

EXERCISES IN REGICIDE

Dramaturgy and Space in Needcompany's Versions of Shakespeare

by Klaas Tindemans

Let us begin with an historical anecdote. By 1599, William Shakespeare and his troupe the Lord Chamberlain's Men had earned enough money to build their own theatre in London. They built their Globe Theatre on the South bank of the Thames, on a piece of land covered by a charter, so that they were out of reach of the Lord Mayor's censorship. Now a replica of the Globe stands on the same site, but the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern, its neighbor, looks a lot more impressive. The first play Shakespeare's company performed in the Globe was Julius Caesar. Unlike most of their plays, there was no clown in this one. The company's legendary clown, Will Kempe, had just left after an argument regarding money and there was no one immediately available to replace him. So, no comic relief in Julius Caesar, only an impassioned political drama that has since been used by both left and right to illustrate the legitimacy of their own ideology.

Jan Lauwers and Needcompany have hardly ever performed drama from the classical repertoire. However, for some productions they have drawn on literary sources — Alberto Moravia in parts of *Snakesong/Le Voyeur* (1994) and James Joyce in *DeadDogsDon'tDance* (2000) — but apart from this few plays from the canon have been used. The company did once present a stage reading of Albert Camus' *Caligula*, but primarily it creates its own stories, and also its own world of language and images. The one major exception is the work of William Shakespeare. Camus' tragedy on the existential madness of a Roman emperor evokes the same pathos as a Shakespeare drama, which probably explains the fascination for this material.

In this article I would like to examine the relationship Jan Lauwers and Needcompany have developed with the world of Shakespeare. It started with Julius Caesar in 1990 — a seemingly irrational drama, seemingly about political strategy. Since then, Lauwers and Needcompany have made a stage reading of Antony and Cleopatra and full productions of *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. In 2001 Lauwers directed his version of Shakespeare's *Tempest* as *Ein Sturm* at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg. I shall hereby be dealing with the three Shakespeare productions made by Needcompany themselves: Julius Caesar (1990), Needcompany's *Macbeth* (1996) and Needcompany's *King Lear* (2000).

The comparison between the start of Jan Lauwers' relationship with Shakespeare and the opening of the Globe Theatre, both involving the performance of Julius Caesar, is of course an anecdote that has been thoroughly overinterpreted. Nevertheless, Lauwers' radical spatial choices in his Shakespeare versions are strikingly comparable to the dramaturgical premises which to a certain extent the Globe imposed by virtue of its empty space devoid of decorative objects. With its balcony and upper floor, the Globe made a vertical perspective possible, while Jan Lauwers primarily makes use of a horizontal perspective. Lauwers' epic spaces surge out in every direction, in the breadth and in the depth. Just like Shakespeare, he is an ardent opponent of 'unity of location'. In such 'romances' as *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, an approach based on the boundaries — or rather the boundlessness — of the imaginary theatrical space is not really so far-fetched.

Macbeth begins on a battlefield in a barren landscape where bleeding and mutilated soldiers are barely visible in the thick mist. And in the remote corners of this landscape, daemonic figures, the witches, are at their business. The castle is not a claustrophobic structure, but a room that appears unbounded. It is only at the end of the drama that the advancing nature — in the form of walking trees — comes to *Macbeth*'s cell and place of execution. In Orson Welles' film version of *Macbeth* (1948), this tension between the misty unnatural surroundings and the monumental architecture actually forms a visual key to an understanding of the *Macbeth*'s family drama.

It is this sort of score that forces the theatre-maker to ask questions about his actors' range, both in space and in their thinking. The boundaries of this range must then become visible on stage. In *King Lear* the issue of theatrical space is made even clearer: Lear wanders between palaces where he is no longer welcome: Gloucester and Edgar roam across a heath that is just as frightening as *Macbeth*'s Scotland. In any case, both plays are perfectly suited to the examination of the relationship between dramaturgy and space. In his Shakespeare productions, Lauwers has grasped this opportunity with both hands.

