

JAN LAUWERS & NEEDCOMPANY

NEEDCOMPANY'S MACBETH

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
ADAPTATION AND DIRECTION: JAN LAUWERS

PREMIERE: 26 MARCH 1996, LUNATHEATER, BRUSSELS

ACTORS

Viviane De Muynck

Ina Geerts

Johan Heestermans

Carlotta Sagna

Mil Seghers

Dominique Van Steerthem

Simon Versnel

Macbeth

Lady Macbeth

Malcolm, Lady Macbeth, Lord

Lady Macbeth, child, witches, servant

Duncan, Lord

Macduff, Lady Macbeth, murderer, Lord

Banquo, Lady Macduff, Ross

Adaptation, Direction and Set design

Dramaturgy

Costumes

Light design

Sound

Trainee

Music:

Jan Lauwers

Helen McNamara

Lot Lemm

Dries Vercrusse

André Schneider

Ayco Duyster

Caccini, 'Amarilli';

Arvo Pärt, 'Miserere';

Giuseppe Verdi, 'Banquo' from 'Macbeth';

Manni Spaniol, 'Assoziationen'

Production manager

Research and Press

Administrator

Carl Gydé

Greet Ramael

Christel Simons

Première: 26 March 1996, Lunatheater, Brussels

Kaaitheter (Lunatheater), Brussels, 27, 28, 29 and 30 March 1996

Rotterdamse Schouwburg, Rotterdam, 3 and 4 April 1996

Stadsschouwburg, Bruges, 6 April 1996

De Brakke Grond, Amsterdam, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13 April 1996

deSingel, Antwerp, 18, 19 and 20 April 1996

Stadsschouwburg, Groningen, 26 April 1996

De Velinx, Tongeren, 4 May 1996

Das TAT, Frankfurt, 16, 17, 18 and 19 May 1996

Kunstencentrum Vooruit, Ghent, 22, 23, 24 and 25 May 1996

A production of Needcompany and Das TAT (Frankfurt) in coproduction with Rotterdamse Schouwburg (Rotterdam), Laagland/NF (Brussels/Amsterdam) and Kaaitheter (Brussels) Needcompany is supported by the Ministry of the Flemish Community and is a Cultural Ambassador of Flanders

Macbeth: *It will have blood, they say; blood will have blood. I am in blood stepped in so far, that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er.*

Jan Lauwers once again takes on the work of an old love of his. On 26th March his latest Shakespeare adaptation, *Needcompany's Macbeth*, will open in the Lunatheater in Brussels. Those familiar with his two previous versions of Shakespeare plays will know that they may expect something with a character of its own.

It was in 1990 that he first caused a stir with his remarkable *Julius Caesar*. He cut the text drastically and limited the cast to seven actors. The set consisted of wooden rocking horses, microphones and a drawing of Lauwers' own, executed in marble. The result was a distilled Shakespeare production, reduced to its essentials, and highly successful.

In his second Shakespeare production, *Antonius und Cleopatra* (1992), Lauwers concentrated on the character of Antony, torn between his passion for Cleopatra and his political aspirations.

Macbeth is sometimes said to be the bloodiest of Shakespeare's tragedies. And blood is the thread running through this interpretation, together with the question of how a human can degenerate into an unscrupulous murderer. The main theme of the play is Macbeth's train of thought and the way it evolves. It would be a mistaken view to hold on to an historical interpretation, since Shakespeare's work is so rich and offers so many essential human elements, that *Macbeth's* central themes can be used as a means of initiating a contemporary quest for the good and the evil in man and what these concepts currently signify.

On this subject Jan Lauwers says, "*It would be a historical lie if one were to take the story literally. In reality Macbeth was a good and virtuous king whose reign comprised fifteen years of peace.*

So the story is not the main thing, theatre is about the feeling one perceives on the evening itself. That is the fine and fragile thing about the theatre as a medium. In art, everything has already been told, and what remains is feeling.

What we have tried to achieve with this, the umpteenth version of Macbeth, is to render Shakespeare's poetry. It is a language that's impossible to understand immediately. Even in England you see the majority of the audience following the play with the text in their hands. This is why it was our intention, rather, to create an overall feeling, to develop an artificial sense of time.

Seen in this way it becomes a radical play with a classical structure and a conservative use of language, averse to any modernization, because I believe that art cannot and should not ever be topical. One could make a Saddam Hussein of Macbeth, but then you enter into an anecdotalism that harms the extra worth that Shakespeare put into it."

The whole play is dominated by ambiguity. *Foul is fair, and fair is foul*, the witches say at the beginning, and that is only one example of 'what there is or what you see, is at the same time not there, or not seen'.

