

FOREVER

GRACE ELLEN BARKEY

&

NEEDCOMPANY



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When the composer Gustav Mahler was diagnosed with a fatal heart disease, he wrote to a friend:

"I have lost everything I have gained in terms of who I thought I was,
and I have to learn my first steps again like a newborn."

It was in this mood that Mahler wrote 'Das Lied von der Erde'. The last of these songs, 'Der Abschied', was to be one of his most personal works, one that reflected his state of mind. Man's struggle with his mortality, in contrast with nature, which is eternal and constantly renewing itself. In FOREVER, her latest production, Grace Ellen Barkey raises the same questions as Mahler:

"No one can sustain constant praise of life.
Death or, rather, the finiteness of human life deserves a song or a dance too."

The song, and also the orchestration, is sung in an intimate setting as a recollection by Maarten Seghers, backed up by the dancers Sarah Lutz and Mohamed Toukabri and a new installation by Lemm&Barkey



Warding off a farewell

Stefan Hertmans

Gustav Mahler's symphonic *Das Lied von der Erde* reaches a climax in its masterly closing section, *Der Abschied*. There has been a great deal of speculation on this dark and complex song: it has been thought to evoke unrequited love, Mahler's existential isolation, his melancholy as a sufferer from heart problems, the cultural fatigue of his generation, social tensions and the hope for a better world. *Das Lied von der Erde* was intended to replace his ninth symphony: since he identified with Beethoven, he feared that the exertion of writing a ninth would prove fatal. So, as a symphonic song cycle, *Das Lied von der Erde* became a sort of suppositious composition to ward off the curse. *Der Abschied* can also be read as an attempt above all not to have to take leave – a plea, once he had been touched by death, to be allowed to continue living despite the darkness in his heart.

In his seventh seminar, on the subject of Antigone, Jacques Lacan talks about the stage of life that he calls 'between two deaths': when one has already experienced death during life and nevertheless continues to live. According to Lacan, it is in this stage of life that man achieves true autonomy: he lives on under his own conditions. Which is why Antigone is such a radiant heroine. It is also the attitude taken by Grace Ellen Barkey in *The blind poet*, another Needcompany production.

Something similar occurs in *Der Abschied*: the celebrated ending in which the word '*Ewig*' (eternal) is heard imploringly seems primarily to allay the ticking clock of death, the hope of not having to die, while we can also hear acceptance of the continuation of life after death – it is only the moment of inspiration, creativity, that has any form of eternal force in each individual instant.

This is the fragile paradox on which the performance of Lemm&Barkey's new production is based. Maarten Seghers plays the obscure figure of a desperate and unaccompanied singer who evokes the melancholy of Mahler's lonely wanderer; the overwhelming orchestration has abandoned him, and now, naked, he sings scraps of the song of farewell, which, without the instruments, sound utterly abstract. But behind him, two dancers (Sarah Lutz and Mohamed Toukabri) delicately and subtly dance the vanished harmonies as a reminder of the safe haven of the orchestra – the connective community that disappears when one is faced with death. It is as if someone is trying, with difficulty, to remember Mahler's song in order to ward off the farewell by means of a resurrection.

This dark element has made 'FOREVER' a fragile, hopeful performance. The farewell becomes something elusive, it is taken apart and thereby displays components of beauty and strength. Farewell becomes *Ewige Wiederkehr* (Eternal return).

The tinkling porcelain in Lemm&Barkey's new installation, which symbolises the fragility of man, art and community, is reminiscent of frozen leaves falling in autumn – nature as Mahler describes it in *Der Einsame im Herbst*: '*Man meint, ein Künstler habe Staub vom Jade über die feinen Blüten ausgestreut*' (The Solitary One in Autumn: 'As though an artist had jade-dust over the fine flowers strewn'). Culture has laid itself subtly over nature, just as the will to live lays itself over mortality. Like dew that resembles jade dust.

'Never has a more moving farewell been sung', wrote Simon Vestdijk, precisely because the conclusion does not bring it to an end, but suggests everlasting continuation. Grace Ellen Barkey appears to have turned the motif of the imminent farewell itself into a manifesto on the intensity and life-force of her highly personal, poetic theatre world. It is typical of her that she has radically removed precisely those rules within which Mahler's self-pity resounds: '*Mir war auf dieser Welt das Glück nicht hold*' (Fortune was not kind to me in this world). Her production truly is about knowing happiness. Even when the porcelain shatters into countless shards, Mahler's last words continue to glitter hopefully: the blue horizons light up on all sides. The perspective is open, porcelain dust floats down, enchanted, over the theatre. The result is a moving, fragile beauty.

