

A SUBLIME MISTAKE

Recapitulation of a Past

A solo for Gonzalo

A NEEDCOMPANY production



Over the period between 1986 and 2020, Jan Lauwers has authored around twenty plays for the theatre. Every one of these has been brought to the stage by the legendary Needcompany ensemble, always in multiple languages.


Lauwers' best-known plays include 'Isabella's room', 'The Lobster Shop', 'Morning Song', 'Ulrike' and 'The Snakesong Trilogy', alongside many others. His entire oeuvre is essentially a quest to sketch as complete a portrait as possible of the person he is collaborating with at the time. In fact, the character and the person who brings the character to life are of equal importance to Lauwers. Lauwers' writing really gets into the skin of his characters as individuals, always seeking to transcend contemporary dogmas when it comes to diversity and identity. In doing so, he puts human nature front and centre. Failure, love, struggle, and woes big and small are always given a special place.

Jan Lauwers: 'More and more, I realise that every play I have written is an ambiguous self-portrait. Ambiguous because I have always sought out the bigger stories of our era. Because one of the most important roles of art is not to forget the past. So why should I be talking about myself as well? It seems to me arrogant and self-congratulatory that art should be about the maker. Yet I cannot escape from this. My interest in history and those big stories goes hand in hand with self-exploration, and with my love of humanity. In all its stubbornness and sometimes downright wickedness, humanity is for me the only thing that truly makes life worth living. I need company. Friendship has always been an important part of that. And friendship is recklessness. Friendship means love, but also betrayal. And then it again becomes a self-portrait. Who am I to think that my friendship might mean something to someone else? Who have I betrayed as a friend, in the half-century that I have been intensely engaged in art?

This play is about friendship. The three portraits in this story are parts of myself, based on my earlier theatre work and the friendships that I have cherished over the course of my work. It is also clear that Gonzalo was sat grinning somewhere in a corner of my studio as I wrote the play.

The sublime absence is about the despair of an artist who has not succeeded in being 'as cold as ice' while creating, but who time and time again wants to be loved. In '**A SUBLIME MISTAKE**' one of the characters says that it is far more difficult to be always angry than to hide behind a smile. With this play I have tried to see this smile no longer as an act of cowardice, but as a weapon in defence of humankind itself.'





One of his many muses is Gonzalo Cunill, together with whom Lauwers has won several prizes, including an OBIE award in New York. The intense friendship between these two men has now led to a critical deep dive into times gone by: a recapitulation of a past.

A Sublime Mistake — played by Gonzalo Cunill — is based on all the slightly lost male characters in Jan Lauwers' oeuvre.

Jan Lauwers: “Gonzalo is a man who is alone in the world. Alone without being lonely. He is the exact opposite of everything I am: he is a former boxer, he swims two kilometres every day; he takes things slowly, he is quiet, and he is terrifyingly calm. A handsome, virile, anti-macho man. He refuses to give in to the turmoil that every human being harbours inside. My life is driven by that turmoil. Opposites attract.”

In other words: an intimate portrait of a man who looks at the world in astonishment and fails to understand why he is even part of it.

EXCERPT

GONZALO

I see a landscape. A landscape without meaning. A rough dirt track somewhere outside Seville. There is a chicken scratching on the dirt track. A dog lies in the shadow of an old plane tree, panting rapidly. A discarded car tyre sits atop a pile of rubble. An Opel 4x4 narrowly avoids the dog, screeches to a halt in front of the chicken and glancingly hits the tyre.

A moment without purpose. An anecdote without meaning. But I have seen it, and I will never forget it. It will live on as a little memory, of all those mysterious, lonely people, who have forgotten the past and have only cherished the oh-so-tiring longing, like a sublime mistake.

ALEX

We are constantly engaged in simplification. We want to simplify and affirm ourselves. We want to hear our own opinion. We read in the newspaper what we want to read: that which pleases us, that confirms our thinking, that substantiates our suspicions. The rest does not interest us. We are blind and we are afraid, and we are convinced we know better. And the more we live, the narrower it becomes. Then we call it wisdom and we are convinced that this experience, this age, is an asset. Subsequently we seek consolation and confuse that with acquiescence. Because we could do better, and we could close our eyes and also not cherish our desire for an infinite, paradisaical condition, and we could argue that the only real truth is life itself, but we don't do that, because we are afraid.

CHRISTINE

Sorrow has many shapes. Dark and resigned, or sparkling and full of life. Orchestrated and outward, a model of how it should be done, or embarrassingly superficial. But also: a pressure in your chest, right beside your heart. Dry as a bone and dull. Like the image of an upside-down nylon pine tree in a clear plastic bag, bedecked with a film of dust because it has lain in the loft for a year. Undisturbed.