The story is sufficiently familiar. Macbeth and Banquo, who put down an uprising against their Scottish king, Duncan, encounter witches who foretell that Macbeth and Banquo's descendants will possess the kingship. For this reason Macbeth, urged on by Lady Macbeth, murders his king and a number of his servants when they are staying the night in his castle. The king's son, Malcolm, flees. Macbeth shifts suspicion onto them and assumes the kingship himself. He then hires assassins to kill Banquo and his son. The son escapes, but Banquo is killed. But it is Macbeth alone who sees Banquo's ghost appear at a feast, which is thereby disrupted by his unusual behaviour.

Macbeth then sees to the slaughter of the family of Macduff, who had joined with Malcolm in England, the latter now advancing with an army. Macbeth loses support.

Lady Macbeth, tormented by remorse, sleepwalks and vainly tries to wash from her hands the imagined blood still staining them. She meets her end in madness and suicide.

Macbeth puts his faith in yet more of the witches' predictions, but he interprets them wrongly.

The play *Macbeth* was first published in 1623 in the so-called 'First Folio', a collection of all of Shakespeare's plays except *Pericles*. The English text currently in the bookshops is the result of many years of meticulous editing, whose intention has been to clarify the text and to keep it readable even for today.

Macbeth was first performed in 1606, probably for King James I himself. In addition to this there is also an complete eye-witness account of a performance in 1611. As from 1663, song and dance were added in accordance with the spirit of the times, and this radically changed version remained in existence until the 19th century.

In the second half of this century, adapted versions of *Macbeth* have been performed regularly, and film versions have been made by Roman Polanski, Akira Kurosawa and Orson Welles.

This Shakespeare production will be performed not only this season, but also in the spring of 1997, in various places in Belgium and other European countries.

Fragment from an unpublished article by RUDI LAERMANS
THE ESSENTIAL THEATRE OF NEEDCOMPANY

(...) One cannot easily mention the Needcompany without bringing in Shakespeare. Fragments from *Antony and Cleopatra* were already being used in the Needcompany's first production, *Need to know* in 1987. Five years later, Jan Lauwers took up this play once again, having already directed *Julius Caesar* in 1990. And at the end of March 1996 *Macbeth* should be opening. At first sight it may appear natural that a director stages plays by Shakespeare. Indeed, together with those of Beckett, they form the ultimate test of the capacities of any stage director. Apart from Shakespeare, however, Lauwers has not staged any other plays from the repertoire. He has worked either with his own textual material or with fragments of works classified as literature (e.g. from Hemingway in *Invictos* and Moravia in *Le Voyeur*).

So why Shakespeare? Why only Shakespeare, and not Racine, Ibsen or Brecht, for example? Lauwers himself has always emphasized that it is mainly the theme of power in Shakespeare that attracts him. In this body of work, power still has a personal, sovereign form. It is *personified*, it is inseparably linked to the moods, actions, and lunacies great and small, of one single person. As such, the figure of the ruler in Shakespeare's dramas also inevitably becomes the focus of all kinds of intrigues, including the fatal settling of scores. It is precisely then that the sovereign shows himself to be a worthy king, in and through the skilful manoeuvring and the tactical manipulation of both supporters and opponents. But this game of power is also always shot through with incalculable, irrational passions, bonds and 'submissions'. The court is a man's world, but behind many a man there is a woman.

Shakespeare's history plays of course conjure up a completely out of date image of the political order. The age of sovereign power is behind us: nowadays, the exercise of political power is generally weakened by elections and parliamentary debates, media reports (public opinion), actions by pressure groups, etc. And yet we keep on linking the power game, in part, at least, to the personal qualities of ministers and other officials. From the entirety of the countless small decisions he makes, we deduce whether we should consider someone to be courageous or persistent or, on the contrary, an unprincipled career man. The game of politics remains personalized, particularly in media reporting. We no longer expect, and this is the decisive difference from the world Shakespeare conjures up for us, that the politician will assert his *desire for power* by means of war and repression on the one hand, and by *an immediate confrontation with his own death or mortality* on the other. Because in Shakespeare's history plays the sovereign is usually also a king who does not shrink from the possibility of his own downfall. In the end his sovereignty rests, as Georges Bataille also emphasized, on a sovereign attitude to the possibility of losing everything, and first of all his own life, his own body.

