologues and a dance solo under the title *No Comment* (2003). Charles L. Mee, Josse De Pauw and Jan Lauwers wrote pieces for Carlotta Sagna ('Salome'), Grace Ellen Barkey ('The tea drinker') and Viviane De Muynck ('Ulrike') respectively. Six composers – Rombout Willems, Doachim Mann, Walter Hus, Senjan Jansen, Hans Petter Dahl and Felix Seger – wrote a musical composition for the dance solo by Tijen Lawton. Broadly speaking the themes of this performance are those Lauwers has reformulated and redefined ever since the start of his work with Needcompany: violence, love, eroticism and death. A collection of several thousand ethnological and archaeological objects left by Jan Lauwers' father urged him to tell the story of Isabella Morandi in *Isabella's room* (2004) (Avignon theatre festival). Nine performers together reveal the secret of Isabella's room with as central figure the monumental actress Viviane De Muynck. This play was awarded several prizes, including the 2006 Flemish Community Culture Prize in the playwriting category. In 2006 he created two pieces for the Avignon Festival, one of which is *The Lobster Shop*, whose script he wrote himself, and *All is Vanity*, a monologue by Viviane De Muynck, which the actress herself adapted from Claire Goll's book of the same name. The Salzburger Festspiele has invited Jan Lauwers to make a new production, *The Deer House*, for summer 2008. Together with *Isabella's Room* (2004) and *The Lobster Shop* (2006) this new production makes up a trilogy on human nature: *Sad Face | Happy Face*. The trilogy as a whole was performed for the first time at the Salzburger Festspiele 2008.

Since 2009 Jan Lauwers is *artist in residence* at Vienna's Burgtheater. *The art of entertainment* was premiered in 2011, afterwards the leading role was played by Dirk Roofthoof. *Caligula* (2012) and the text by John Cassavetes *Begin the Beguine* (2014) were also collaborations with the Burgtheater.

Jan Lauwers wrote *Marketplace 76* for the Needcompany ensemble. It was premiered in September 2012 during the Ruhrtriennale. *The blind poet* (2015), Jan Lauwers latest play, will premiere during the 2015 Kunstenfestivaldesarts.

PROJECTS

In 1999 Jan Lauwers launched *Needlapb*, a one-off occasion for ideas, notes, sketches and random thoughts. *Needlapb* enables one to see the initial stages of various projects in which experimentation gropes its way towards the stage.

Just for Toulouse (Théâtre Garonne, 2006) was the first of a series of evenings when Needcompany's *associated performing artists* presented installations and performances. In 2007 *Just for Brussels* was presented at BOZAR.

He founded OHNO COOPERATION together with Maarten Seghers to give concrete shape to their mutual artistic commitment. Up to now this has taken the form of listening to, looking at, thinking about and making music, visual art and performances: *The Grenoble Tapes* (2006), *O.H.N.O.P.O.P.I.C.O.N.O.* (2006), *The OHNO Cooperation Conversation On The O.H.N.O.P.O.P.I.C.O.N.O. Ontology* (2007). They are combined in *an OHNO cooperation evening* (2008) In 2009 the artist-curator duo OHNO COOPERATION invited several artists to participate in *The Tragedy of the Applause – Roubaix*. In August 2011 OHNO COOPERATION curated the fifth OPEN AIR in Antwerp, in the frame of which it invited several artists. *The OHNO Cooperation Conversation On The O.H.N.O.P.O.P.I.C.O.N.O. Tautology* (2014) was created on commission to Fiden 2014.

Jan Lauwers was selected in the margin of the Biennale in Venice (2012) for the workshop of Dramatic Arts. Curator Alex Rigola invited a group of prominent theatre makers, resulting in a performance called *The Seven Sins* (2011) and *The Impossible Act* (2013). In 2014 Lauwers presents *Just for Venice* there.

FILMPROJECTS

Jan Lauwers also has a number of film and video projects to his name, including *From Alexandria* (1988), *Mangia* (1995), *Sampled Images* (2000), *C-Song* (2003), *C-Song Variations* (2007) and *The OHNO Cooperation Conversations on the O.H.N.O.P.O.P.I.C.O.N.O. Ontology* (2007). During summer 2001 Lauwers shot his first full-length film with the working title *Goldfish Game* (2002). The script was written together with Dick Crane. *Goldfish Game* is the story of a small community of people who are violently torn apart. The premiere took place at the Venice Film Festival (in the New Territories (*Nuovi Territori*)) category. The *Kinematrix* internet magazine (Italy) proclaimed *Goldfish Game* the best film in the *Formati Anomali* (Unusual Forms) category. The jury report said: 'An innovative style of directing that surpasses the limits of the digital medium'. *Goldfish Game* was selected for the Buenos Aires International Human Rights Film and Video Festival in 2002, the Ghent Film Festival in 2002 and the Solothurn Film Festival in Switzerland in 2003. At the Slamdance Film Festival (January 2004), *Goldfish Game* was awarded the Grand Jury Honour for the Best Ensemble Cast.