Political Intrigue Versus Rhetorical Dispute

Julius Caesar was a singular choice for a Shakespeare debut, because in this play the theatrical space can be defined very clearly. The location is the forum in Rome, in the heroes' homes, or in an army camp — the latter is a variation on the original political environment. Nevertheless, Lauwers obliges himself to find an uncompromising code, in terms of both space and gesture that does not concern itself with the locations to which the text refers. Despite this, he creates a comprehensible play that leaves sufficient doubt about the political relevance of this 'regicide'. Julius Caesar is a 'problem play', and it is not easy to place in an oeuvre that can mostly be divided into tragedies, comedies and histories. Shakespeare's source was *Bioi Paralleloi* by the Greek-Roman Plutarch, in which he weighs up this Caesar against Alexander the Great. But Shakespeare was not writing a heroic poem here, and he let Caesar die halfway through the play, although his spirit continues to haunt the play and ruin everyone: it is no doubt a tragedy. In the classical interpretations, the protagonists are seen as the embodiment, on the one hand of Brutus' stoic attitude towards life — serious, virtuous, cautious — and on the other hand we have Cassius' epicurean attitude — impulsive, egocentric, emotional. The psychological conflict revolves around an icon: Caesar, who rejects the king's crown. The 'Caesar' icon represents the superior political intelligence that founded the Roman Republic but also fatally harmed it. Caesar was given the chance to undergo a metamorphosis into a divine icon, because he was murdered at a very 'timely' juncture. His successors usurped his name in a state which, as a result of Caesar's own interference, had lost its republican identity.

This view is open to dispute, because a number of visible contradictions in the play itself are smoothed out by considering the tensions between the people and the senate, between soldier and politician, and between man and woman. 'Classicists' reduce the character of Portia to one of understanding subservience whereas in fact she both directly and indirectly forces the conspirators — Brutus above all — to engage in painful reflection. Even more problematic is the suggestion that political action comes down to an intellectual dispute that has lost all connection with any physical reality. However, if political intrigues are still to involve vital human choices, this reality can simply be denied. But Julius Caesar shows much more than the tragic failure to save the political idealism that would make the Roman Republic a stable, rationale and aristocratic regime.

In Lauwers' version several theatrical signs suggest that it is after all mainly a rhetorical dispute that is taking place: neutral costumes that give the actor few marks of identity, an apparently random positioning (and movement) of the actors in the space, and a narrator who explains the successive scenes in a dry tone. The only politicians that remain are the conspirators Brutus (Johan Leysen), Cassius (Dirk Roofthoof) and Casca (Erick Clauwens) and Mark Antony (Tom Jansen) and of course Julius Caesar (Mil Seghers). In addition, there are Portia (Grace Ellen Barkey) and a narrator (Hendrien Adams) who links the scenes together and plays a few anonymous characters whom are essential to the purposes of the play, such as Caesar's wife, Calpurnia. Everything seems to be focused on clarity, on a well communicated insight into the arguments themselves. But this transparency is misleading. The floor is not smooth, but is covered in large slabs of marble of different sizes, some of them cut sharply, others milled. At the front lies a small board on which Caesar stands until he leaves for the senate, where he will be murdered. The conspirators cast glances at their future victim, fearful, suspicious and respectful. Portia is an emphatic presence on the stage, although she has just openly complained that she has heard nothing about Brutus' political plans. Her own agitation increases during the murder scene, and she dances with brusque movements between men who are always stylishly striding onward and are rarely raising their voices. These men betray their nervousness only by the way they look at Caesar, standing on his board on the forestage. Their conversations are about security, political calculation, and the 'welfare of the republic', but you do not yet see many differences (of opinion): in their movements, the timbre of their voices and their averted eyes they all maintain the same gestures and facial expressions. The space makes these differences even more 'accidental': there is hardly any 'entering' and 'exiting', there is no fixed diately to the great argument between Cassius and Brutus on the subjects of virtue and loyalty, but above all political impotence, with neither listening to the other. At this point it is only the men's talking heads that are lit, and this by harsh bulbs that shatter when the conversation has come to a dead end. The dead populate the battlefield between the conspirators and Caesar's supporters led by Mark Antony. Lauwers is not showing an historical drama — there is no Octavius on the stage, no future emperor. Portia commits suicide and together with Caesar arranges a cavalry of rocking horses on stage. They then sit down on them and accompany the dead to their places. All the combatants stand at the front of the stage, reacting to one another, even if they are opponents. Their discussions become increasingly absurd and the succession of suicides ever more

grotesque. In a generous gesture, Mark Antony is able to honor the heroes of the conspiracy, although, in fact, they have not made much of a political impression.