In Lauwers' partial and complete stagings of Shakespeare, especially *Julius Caesar*, the participants in the power game appear to be perpetually fascinated by the possibility of their own downfall. Both the characters' speech and actions are marked by a striking casualness, even indifference, with regard to their ultimate fate. So in these versions there is no space for grand feelings, passionately spoken phrases or tearful death scenes. Nothing theatrical, and that's why the vanishing point of sovereign actions, including the non-kingly, is presented that much more succinctly. So the 'spare acting' method here unmasks not only the false or unreal in the play, it also has a point to make regarding the content. This is because the indifference with which the actors speak their lines, or literally die quietly, reflects in a soundless and yet abundantly clear way the *longing for death* that consumes Shakespeare's characters. Caesar, Macbeth, Hamlet, and all those other renowned, noble figures: what are they other than slaughterers whose violent

deeds were nourished by the wish to go beyond the limit at which they will themselves be slaughtered?

In short, in his Shakespeare productions, Lauwers wants, in everything, to remain faithful to a possible implicit text. In this way it is not 'Shakespeare' (the dead body that theatre academics, dramaturges, etc., have mummified) that he is directing, but rather *his* Shakespeare - 'his' relationship with life and death, power and desire.

The specific commitment in Lauwers' handling of Shakespeare's works means that productions like *Julius Caesar* and *Antonius und Cleopatra* do not stand apart from the Needcompany's other work. On the contrary. *Le Poinvoir*, for instance, also deals with the inevitability of death, and particularly the sovereign attitude that can be taken up regarding man's fate. In the unutterable 'little death' of the orgasm, which is the explicit theme of *Le Poinvoir*, there ultimately lies hidden a longing for death that's much more difficult to express, the infra-human desire to go beyond the limits of human life, towards the organic nothingness. It is precisely for this reason that the character played by Viviane De Muynck kills herself when she hears that her daughter is pregnant, and returns from the realm of the dead to be among the living again. *She was beyond the border*, at least in the play (and so: fictionally, purely symbolically, imaginarily). Those who, despite the fragmentary composition of the play, did not see this rigorously logical, almost conceptual thread running through it, were watching with their eyes shut.

In *Invictos*, Lauwers provided the clearest dramatization of the inhuman and simultaneously all too human longing for death, which is of course always a longing for immortality too (or for monumentality?). The actor Tom Jansen, sitting at a table, pen and paper within reach, meditated on life. The explicit fragments of text originated from Hemingway, whose deathwish Jansen portrayed theatrically by swallowing glass after glass of whisky. Is the glow of alcohol the unwitting premonition of the heavenly paradise? Perhaps. In any case, this was a powerful, unmistakable statement: through this Hemingway/Jansen figure, Lauwers was confronting the audience with a longing it knows only too well, but which it usually denies. Because our culture literally no longer offers any space for death or dying.

After the studies of P. Ariès and others, it is a cliché to describe modern culture as inimical to death. Death has indeed become taboo, surrounded by a mist of silence, a terrifying silence. The less it occupies a public position - in the form of public rituals or collective memorials - the more death inspires every individual with fear. Even so, this private fear is still socialized by a struggle against any possible foreshadowing of death, a struggle which is, all-in-all, exceptionally magical. Everything that reminds us of man's mortality is damned: smoking, drinking, immoderate eating, unsafe sex, etc., as well as dirt, waste, and mutilated, worn-out bodies or any body no longer glowing with health.

Banished from and robbed of a public language, the longing for death still finds a hideaway in popular visual culture. Under the guise of public spiritedness (images of war in news reports) or entertainment (action films) one can 'satisfy' the fascination for death daily in a sublimated form. Conversely, the Needcompany's work asserts the possibility of a sovereign attitude towards the inevitable, and thereby also the existence of such a thing as Thanatos, *in a public space*. In other words, the cultural-critical charge of this body of work should, in a word, be sought where it is not usually expected. And this is in the unceasing thematizing, sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit, of the intertwining of life, death and longing.(...)

Viviane De Muynck (°1946)

She studied acting at the Conservatory in Brussels, her tutors there including Jan Decorte. As from 1980 she worked as an actress for the Mannen van den Dam in *The Pelican* (Strindberg), *The Laxative* (Feydeau), *Force of Habit* (Bernhard) and *The Park* (Strauss). In 1987 she was awarded the Theo d'Or Prize for her performance of Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, directed by Sam Bogaerts for the Witte Kraai company. After that she acted for the Maatschappij Discordia in *Kras* (Judith Herzberg) and *Das Spiel vom Fragen* and *Sixteen Scenes*. She has now been working as a freelance for two seasons, performing in *Torquato Tasso*, a production by Stuc, *Hamlet* by the Zuidelijk Toneel and *Count Your Blessings* by the Toneelgroep Amsterdam, directed by Gerardjan Rijnders. In 1994 she played a part in Jan Ritsema's *Philoktetes Variations*, alongside Dirk Rooffthoof and Ron Vawter.