Useless in its ugliness. Sorrow stimulates all the senses and ranges from hopelessness to deep disgust. Rage and sorrow battle one another like sworn enemies who have long since forgotten why, and believe that the purpose of the atrocities is the atrocities themselves.



A SUBLIME MISTAKE FROM THE MAN IN THE WHITE SUIT

Text by Elke Janssens

Sometimes, everything is encapsulated in a small gesture: a man in a white suit in an intimate theatre setting. A single actor, no dancers, no live musicians, no change in lighting, no imposing stage set. Just a man in an immaculate white suit who smilingly addresses the audience as he constructs a glass installation.

The man in the white suit is Gonzalo. He tells the tale of three inseparable friends: Gonzalo, Alex and Christine. Gonzalo is jolly, Alex gloomy, and Christine mellow. Conversation fluctuates between the philosophical, the humorous and the banal. Memories, reflections, and random images are carefully sketched, coloured in, and sculpted like works of art. As narrator, Gonzalo has the audience observe in the same way that an artist observes life. Because that is the primary task of an artist: to observe.

In 1435, Leon Battista Alberti wrote 'De Pictura', a tract on painting. In it, he describes how a painter studies and uses elements such as dots, lines, and surfaces as the foundation for imitating reality. Five centuries later, Wassily Kandinsky delves into the same elements in his treatise 'Point-Line-Plane' and concludes that the painter's purpose in observing can be summarised as follows: "find life, make its pulse noticeable, and see the order in everything that lives." Over the centuries, both artists studied how the perception of form could influence the public experience of art. Alberti focused on beauty and aesthetic experience, while Kandinsky focused on the emotional (and spiritual) dimensions of art. And all of this is based on the essence of observing.

The fact that Gonzalo tells his tale at his own funeral is not unusual in Lauwers' work. The dead are often allowed to speak. Erwin Jans already wrote in 2006: "It is no coincidence that death and the dead play a prominent role in Lauwers' performances. The dead serve to remind the living of their mortality. The dead open up a fresh perspective on the living."

Assuming that every artwork springs from an essential question, it often results in a moral or reflection, or in something that transcends these. The element of catharsis plays a crucial role in this latter aspect. In its original sense, catharsis means a 'cleansing of emotions' that one can experience as a spectator to a tragedy (Aristotle). It concerns emotions that arise from a process of identification with a character. This identification has a fundamental place in Lauwers' work, in which solace and (modest) happiness often lie hidden in the gestures/actions of the characters. Just as Lauwers once breathed life into the character 'Isabella' as a female counterpart to Zorba The Greek, so too does Gonzalo's funeral become a celebration that honours life in both its joys and sorrows.



A retrospective view is interwoven throughout 'A sublime mistake'. Short fragments of text drift through from 'No Comment', 'The Deer House', 'Images of Affection' and other performances. Sound fragments from Rombout Willems recall 'War and Turpentine' or 'Tres' by Grace Ellen Barkey. There is the man in the white suit from 'Isabella's room' and 'The Lobster Shop' or the installation 'The Moustache of Duchamp' from Snakesong. All these performances were unfailingly made up of a multitude of images and stories. This time, as a storyteller, Lauwers searches for the simplicity of the story and inundates the viewer with reflections.

Between 1915 and 1923, Marcel Duchamp created the artwork 'La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même' [The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors], better known as 'Le Grand Verre'. It is one of the most enigmatic works in art history. Duchamp worked on it for years. One day, the piece became damaged in transit. Duchamp declined to repair it as he found the broken work more interesting. The work symbolises a thought process. It is an account of personal (poetic) events and reveals the artist's subconscious. It is a work that is slowed down and only completed in confrontation with the viewer.

In 1919, Duchamp created the work 'L.H.O.O.Q', in which he draws the well-known moustache and goatee on the 'Mona Lisa'; the ultimate portrait in which identity is undermined in various ways. In this work, Duchamp plays with gender identity and cultural identity, and undermines iconic identity. At the same time he calls the identity and authorship of the artist into question.

These two works by Duchamp come together as a tribute in the glass installation 'The Moustache of Duchamp' by Jan Lauwers, in which matter, identity, and the act of portrayal manifest themselves on artistic, political, and existential planes.

It is no coincidence that Lauwers is reprising 'The Moustache of Duchamp' - a work from 1997. Duchamp is ubiquitous in Lauwers' work. Duchamp, who, like the obstinate court jester of contemporary art, questioned the position of art with his work; who tried to redefine the very essence of art in a pamphleteering manner, abhorred the notion of reproduction, and commented on the commercialisation of art. All these aspects also feature in Lauwers' creations. Duchamp takes it one step further. He is one of the first artists to reinvent himself as a woman, producing his own literary and visual works under the name 'Rose Sélavy' (which embodies the phrase 'Éros, c'est la vie'), thereby becoming a work of art in his own right.