Insight into Theatrical Space

What has this choreography made clear? No ideological point of view, no psychological motives, but an insight into a theatrical space, which is also a place of politics. The theatrical attitude in the form of a Gestus that Needcompany adopts in Julius Caesar fits seamlessly into the recent tradition of 'narrative theatre'. This attitude implies that the actor can never entirely hide behind a fictional identity or fictional society, as suggested or even imposed by the drama. The actor can only legitimize the importance and meaning of his role on the basis of the actual acting situations in which he finds himself and which he himself creates. In these acting situations, such obstacles as simultaneous actions and arbitrarily positioned fellow actors have their dramaturgical function, but this arises out of a highly deliberate handling of the acting area as such.

In Needcompany's Julius Caesar, the game of mutual provocation is strikingly visible, certainly in the first part leading up to Caesar's murder. The actors are constantly looking for their position, not the place with the best light, but the place where route the actors follow over the floor. In each case they look for a place that clarifies and reinforces their argument, but you hardly see the effect on the thinking or the attitude of the others. This changes slightly after Caesar's murder, when Brutus, against Cassius' advice, allows Mark Antony to give a funeral oration. At moments like these the physical relationships are directed more tightly: Brutus speaks to Mark Antony while Cassius stands between them. This image has a choreographic precision and is it not a question of an insolent character preventing another from speaking.

The same logic extends into the fourth and fifth acts of Julius Caesar. Mark Antony gives his funeral oration, which is strictly divided into two: the eulogy upstage, the battle speech downstage. Grace Ellen Barkey — who at this moment represents the voice of the people, in all its diversity — utters widely varying scraps of text, reactions to both the murder and the political agitation, while she takes Mark Antony out of the picture. His figure is pushed aside, his voice dies away and we switch immediately - they relate to their fellow actors in the 'right' way. This quest is a constant justification of the role and the significance of the character. Lauwers has the dancer Grace Ellen Barkey cut across the male eroticism, which takes the form of a physical longing for power (political and otherwise). This abstract function is quite separate from her character and also allows her to take up the role of escort on the journey to the underworld. In Lauwers' play, the conflict between the Roman usurpers is after all reduced to this descent into hell. The actors remain on stage when their character has died. They sit down on the rocking horses, smiling and amazed at the seriousness of the politics in the world of the living. In this space the boundary between life and death is immediately crossed, and dying means that one can observe social relationships from a position of greater freedom. The theatrical space they are in is thereby politically colored: 'political' is here defined as a desire (erotic or otherwise) for order in a complex society, a longing for an order that is able to reconcile the perpetuity of ideals with the historical restriction of the need for concrete decisions. Needcompany's first confrontation with Shakespeare yields this rather abstract insight, but in no way necessitates a choice of meanings regarding Julius Caesar — between the Roman political icon or the Shakespearean figure.

Needcompany's Julius Caesar is an exercise in Shakespeare, starting from the realization that Shakespeare's compelling dramatic language is of a different order compared to material that was previously drawn on in *Need to Know* (1987) and *ça va* (1989). In Julius Caesar, Jan Lauwers does not counter the dialogues with any spectacular images; this is not the theatrical intention. The actors have to overcome both themselves and their characters' premises by exploring an undefined space with only a few points to hold onto — a tall, living Caesar on whom they can focus, and a dead Caesar on a rocking horse whom they would prefer to see disappear from the picture. It is only Marc Antony who briefly avoids this 'political spirit', but he does not avoid the woman (Portia) who constantly upsets the order. The effect of the characters' theatrical quest is not an articulation of 'grand themes', nor a false universal statement, but a recognizable personal comment on mortality and eternity, desire and hatred, truth and lie. In their confrontation with these grand themes, the little people — actors — are forced, to their considerable cost, to realize that the forces that hold society together, even in the relatively clearly comprehensible Roman aristocracy, are the same ones that make it burst apart. This is a very 'Shakespearean' effect, which refutes and resists any form of sentimental or political assimilation. All of

this comes in an uncompromising form, not because there is no clown to provide comic relief, but because there is something clownish about all the dead on their rocking horses, with their broad but misplaced smiles.