She performs regularly on TV and in films. She appeared, for example, in *Vinaya*, a film by Peter van Kraaij and Josse De Pauw, and in *De Avonden* (The Evenings), directed by R. Van den Berg, based on the book by Gerard Reve. She was nominated for the Golden Calf for her performance as the mother in *De Avonden*.

Since 1993, in the opera *Orfeo*, she has worked regularly for the Needcompany in productions by Jan Lauwers. In *Snakesong/Le Pouvoir* (1995) she played the part of Queen/mother and in *Needcompany's Macbeth* she plays Macbeth.

Ina Geerts (°1965)

She graduated from the Higher College of Dramatic Art in 1988. Over the years she has acted in various productions by directors including Karst Woudstra, Jan Decleir and Rik Hancké. She worked for a number of years on E.D.I.T. (European Drive-In Theatre) and *Stationendrama I* and *II* by Nick Kortekaas.

Alongside frequent theatre work she has also appeared in BRTN TV series including *Langs de Kade*, directed by Patrick Lebon, and worked on various radio plays for the BRT. In 1992 she set up the 'Cirke Da-Da' music group.

Since 1993 she has been a member of the Needcompany, and performed in *Snakesong/Le Voyeur* and then in *Snakesong/Le Pouvoir*. In *Needcompany's Macbeth* she plays the part of Lady Macbeth.

Simon Versnel (°1947)

He trained as a classical singer under the Rotterdam singing teacher Dini Erkens and since 1979 has often performed as both singer and actor. He has given several song recitals, operatic concerts, chamber music concerts and so forth, in both the Netherlands and France. He has played a number of varying parts including Don Andres in *La Périchole* by Offenbach (1989-92), Shakespeare in Sondheim's *The Frogs* (1990), Sam in Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti* and Petruccio/Fred in Cole Porter's *Kiss me Kate* (1990). He has also acted in various short films, including a Japanese-English film shot in 1992 and intended for the Holland exhibition in Japan.

In 1992 he toured the Netherlands and Belgium with the play *Untitled Cowboys* by Maarten van der Put. Since 1993 he has performed in two Needcompany productions, *Don Quijote* (1993 and 1995) and *Tres* (1995) both by Grace Ellen Barkey. In *Needcompany's Macbeth*, by Jan Lauwers, he plays Banquo and other parts.

Johan Heestermans (°1957)

Studied to be an actor at the Higher College of Dramatic Art in Antwerp, from 1976 to 1981. Since then he has appeared in plays by various writers and directors. He performed in Jan Decorte's *Torquato Tasso* and *King Lear* in 1983 and 84, Dirk Opstaele's *Tartuffe* for Leporello in 1995, and for the Mannen van den Dam, Groupov in Liège and in *Dibouk* at La maison de la Culture MC93 in Bobigny. He performs not only in the theatre, but also at the opera. He was in Richard Strauss' *Salome* in 1989, directed by Leiser and Caurier, and in Dvorak's *Rusalka* at the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, USA and at Spoleto in Italy. He was also assistant to Georges Lavaudant at the Théâtre National Populaire in Lyons and to Pierre Strosser at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris and the Grand Théâtre in Geneva. He has also directed several opera and theatre productions.

From 1992 to 1995 he worked for Médecins sans Frontières.

In *Needcompany's Macbeth* he plays several parts including Malcolm.

Carlotta Sagna

She trained as a dancer at the Italian Compagnie Sutki in Turin, under Anna Sagna, at the Académie de Danse Classique at Monte Carlo under Marika Besobrasova and at Maurice Béjart's Mudra in Brussels.

She danced for Micha Van Hoecke's Compagnie L'Ensemble and also worked in several productions by Caterina Sagna for the Nadir dance company. For several years she was a member of Rosas, Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker's dance company, performing in *Ottone*, *Ottone*, *Stella* and *Achterland*.

After that she worked on a production by Cesare Ronconi's La Valdoca theatre company. Since 1993 she has been a member of the Needcompany, for whom she first appeared in *Orfeo* (1993), followed by *Snakesong/Le Voyeur* and *Snakesong/Le Pouvoir*. She plays several parts in *Needcompany's Macbeth*, including that of Lady Macbeth and the witches.

Dominique Van Steerthem (°1964)

He has been involved full-time in different forms of theatre since 1984.

In 1984 he played the leading part in *Junkieverdriet* (Junkie's Sorrow) by the Begrip company, about the life of Jotie 'T Hooft.

From 1985 to 1992 he acted for the Joris Jozef puppet theatre. In the meantime he studied theatre for a year at the Conservatory in Ghent in 1987 and at the RITCS in 1988. In 1989 he founded the Belgische Improvisatieliga and a year later set up 'De Belchen', an improvisation company. And since 1991 he has done associated work for the Rotterdam improvisation company 'Lawine'.