One might say that the three characters in 'A sublime mistake' personify the artistic, the political and the existential - or is there in fact just one character?

In previous work, Jan Lauwers often started from existing stories, stories of the people around him. The story about his own father in 'Isabella's Room' (2004), the genealogical tales of the performers from 'The Blind Poet' (2015), or the story of an elite soldier who wanders into Lauwers' family of artists in 'All the Good' (2019) sketch this recurring working method. He always interweaves these stories with contemporary themes to create a new universal tale. With 'A Sublime Mistake', he digs still deeper and touches on something essential that is deeply personal; not only to himself as an artist, but also as a human, a friend.

Jan Lauwers is synonymous with Needcompany. Lauwers has stayed true to his founding principle 'I need company' for almost 40 years, in gestures both grand and modest. This is also true of 'A Sublime Mistake'. From a single character alone on stage, he unfolds into three characters, continually inviting the audience into the play, the dead lingering nearby like angels. Or as he writes: "I don't want to be alone. I hate being alone. Being alone is pointless. In my dark cell I have written only one word on the wall: together."

Needcompany is an artist collective founded in 1986 by artists Jan Lauwers and Grace Ellen Barkey. Together with a third artist, Maarten Seghers (who has been affiliated with Needcompany since 2001), Lauwers and Barkey lead the collective, supporting a wide range of artists and using it as an outlet for all of their artistic creations: theatre, dance, performance art, visual art, writing and much more. Needcompany's creations have featured on some of the most prominent stages around the globe.

Jan Lauwers (Antwerp, 1957) is an artist who works in just about every medium. Over the last thirty years, he has perhaps become best known for his pioneering work for the stage with Needcompany, which was founded in Brussels in 1986. Over the course of this period, he has also built up a substantial body of visual artwork, which has been shown at BOZAR (Brussels) and McaM (Shanghai), among other places. From 2009 until 2014, Needcompany served as artist-in-residence at the Burgtheater in Vienna. Jan Lauwers was awarded the 'Decoration of Honour in Gold for Services to the Republic of Austria' in 2012. In 2014, he received recognition in the form of the 'Golden Lion Lifetime Achievement Award' at the Venice Biennale. He is the first Belgian to receive this prize in the theatre category. In 2018, the Salzburg Festival presented 'L'incoronazione di Poppea', the first opera staged by Jan Lauwers, followed by 'Intolleranza 1960' (Salzburg Festival, 2021) by Luigi Nono and 'Le Grand Macabre' by György Ligeti (Vienna State Opera, 2023).

Gonzalo Cunill began his studies in Buenos Aires at the National Conservatory of Dramatic Art, alternating with courses and seminars given by master actors such as Raúl Serrano, Agustín Alezzo, Cristina Rota, Fernando Piernas, Jan Lauwers, and Mariano Barroso. His theatrical career in Spain dates back as far as 1992, when he premiered the play 'El hundimiento del Titanic' directed by Carlos Marquerie, with whom he continues to collaborate to date. He has worked with Rodrigo García, Alex Rigola, Carlota Subiros and others in a huge range of productions in Spain and abroad. At the end of the 1990s, he started working with Jan Lauwers. He played a part in productions such as 'Caligula', 'Morning Song' — for which he was awarded the Special Critics Prize for best actor in Barcelona — 'Begin the Beguine' and 'Billy's Violence'. He also took on a role in Lauwers' feature film 'Goldfish Game'. His latest work is 'Billy's Joy' (2023). In recent years, he has produced plays in collaboration with the director and actor Juan Navarro.

Alain Badiou states in 'Ode to Love': "To speak with the poet [Paul] Eluard, love is also the demanding desire to endure [le dur désir de durer]. It is the desire for an unknown duration. Because, as everyone knows, love is a reinvention of life. And reinventing love means reinventing this reinvention." That desire to (continue to) endure is Lauwers' ode to his love of theatre and humanity.



With 'A Sublime Mistake', Lauwers wrote a new play. He writes like a painter, like a visual storyteller, and has created a portrait of an artist as a human being. It has become a self-portrait of friendship, love, and death, of life in all its beauty and struggle, in all its inevitability.

October 2024, Elke Janssens



A Sublime Mistake

Written and directed by **JAN LAUWERS** Performed by **GONZALO CUNILL**

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With support of **THE FLEMISH GOVERNMENT**

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