Theatrical Space Opened Up Like Wounds

In a certain sense, Lauwers made things easier for himself in Needcompany's *Macbeth* (1996) and Needcompany's *King Lear* (2000). As mentioned above, *Macbeth* and *King Lear* are both dramas that seek out great spaces in their own right, and which create landscapes where an actor — within the limits of the stage floor on which he must act — has to seek and find a 'vastness' of his own. The almost artificially imposed dramaturgy of *Julius Caesar* — opening up closed political discourse, in both stage design and choreography — is almost the obvious choice in the 'romances'.

Literary theory tells us that 'romances' are stories that combine myth and history and thereby try to express the identity of the community. Both these 'tragic romances' were written and performed at the time the 'United Kingdom' was being formed: in 1603 a Scottish king ascended to the English throne. From that time on, two court cultures and — even more importantly — two political entities were forced to cohabit. At about that time, Shakespeare and his Lord Chamberlain's Men were performing tragedies about kings descending into absolute ruin, sometimes due to their own faults. They are certainly not stories that give unqualified support to the legitimacy of the Stuart King James I. Unlike the 'history plays', in the 'tragic romances' Shakespeare does not describe any historical context: the dynastic intrigues are limited, and in *Macbeth* the ambition of the leading character rises sharply and falls equally sharply, without the expression of any views on kingship, as is the case, for example, in *Richard II*.

The ideological undertone is limited to an idealized image of King Duncan, who adds loyalty to the feudal bonds of mutual obligation. In contrast to this feudal 'heaven', we have *Macbeth's* hell. Shakespeare guards against legitimizing his rule as a theological regime, as James I did in his writings. The struggle against *Macbeth* soon makes it clear that a return to Duncan's idyll has become impossible, both geopolitically and ideologically. Scotland's alliance with England brings with it obligations that were only to be entirely fulfilled at the moment of union.

And in the confrontation with the defector MacDuff, he shows features that make him seem more like a 'civilized' version of *Macbeth* than the 'good shepherd' that his father was. Historically speaking, the tragedy of *Macbeth* takes place in the black hole of the transition from divine (theological) to political (secular) authority. And this hole truly is black, since it is not colored by any proletarian uprisings — Jack Cade in *Henry VI* part 2 — or tragicomic sub intrigues — Falstaff in *Henry IV* parts 1 & 2. We see two figures, *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth*. The third character, as Jan Kott put it, is the world itself, a world that looks like a nightmare.

Needcompany's *Macbeth* offers a paradoxical 'historicization' of the world. In Lauwers' version, the 17th-century themes of royal authority and Christian (or anti-Christian) power are no longer in use. This performance has become a reflection, both rhetorical and visual, on the confrontation with deadly violence, political violence. Lauwers once again opts for an abstraction, for a moving architecture. Not an empty stage, but a number of compelling visual focal points: a pillar with a glass of water; a long table across the stage; a set of large dishes on pillars which on closer examination turn out to be made not of clouded glass but of ice, and one of which is filled with blood. Duncan (Mil Seghers) and Banquo (Simon Versnel) smear blood over themselves when they die; Carlotta Sagna, in the part of the single witch, drinks the blood. In this world, the thought or image of blood is essential. Lauwers uses this 'raw material' to enhance the theatricality itself: visually spectacular and transparent in its artificiality — the blood tastes good. In this production, just as in *Julius Caesar*, a world takes shape in which the dead and the living continue to keep an eye on one another. In *Macbeth* there is more literal reason for this. In *Julius Caesar* the 'demonology' is limited to poetry, whereas in *Macbeth* we see apparitions of flesh and blood: witches, dead returning from the grave. Lauwers makes the boundary between the normal world and the underworld even narrower, even less clear, and does so with a wide variety of dramatic means. Duncan and Banquo remain on stage even after their murder, sometimes smeared with blood, and they play all kinds of functional roles, while literally in the background behind the table. The witches and *Lady Macbeth* fuse into a single chorus of black, bloody magic. The witch makes predictions that are reduced to a minimum: only the information that is absolutely necessary — *Macbeth* will be King; *Macbeth* will be defeated by a moving forest. *Lady Macbeth* (Ina Geerts) is recognizable, but Carlotta

Sagna also speaks some of her lines, as do Johan Heestermans and Eric Houzelot, who also plays Malcolm and Macduff respectively before and after this.