In February 2003 Jan Lauwers made a silent short film on violence, called *C-Song*. This film has been shown to a limited audience several times, during the *Needlapbs* at STUK in Leuven and the Kaaitheater Studios in Brussels, and also in 'War is Not Art' at the Vooruit in Ghent. In April 2004 *C-Song* had its official premiere at the Courtisane short-film festival in Ghent. It was subsequently selected for the International Short-Film Festival in Hamburg in 2004 and in July 2004 was screened in the old water-tower at Bredene on the Belgian coast as part of Grasduinen 2004, SMAK-aan-Zee.

C-Song Variations (2007), a short film made in connection with *The Lobster Shop*, had a preview at BOZAR (Brussels) in April and its premiere at the Temps d'Images festival in La Ferme du Buisson (Paris) in October 2007. It was then shown at the haus der kunst (2007) in Munich.

For the SPIELART Festival in Munich (2007) he did a video project together with Maarten Seghers: *The OHNO Cooperation Conversations on the O.H.N.O.P.O.P.I.C.O.N.O. Ontology*. *The OHNO Cooperation Conversation On The O.H.N.O.P.O.P.I.C.O.N.O. Tautology* (2014) was created on commission to Fidena 2014.

VISUAL ART

At the request of the curator Luk Lambrecht, Jan Lauwers took part in the *Grimbergen 2002* exhibition together with 8 other artists (including Thomas Schütte, Lili Dujourie, Job Koelewijn, Atelier Van Lieshout, Jan De Cock and Ann Veronica Janssens). In spring 2006 his work was included in the DARK exhibition at the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam. In 2007 Jan Lauwers had his first solo exhibition at BOZAR (Brussels), curated by Jérôme Sans (former director of Palais de Tokyo, now at the UCCA). To accompany this exhibition he also compiled the first book to focus on his art work from 1996 to 2006. At the Artbrussels art fair (2007), Lauwers was invited to make a site-specific work for BOZAR. Luk Lambrecht has invited Jan Lauwers to take part in *Down to Earth*, a group exhibition of ceramics at Strombeek cultural centre, which includes work by Ann Veronica Janssens, Heimo Zobernig, Atelier Van Lieshout, Lawrence Weiner, Kurt Rylsly and Manfred Pernice. In May 2009 Jérôme Sans invited Jan Lauwers to exhibit at *Curated by vienna 09*. *Curated by* brought 18 Viennese contemporary art galleries together with international curators. In September 2011 Champ d'Action and M HKA organised the 8th Time Canvas, during which Jan Lauwers' "Last Guitar Monster" was shown.

Deconstructions were made by Jan Lauwers using disused museum material. These museum installations have already been shown at BOZAR (Brussels) and the haus der kunst (Munich) in 2007. They formed the setting for a six-hour marathon performance by the NC ensemble on which the whole of Jan Lauwers' mental world converged.

The result was *The House of Our Fathers*, which was shown at the Museum M in Leuven, the 16th Internationale Schillertage in Mannheim (2011). And during Hannover's Kunstfestspiele Herrenhausen in 2013.

MAARTEN SEGHERS

As an artist in his own right, Maarten Seghers makes objects, installations, performances and music. With his latest creation WHAT DO YOU MEAN WHAT DO YOU MEAN AND OTHER PLEASANTRIES (2014), through seeming absurdity, Seghers smartly and inimitably exposes art practice and with beauty and hilarity ploughs through the inevitability of our woes.

In 2006, he set up OHNO COOPERATION in close collaboration with the artist Jan Lauwers and the musician Elke Janssens. Together they make performances, video works, installations and music. OHNO COOPERATION also invites other artists and musicians to work with it and presents these joint ventures in series of international exhibitions and concerts. These confrontations add crucial enrichment to their further work.

Having studied stage directing in Brussels, since 2001 Maarten Seghers has also been involved in the theatre and dance work by Jan Lauwers and Grace Ellen Barkey, both as a performer and a composer

In *Images of Affection* (2002), *Isabella's room* (2004), *The Lobster Shop* (2006) and *The Deer House* (2008) by Jan Lauwers and *(AND)* (2002), *Chunking* (2005), *The Porcelain Project* (2007) and *This door is too small (for a bear)* (2010) by Grace Ellen Barkey, he was responsible for composing music, as well as performing.

He wrote music for *No Comment* (2003), *The Art of Entertainment* (2011) and *The Unauthorized Portrait* (2003) – a film about Jan Lauwers by Nico Leunen.

He receives the full artistic and production support of Needcompany. Some of his work is included in the permanent collection of FRAC Nord-Pas de Calais.

LINKS TO THE BIOGRAPHIES

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