As well as acting, he has also written several plays which have mostly been performed by theatre students and beginners in directing. He has also performed for various foreign companies and has been involved in acting work for business. For the Needcompany he has appeared in *Snakesong/Le Pouvoir* (1995). In *Needcompany's Macbeth* he plays various parts including Macduff and Lady Macbeth.

Mil Seghers (°1971)

He joined the Needcompany in 1988 and since then has appeared in almost every one of their theatre and film projects. He acted in the theatre productions *ça va* (1989), *Julius Caesar* (1990), *Antonius und Cleopatra* (1992), *Invictos* (1991) and *The Snakesong Trilogy - Snakesong/Le Voyeur* (1994). In *Needcompany's Macbeth* he plays the part of Duncan.

Besides his work for the Needcompany he is also regularly in demand for films. He has appeared in a film by Eric Van Zuylen and in Frédéric Fontaine's film *Les sept péchés capitaux*. He recently also acted in a short film by Alex Stockman, called *Violette*. The latest film in which he has appeared is *Antonia*, a film by Marleen Gorris, which won the Oscar in the category 'best foreign movie'.

JAN LAUWERS & NEEDCOMPANY

Jan Lauwers (°1957) is a visual artist and a theatrical artist. He studied Monumental Art at the Academy of Art in Ghent from 1976 to 1980.

In 1979 he founded the Epigonenensemble. After a number of street entertainments and short performances he disbanded the ensemble and formed the Epigonenteater zlv. With their last two productions, **De Struiskogel** (1983) and **Incident** (1985), Jan Lauwers and the Epigonenteater zlv. achieved an international breakthrough, by means of performances throughout Europe and in Canada.

The Epigonenteater zlv (zlv=without the leadership of) operated as a collective. Every member of the group took an active part in the development of the productions. This way of working changed over the years.

Jan Lauwers, as founder of the company, took more and more responsibility for the end result.

He finally disbanded the Epigonenteater zlv and, in 1986, with, among others, a number of ex-members, set up the Needcompany.

Jan Lauwers' work now has a position all of its own in the international theatre landscape. Jan Lauwer's work is not easily situated in a particular genre or well-defined movement. He has developed an authentic theatrical language out of his background in the plastic arts, which combines the spoken language with visual and auditive elements.

Until now, the Needcompany has nine productions to its name.

Need to Know (1987) was the Needcompany's first production.

The play was built up around the documentary film **Kidnap, Terror and the State** and fragments from Shakespeare's **Antony and Cleopatra**. This first production by the Needcompany was widely applauded both at home and abroad, and finished its run with a tour of the USA and Canada.

The following production **Ca va** opened in March 1989 in Theater Am Turm in Frankfurt. The central themes were death and beauty. **Ca va** was produced by Mickery (Amsterdam), Theater Am Turm and the Kaaithheater (Brussels) in co-production with the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

At the Sommertheater Festival 1989 in Hamburg (one of the trendsetting festivals in Germany), the Needcompany won the **Mobiël Pegasus Preis** for **ça va**, the prize awarded to the best performance of the festival.

Jan Lauwers' third project, **Julius Caesar** (1990) was his first production based on an existing classic text, in this case Shakespeare's **Julius Caesar**, performed by seven actors.

In May 1991 **Invictos** opened, a play based on the life and work of the American writer Hemingway. The cast consisted of two Flemings, a Dutchman and three Spaniards. It was performed in various European cities, and in different languages.

In February 1992 *Antonius und Cleopatra* also a Needcompany production, directed by Jan Lauwers, opened in Theater Am Turm and in many respects was a sequel to *Julius Caesar*. It was also performed in Hamburg, Berlin, Salzburg, Vienna and Brussels.

On 21st October 1992 the German language version of *SCHADE/Schade* opened in Theater Am Turm. The Dutch language version of this solo performance, directed and designed by Jan Lauwers, opened on 18th November 1992 in the Kaaitheter studio in Brussels. In 1993 it won the Dutch-Flemish 'Toneelschrijfprijs'-prize, for the best Dutch play written that year. This play was performed in several European cities. An English version will be made.

Needcompany also participated in Walter Hus' opera *Orfeo*, which Jan Lauwers directed as well as providing a part of the text. The first performance was on the 23rd of May 1993 in the Bourla-theatre (Antwerp). Performances were given in Paris and Vienna. In 1994 this production was performed in Berlin, Rotterdam, Lisbon, Frankfurt and Brussels.