Macbeth is played by a woman (Viviane de Muynck). He is a prominent, sovereign presence, and un sentimentally reflects on his dangerous ambitions and tormenting nightmares, while the hysteria around him only increases. Even when the dead Banquo appears at the banquet, he reacts only by raising his voice; the tumult arises more from Lady Macbeth's reaction and the chaos that follows it. After all, the violence is more in the form than in the characters, in the blood and also in the sound: a tiled floor on which every issue resounds, a microphone that amplifies every bodily sound, glass and ice that are amplified as they crash onto the tiled floor. These minor explosions mark the murder and manslaughter we do not see: just as in *Julius Caesar*, Lauwers avoids all realistic references to the battlefield. He scraps almost all the transitional scenes: the war lies in the images and the rhetoric, not in the narration.

There is a long table on stage: it is there that Macbeth addresses his audience, who listen in interest as if they themselves were playing no part in this bloodbath. With the exception of Lady Macbeth's suicide and the hysteria that precedes it, Macbeth is on stage at all times. But he rarely takes up a central position. He stands opposite the table, he sits next to it, he listens but does not show any reaction, he speaks to everyone who is at the table 'by chance', or he addresses the space in front of him, always equally rhetorically. The language sounds concrete enough, but in one way or another what he says never seems to reach his fellow actors. The language, however dramatic, in the first place comments on the images, the architecture and not vice versa.

The most interesting dramatic relationships are once again the spatial ones. For example, the pillar with the glass of water: this is where King Duncan announces Macbeth's promotion. This is also where Malcolm allows himself to be put to the test by Macduff, by pretending to be a tyrant without a conscience, worse than Macbeth. Lauwers makes this into a key scene, on the one hand by its austere setting — it seems like a duel between fencers — and on the other by the extremely sharp tone both actors employ, a tone from which all humanity has departed. A tone that contrasts with the empathy that Macbeth has been able to arouse despite his grim seriousness. There is not even any pathos in Duncan's death scene, in which he smears blood on himself and quietly rests his head on a fellow actress's shoulder. The actor creates the image, and that is all.

The conclusion is that Macbeth himself claims the rest of the space, but without dirtying his hands. He does not come near the blood, despite his words "I am in blood stepp'd in so far", and despite the blood in which the women drown. He does not touch anyone.

The Place of Power

Is Needcompany's *Macbeth* a puppet show of gratuitous cruelty, manipulated by the rhetoric of an exhausted tyrant? Or is it a visually impressive spectacle that aestheticizes the cruelty but does not interpret it? Following on from *Julius Caesar*, this play is above all a study of the theatrical space, both material and mental; a study of power relations and the way an austere visual idiom is able to make them perceptible. Power is to be found in the oddest places. But the visible power relations do not simply illustrate the narration.

In *Julius Caesar*, for instance, Portia is presented as a figure who cuts through the intrigues and finally also puts the self-importance of political convictions into perspective, while, on the surface of the story, nevertheless committing suicide because of her powerlessness. Macbeth is played by an actress, which immediately excludes any simplistic rhetoric. He dominates the scene of screeching vixens and conceited nobles. While his predecessor and successor are stiff with formality, he prevails over the stage, in gesture and in word. He is literally able to claim the whole space and is therefore more a commentator than an action hero or committed narrator, despite the fact that this play is considered to be about his downfall. Lauwers is here exploring the death wish through Shakespeare: what sort of 'life' can take shape in a theatrical underworld? And do we crave this spectacle? Portia and Macbeth are the first to cautiously dare to draw conclusions. Such abstract, formal conclusions as: death affords space.

The question now is what Shakespeare's *King Lear* can add in the context of this approach.