FOREVER

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Idea & choreography Grace Ellen Barkey

Installation Lemm&Barkey

Music Interpretation of Der Abschied (Das Lied von der Erde), Gustav Mahler

With Maarten Seghers, Sarah Lutz, Mohamed Toukabri

Musical director Rombout Willems

Costumes Lot Lemm

Dramaturgy Elke Janssens

Lighting & Video-programming Gwen Laroche

Sound Bart Aga / Pierrick Drochmans

Trainee assistant to the director Camille Doucet

Production manager Marjolein Demey

Singing coach Lucy Grauman

Photo Phile Deprez

A Needcompany **production**.

Coproduction: Steirischer Herbst, PACT Zollverein (Essen)
and internationales figuren.theater.festival (Erlangen and Nürnberg)

With the support of the Flemish authorities.

OVERVIEW OF PERFORMANCES BY GRACE ELLEN BARKEY

- 1992 One**
first night: 26 November 1992, Theater am Turm Probebühne, Frankfurt
- 1993 Don Quijote**
first night: 28 October 1993, Theater am Turm, Frankfurt
- 1995 Tres**
first night: 18 October 1995, De Brakke Grond, Amsterdam
- 1997 Stories (histoires/verhalen)**
first night: 19 February 1997, Brigittinenkapel, Brussels
- 1998 Rood Red Rouge**
first night: 5 October 1998, STUK, Leuven
- 1999 The Miraculous Mandarin**
first night: October 1999, PS 122, New York
- 2000 Few Things**
first night: 7 October 2000, BIT teatergarasjen, Bergen (Norway)
- 2002 (AND)**
first night: 23 October 2002, De Brakke Grond, Amsterdam
- 2005 Chunking**
first night: 12 May 2005, PACT Zollverein, Essen (Germany)
- 2007 The Porcelain Project**
first night: 10 October 2007, Kaaitheater, Brussels
- 2010 This door is too small (for a bear)**
first night: 25 February 2010, Kaaitheater, Brussels
- 2013 MUSH-ROOM**
first night: 22 March 2013, PACT Zollverein, Essen (Germany)
- 2013 Odd? But True!**
first night: 9 November 2013, BRONKS, Brussels
- 2016 FOREVER**
first night: 24 September 2016, steirischer herbst, Graz

GRACE ELLEN BARKEY

The artist, choreographer and performer Grace Ellen Barkey was born in Surabaya (Indonesia). She lives and works in Brussels and is a co-founder of Needcompany (1986), a house of artists.

Since 1992 she has been steadily and successfully building an international career with her own stage creations, whose nature lies where theatre, dance, live art and visual art meet. The musical dramaturgy is central to her work, and includes works by Gustav Mahler as well as Sonic Youth. In 2013 the iconic avant-garde American performance art collective The Residents has written music for her creation MUSH-ROOM. In her latest production FOREVER (2016), Grace Ellen Barkey raises the same questions as Mahler: "No one can sustain constant praise of life. Death or, rather, the finiteness of human life deserves a song or a dance too."

Grace Ellen Barkey is steadily building up a visual oeuvre of her own. Her most recent installations form a study of the transposition from a space to a narrowness in which the viewer is invited to become part of a sensory work. She has been collecting, photographing and filming flowers, leaves and other flora for many years in her own town garden in Brussels and her immediate surroundings. "A claustrophobic look at the notion that people are mortal while nature is eternal. Beauty is only appealing when it is transient. Only then does it acquire a history."

Grace Ellen Barkey is also one half of the artistic duo Lemm&Barkey, together with Lot Lemm. Their work has been exhibited at several museums including BOZAR (Brussels), Benaki Museum (Athens), Musée des Arts décoratifs (Paris), CC Strombeek, Dr. Guislain museum (Gent), Triënnale Hasselt / Superbodies i.a

LOT LEMM

Lot Lemm has worked at Needcompany since 1993. She initially started as costume designer on various productions including *Le Voyeur* (1994), *Le Pouvoir* (1995), *Needcompany's Macbeth* (1996), *Le Désir* (1996), *Caligula* (1997), *The Snakesong Trilogy* (1998), *Morning Song* (1999), *Needcompany's King Lear* (2000), *Images of Affection* (2002), *Goldfish Game* (feature film, 2002), *No Comment* (2003), *Isabella's room* (2004), *The Lobster Shop* (2006), *The Deer House* (2008), *The art of entertainment* (2011), *Marketplace 76* (2012), *The blind poet* (2015) all by Jan Lauwers, and *All is Vanity* (2006) with Viviane De Muynck. When it comes to Grace Ellen Barkey's productions, her involvement increases with each one. She started as a costume designer on *Tres* (1995), *Stories* (1997), *Rood Red Rouge* (1998) and *(AND)* (2002). On the productions *Few Things* (2002), *Chunking* (2005), *The Porcelain Project* (2007), *This door is too small (for a bear)* (2010), *MUSH-ROOM* (2013), *Odd? But True!* (2013) and *FOREVER* (2016) she also defines the stage setting.