Snakesong/Le Voyeur (1994) was the first part of *The Snakesong Trilogy*, about sex and power, love and death. Jan Lauwers worked on writings by the Italian author Alberto Moravia (1907-1990), with a large cast comprising permanent Needcompany members and guest performers. Apart from dozens of novels and short stories, this abundantly productive and versatile author also wrote essays, film scenarios, travel stories and plays. High points of his work include 'The Time of Indifference' and novels such as 'The Conformist', filmed by Bertolucci, and the novella 'Agostino'.

Snakesong/ Le Voyeur (1994) was a Needcompany production in coproduction with Theater Am Turm (Frankfurt), Théâtre de la Ville and Kaaitheter (Brussels).

For the second part of *The Snakesong Trilogy*, *Snakesong/Le Pouvoir*, Jan Lauwers himself wrote a dramatic text, called *LEDA*. In this story of an act of love he develops the notion of 'power' as the main motif and transposes the themes from *Snakesong/Le Voyeur* into a timeless, mythical context.

The myth of Leda and the Swan, the axis around which this text is constructed, as a metaphor forms the perfect foundation on which to discuss eroticism, violence and death. Leda and the Swan are standing trial before a tribunal of senior judges and are interrogated about their act of love.

Whether the point of departure is an existing play or a scenario he wrote himself, whether it is Lauwers' first, mainly visual performances, or plays in which the text is fundamental: the themes near to Jan Lauwers' heart always reappear, each time in a new variation. These themes are: death in all its forms (murder, suicide and 'simply' dying), love in its extreme forms (the contradiction between individual desires and politically-tinted motives, and especially passion) and friendship, purity, survival...

Concurrent with his theatre work is Jan Lauwers' completion of several film and video projects including *The Girl and the Weeping Willow* (1987), *From Alexandria* (1988), *Rabbit Day* (1989), *A Drawing in the Snow* (1990) and *Mangia* (1995).

NEEDCOMPANY

In recent years the Needcompany, founded by Jan Lauwers, has undergone several fundamental changes.

Since 1993 Needcompany has been an independent structural unit (it formerly operated under the Kaaithheater's wings) with an efficient infrastructure of its own.

The permanent core of actors with whom Jan Lauwers almost always works in the realisation of his projects has remained essentially unchanged, though shifts have taken place and new actors have joined this core. Mil Seghers, Grace Ellen Barkey, Ina Geerts, Carlotta Sagna, Viviane De Muynck, they have all played an important part in recent productions. In addition to this, people are approached who can make an essential contribution to a particular project simply 'by the way they are'.

An important new element is the collaboration with Grace Ellen Barkey, who has been creating performances within the framework of Needcompany since 1993. She has been a member of Needcompany since 1986, as an actress and choreographer. In 1992 she made her début as a director with a play called *One*, produced entirely by Theater Am Turm in Frankfurt. Her second play, *Don Quijote* (1993) was also a Theater Am Turm production, in coproduction with Needcompany. Her most recent work, *Tres*, opened in De Brakke Grond in Amsterdam on 18th October 1995.

SO FINE AND YET SUCH A HIGH SPECIFIC GRAVITY

Jan Lauwers refines theatricality in 'Needcompany's Macbeth'

Jan Lauwers has already staged Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Now was the opening of *Needcompany's Macbeth*, under his direction, at the Lunatheater in Brussels. This production rejects all sensationalism, but despite its restraint it carries a lot of weight.

See how everything is embodied in the closing scene of *Needcompany's Macbeth*. At the centre of the overwhelming emptiness we see only the frail figure of Carlotta Sagna. On her vest we see the sticky blood that has only just poured out of her mouth. She looks ghastly, hurt, and yet her face is graced with a smile: idiotic or impenetrable? She sways her hips sensually against a microphone, creating a muffled rhythmical knocking. It sounds like a heartbeat. Meanwhile Manni Spaniol's *Assoziationen* swells up on the sound track, with the ticking of a clock (time?) and the rolling of a drum (war?). Themes like desire, eroticism, violence, mortality and death all coagulate together in this one image that's fully open to interpretation. It summarizes the whole of *Macbeth* as the director sees it, and even more than this, it summarizes the themes Lauwers has been exploring for years. Together with the death that Mil Seghers once enacted in *Julius Caesar* (1990) this will become one of the most oppressive and, as far as I am concerned, most cherished theatrical experiences ever.

It is rather a trivial comparison, and detracts from the play's charged atmosphere, but nevertheless, *Needcompany's Macbeth* develops like a coil that's being wound tighter and tighter, in order, once it has reached that concentrated closing scene, to burst open with full force. The image spurts out from that point with retroactive force, releasing an abundance of symbols with several layers of meaning, the result of an enviable inventiveness, and all produced with a great deal of taste. This representation of *Macbeth* is a trimmed down version, neatly measured, without any fuss or audience manipulation, trusting totally to the strength of the theatrical language. A question that still occupies us is 'where does that strength come from?'