King Lear as Rhetorical Ballet

The content of Macbeth is linked to questions of the legitimacy of the new Stuart dynasty, questions which were also asked in powerful circles at the time. Shakespeare's drama does not answer these questions, and his emphasis is more on the pain that goes with such a change of regime. This applies even more to King Lear, which was probably written in 1603, the year James I came to the throne. The anecdotes have little to do with the political unrest, but the way Shakespeare handled the popular content of the 'Leir' legends is certainly extremely topical. Everyone meets their downfall in Shakespeare's King Lear — even Cordelia, the 'good daughter', together with her father. Though of all the many dramatic adaptations that could be seen at that time, it was another story that the public knew well. In that version, 'Leir' divided his kingdom, cast out the daughter who was not willing to play up to him and was then himself cast out by the daughters who flattered him. In that story, the youngest daughter, Cordelia, restores her father's honor with the support of the French army and enables him to continue his rule — or else pensions him off while she herself takes the crown. However, the end of Shakespeare's King Lear remains entirely open; no balance is restored and the political and domestic relationships remain destroyed. The subplot involving Gloucester, Edgar and Edmund also has at its heart a father who unjustly renounces his offspring. This reinforces the sense of 'anomie' — a society without lawfulness.

In King Lear, the stage is in every respect empty: morally, socially and theatrically. The staging of the downfall assumes grotesque forms. The figure of the fool (who has no name) is symptomatic of this. He is constantly hesitating between pointless jokes and bitter comments. He comments above all on himself, since he only has embarrassing things to tell about the others. And so, the fool's ruin comes from vicarious shame, whereupon he vanishes from the scene. Gloucester and Lear wallow in their lamentations, shouting at the gods and becoming enraged when natural laws are not respected. The fool can only observe the tragedy and absurdity since they are 'funnier' than he himself. The 'idyll' of feudalism is also lost, together with respect for theology and physics. Cordelia no longer sees to the restoration, but appears only in an inverted Pieta in which the father — who is himself dying — laments the dead daughter. All that remains for the good Kent to do is to comment impotently on what he sees.

Needcompany's King Lear is possibly Jan Lauwers' most classical version of Shakespeare. He allows his actors to give an account of the plot with no misunderstandings about the characters. In the case of Albany/Cornwall (Dick Crane) and Edgar (Misha Downey) their name even appears on their shirt. He has the spectacular moments performed one by one, though in a restrained style: Kent (Dirk Roofthoof) 'disguises' himself with a simple pair of spectacles, and is transformed into the fool by an equally simple fool's cap. Regan (Anneke Bonnema) and Cornwall 'suck' Gloucester's (Simon Versnel) eyes out of their sockets, and during his attack of madness, instead of wearing wild flowers, Lear (Tom Janssen) puts on the headdress of an Indian chief.

This time Lauwers does stage the decisive battle: stroboscopic lights, music by The Residents — a crazy recycling of rock 'n roll, and Dirk Roofthoof screaming out stage directions. Everyone moves around a table with a few chairs, everyone exhausts themselves in a stylized death wish. Until Lear and Cordelia (Muriel Héroult) freeze in the form of the Pieta and, barely audibly, the survivors draw their bitter conclusions. Needcompany's King Lear employs the resources of 'narrative theatre' in a nihilist dramaturgy that has been fairly familiar to us since Jan Kott suggested to Peter Brook in 1962 that he should reinterpret King Lear as Shakespeare's version of Beckett's *Fin de partie*. This remains a defensible interpretation, which in addition is in line with Lauwers' previous interpretations of Shakespeare. He continues to emphasize the theatricality of his narration — no decoration, just actors and dancers, and a small pedestal for Lear, just as for Caesar ten years previously.

In fact, Lauwers does this so consistently that he deletes a crucial scene: Gloucester's suicide attempt, the perfect example of *Verfremdung* before the notion was even conceived. In the form of his 'mad' alter ego, Poor Tom, Edgar stages his blind father's leap, the leap from the white cliffs of Dover. Lauwers deletes this scene because, after all, the deception this leap represents appears throughout the whole play, and no actual scene is needed for it. Jan Lauwers here gives us an insight into his theatrical thinking by not showing something. He tries to remove every trace of pathos from this family tragedy — in the nineteenth century King Lear was the romantic masterpiece. And remarkably enough, he did this by letting the actors relate to each other in a singularly 'empathic' manner.