Is it in the treatment of the text? Jan Lauwers chose Willy Courteaux's literary translation because it shows respect for Shakespeare's original. This respect applies particularly to the poetry of the text, because Lauwers has allowed himself a number of cuts in the content, including a drastic turn in the tenor of the closing monologue. In his staging, Lauwers unthreads the text of the play. He splits it up into short compartments and surrounds each one in silence. This option by no means misses its mark. As a result of this measured rhythm, the text takes on the air of a dry recording, though the content includes violence, murder and manslaughter. Another consequence is that every line takes on a high specific gravity and comes over with maximum effect. Where else could that strength lie? Possibly in the theatrical language Lauwers employs. In his work, elements such as the speaking of the text and the building of characters are in proportion to the aesthetic theatrical symbol, which links a great restraint to a rich content. The story of *Macbeth* is that of an escalation of murders, by which means this king, rising by lack of virtue, wants to nip in the bud any threat to his person. At *Needcompany* this is not accompanied by furious slashing, nor frenzied witches, but with tall pedestals on which stand basins containing blood. This is applied carefully to the characters' faces, to that of King Duncan, of Banquo, of Lady Macduff. This is how stage murders are

committed under Lauwers. It is hard to conceive of a greater contrast between the preciousness of a gesture and the horror of its significance. Simon Versnel does it even more aesthetically, by singing an aria from Verdi's *Macbeth* and stopping at the moment in the opera when Banquo dies.

In *Needcompany's Macbeth*, Jan Lauwers refines the concept of theatricality. He throws overboard all that's redundant in order finally to retain just two things: a clear text and theatrical symbols which are both beautiful *and* brimming with information. He has thinned them out so much in their execution that they have acquired a maximum specific gravity. If as a spectator you are served up with something like this, it's something you can really get your teeth into. This is true gastronomy, easily digestible but with a great many courses.

Geert Sels

De Morgen, 28th March 1996

ICE QUEEN RULES IN 'NEEDCOMPANY'S MACBETH'

Jan Lauwers' adaptation wins out on extreme stylization.

Shakespeare had *Macbeth* degenerate into a bloodbath, but the way the Needcompany handles this subject is macabre. The blood lies in coolly lit dishes, in whose form one might see holy-water fonts or ritual basins. As subdued as in a ceremony, in every murder scene an actor rubs himself in with the red stuff. It pours in streams from the mouth of Carlotta Sagna, one of the actresses who plays the part of Lady Macbeth. The rhythm of this staging is determined by the spilling of blood, and it captures the spiral of violence in an extreme stylization. The director, Jan Lauwers, shapes *Macbeth* in a flush of images that lead a life of their own.

Lauwers' interpretation is based on a drastic adaptation and cutting of Shakespeare's tragedy. He does not make it easy for the audience. Actors play various parts, characters are duplicated on stage, and it is clearly not Lauwers' concern to disentangle a complicated plot. In *Macbeth* he wants, primarily, to summon up a chilling apocalyptic atmosphere. You may question his approach, but the precision and refinement of the stylization command admiration.

The performance has already been running for some time before you hear the opening lines from the three witches. Macbeth is addressed as the future king, a prediction that turns him at a single blow into a villain and sets in motion the domino-effect of murder and manslaughter.

The words of Needcompany's witches do not sound demonic, like a premonition of all hell breaking loose. Carlotta Sagna pronounces them almost in passing, like a sphinx. The mysterious oriental pose she assumes evokes an image of detachment, which also returns at the end, when Sagna suggests the rhythm of the heart using a long rifle microphone.

The piece is unexpectedly cut short long before Macbeth's downfall becomes apparent. In so doing, Lauwers is making a clear choice. He is not concentrating on the tragedy of one figure, but on the effects of mindless violence. What he is showing is the searing consequences of the mechanisms of power.

Scenes

Macbeth is played by Viviane De Muynck, who rules like an Ice Queen over a desolate world. She utters her monologues extremely slowly, as if in a trance. The spiral of violence comes about partially beyond her will. At the banquet with King Duncan, depicted by Lauwers as a Last Supper, she sits fretting indecisively to one side.

It is this sort of well-thought out scene, shown with refinement on a huge tiled floor, that constitute the strength of the play. A superb example is the restrained and nonchalant way Lauwers sends his characters to their deaths. They calmly scrub the blood from their faces or, like Banquo, simply stop singing in the middle of an aria from Verdi's *Macbeth*.

The high point is the scene in which Lady Macbeth goes mad and commits suicide. The play's symbols and visual signs are concentrated here, the dishes of blood start shattering and turn out to be made of ice. Searing images that remain burnt into the retina.(...)

Geert Van Der Speeten
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FORM CONQUERS LANGUAGE IN NEEDCOMPANY'S SCULPTED MACBETH

Bright theatre lights shine unpleasantly straight into the audience's eyes. They are only freed from this dazzling whiteness when the performance begins. At the end, when the stage is scattered with blood and shards, the spots come down once more to catch the audience in a short, glaring burst of light.

This is an old theatrical message to which dramatist Jan Lauwers is giving shape. What's happening on stage is about us, and Lauwers wants to emphasize that there is no escape from it. The most remarkable thing about this staging of Shakespeare, called *Needcompany's Macbeth*, is actually that Lauwers shows himself much more as a designer than a director, and to a greater extent than in other productions made with his Flemish Needcompany. This is more striking because he uses a stately translation (by Willy Courteaux). Courteaux' wilful language structure turns out to combine surprisingly well with this sculpted performance.

Lauwers' origins are in the plastic arts, which could be seen right away in all his plays. Now, in this adaptation of *Macbeth*, he has, as it were, moulded language and action into moving plastic. It has become visual theatre, in which the text and the words are no longer important in driving the action forward, but are at the service of the whole. Something like this requires a different attitude from the audience. This is not easy, since as theatre-goer one tends first to listen to the text, to learn exactly what is happening and who is who.

In this *Macbeth* the anecdotal storyline is not the most important thing and is even partially abandoned. It is more the idea, or the theme, that Lauwers gives shape to. He is concerned with making contradictions visible, ambiguities such as the witches' statement, 'Foul is fair, and fair is foul, ', the apparent opposition between exterior and interior, between good and evil, in short that whole complex being called man.

Universal

It is not for nothing that he has Viviane De Muynck play Macbeth. But not as an obligatory transvestite part. She is addressed as a man and husband and yet in her black trouser-suit and shiny top she looks very deliberately feminine. It gives the character a more universal significance.

When the play begins, and the stage is lit up excruciatingly slowly, a woman is standing downstage left, her arm arched gracefully over a white glass bowl on a pedestal. When she finally lets her hand descend into the bowl, it emerges red with blood. This is the hand of Lady Macbeth, which can no longer be washed clean. The contrast between the virginal white glass and the blood-red fluid in it is exquisite, absurd, unreal and all too clearly a theatrical trick. A little later she washes her hands in a basin, and using that same water she will later apply tears to her eyes, having received a sorrowful message.

Lauwers is constantly using aesthetic means to show atrocities and other nasty things. Words, laughter and the sound of breaking glass are amplified by means of a microphone

continually carried around by Carlotta Sagna. There is no murder to be seen. The many deaths are signalled by marking foreheads and faces with blood. Macbeth walks round as calm as you like amongst all the death and destruction he is sowing. Viviane De Muynck plays him with a serene expression which, just like the opal glass, betrays nothing of his dissolute inner self. What is it that drives this man to so much bloody suffering ? According to Lauwers' interpretation, it is not 'simply' ambition, or fear, and nor is it Lady Macbeth that puts him up to it, it is an inner urge. What Macbeth does comes from his very self.

The actress at the beginning (Carlotta Sagna) is not the only one who plays Lady Macbeth. Ina Geerts also plays her, while two actors also give her an extra voice, when she incites Macbeth not to be weak but to kill King Duncan and take the crown. They represent the voices inside himself, which he cannot resist.

As awful as the truth that Lauwers shows may be, he has wrapped it, in a homogeneous style, in pure beauty. Apart from a flagstone floor, everything is in glass and wood. The middle of the stage is dominated by a gigantic solid wooden table, at which the banquet was to take place to honour Macbeth's recently acquired kingship, and at which Banquo, whom he has murdered, appears in his mind's eye. Downstage left are two wooden pedestals, one with the bowl and the other with a glass of water for speakers. Behind these, against the back wall of the stage, there are five identical wooden pillars with white bowls.

When, after so much blood has flowed, the pendulum swings back, starting with the death of Lady Macbeth, the bowls are lit up in white and are smashed to pieces on the floor. In the midst of this havoc, Macbeth sees, unmoved, a burning wick coming towards him, declares what is happening on stage to be meaningless fairytales and observes, perfectly calmly, "As long as I see life, I have to kill. I will not give up." This terrible message is strengthened by the closing image. Carlotta Sagna, covered in blood, knocks back and forth against the microphone with a slight movement of her hips, like a gong, firstly as a lament and then, to violent music, becoming ever faster, more cheerful and mischievous. The play finishes before this game of aggression can degenerate. But that it could come to that is made just as palpable. What Lauwers offers us in this *Macbeth* does seem to be the poetry of cruelty. Quite exceptional.

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