Unlike Julius Caesar, where each actor first had to find his own direction, the actors here have far fewer doubts about the impact of their words and the emotions that accompany their rhetoric. They often address the audience, confident that their fellow actors should actually hear what they are meant to. They define the space in which they act, think and feel in an authoritarian manner. Typical of this is the scene in which Lear and his daughter Goneril (Grace Ellen Barkey) and her husband Albany have their first argument about the behavior of Lear's court. While engaged in this dialogue the actor's pace from upstage to downstage and back in a straight line. They take hold of the stage, but the space no longer offers any certainties, and is not a stable place where a serious problem can be discussed. Lear has come down from his pedestal, and his daughters are no longer sitting subserviently on their comfortable mats. Nothing has a fixed place any more, nor is there any longer a meaningful outside world, just the false security of an empty stage — a void which they desperately try to fill with their footsteps. Lear himself is responsible for this chaos, the 'anomie' from which he has to flee. Lear is nowhere anymore, and so no meaningful spaces can any longer be shown, no palaces, no stables, no idyllic spots on the heath.

To counter this 'classical' theme, told in a pleasant stage tone, Lauwers introduces a choreographic element. Needcompany's King Lear is after all also a choreographic piece, created by Carlotta Sagna, with an almost equally 'classical' abstraction: the dancers do not imitate anything, the stage space is the stage space, nothing more and nothing less, and the lighting conceals nothing. In the case of Edgar and Cordelia, it is virtually impossible to make any distinction between their dramatic roles and their roles as dancers. Cordelia hardly ever speaks, but is constantly on the stage as a nymph whom no one sees but who does embody the illusion of a better life. Lauwers simply allows this simple narration, and he allows you to be carried along by the great emotions they all experience. But the bareness and aggression of the language of movement — combined with the music by Mogwai and others — see to it that the stage does not shut itself up in the sour idyll of obstinate fathers and lost sons and daughters. Lauwers maintains a bold new principal: theatrical alienation. Emotional excesses are compensated by the abstraction of movement and the objectification of the space. This makes the processes of acquiring and losing power visible once again. Is this a matter of aestheticization, of shifts in taste and style, or is there a greater trust in Shakespeare's writing as such? And, even more importantly, does Shakespeare's work thereby acquire a different meaning for Lauwers?

Theatrical Space as the Empty Place of Power

Jan Lauwers probably never started on Shakespeare with the preconceived plan of building up a Shakespeare oeuvre or Shakespeare series. One can only look back and observe that the language and the symbols have changed, have deteriorated or been enriched, and often both simultaneously. Jan Kott suggested that the standard of the versions made of Shakespeare is a reflection of the overall standard of the theatre being made in a particular place at a particular time. This is slightly too normative a statement; after all, how can one define something like the timeless quality of Shakespeare dramaturgy? Nevertheless, Needcompany's versions of Shakespeare undoubtedly show the seriousness needed to analyze their many layers of meaning and to develop an appropriate theatrical language. This work is thereby symptomatic of Needcompany's importance in the renewal of theatre in Flanders and beyond.

Lauwers evolved from a risky experiment — Julius Caesar as a hesitant narrative — to a classical piece of directing that exudes self-confidence — King Lear as a rhetorical ballet. The symbolic language is of course evidence of this development, and of an increasing familiarity with a narrative approach, but it still forces itself to constantly enquire into the theatrical space. The same question led Shakespeare to build his own theatre 400 years ago. Needcompany has created a story about power relations that parallels the search for certainties and doubts about the forces that define the theatrical space. To this end, Jan Lauwers uses choreographic means — subtle in Julius Caesar, powerful and formal in Needcompany's King Lear — and rhetorical figures — most consistently in Needcompany's Macbeth. At no time are politics brought up in the form of recognizable symbols, and at no time does Lauwers 'update' these Shakespeare dramas. What he does create is an empty space, the essence of power that cannot be seen or touched, that can only be encircled by dancing and oratorical movements. And the inability to put this essence into words usually means the death of the tragic heroes.

The space Needcompany sets aside for aesthetic reflection is in the first instance an empty space: the actors have to have good 'arguments' at their disposal to fill it in. It is the invention and expression of

these 'arguments' that forms the power game, this is the political significance of the theatre that Needcompany has been performing for the last twenty years. Again, and again, Needcompany tries to make visible the tension between the real power game on the stage — the struggle for the space — and the power game in the 'fables' involving Caesar, Macbeth and Lear. This is the core of their political and dramaturgical exercises. And when you do this with Shakespeare, they are exercises in regicide. Knowing full well that the corpse will rise again at the end of the performance to gratefully receive its applause.