



Victor Afung Lauwers

Maarten Seghers

Jan Lauwers

# BILLY'S VIOLENCE

a tragedy in ten chapters

a Needcompany production

# Introduction

For *Billy's Violence*, Victor Afung Lauwers researched the ten tragedies of Shakespeare and rewrote them into violently loving, intimate dialogues in which the woman is the central focus, stripped of any historical reference or anecdotal content.

**Erwin Jans:** 'Shakespeare may have never been so brutally and provocatively stripped. Obscene, hard and poetic. Words. Words. Words. But there are hardly any words left. Only some highlights. Recognizable poetry - Shakespeare quotes - that flashes like lightning against a dark night and disappears just as quickly. Just long enough to recognise the landscape, but too short to find its way.

When the curtain falls over Shakespeare's tragedies, order is restored. Over a mountain of corpses, the calm of the equilibrium descends once more. In what precedes this - the actual play - a departure from all moral rules is staged, a deep rent in the social fabric, an excess of aggression and violence. Is this excess only required to more convincingly demonstrate the need for the law? Or does the violence contain its own insight? Its own truth? And what might that be?

Shakespeare is the most read and performed writer the world has ever known. And yet many of the bard's plays are virtually unperformable due to their violence, gruesomeness, racism and misogyny. What does violence in art mean in today's world? Why do we enjoy watching it so much? Is violence viewed differently today than it was in the 16th-17th century?

**Jan Lauwers:** 'Shakespeare wanted an audience in his theatre, but in the streets of London there were dog fights and torture. Women were being burnt in the squares, public executions took place. These were large-scale festivities that brought many people together on the streets and Shakespeare had to use sex and violence, among other things, to lure the audience to his theatre. That is very interesting. It is not dissimilar to Quentin Tarantino. Is it gratuitous, entertaining, or is it necessary or impossible? Quentin Tarantino is a choirboy by comparison to the sheer brutality evoked by Shakespeare.

I am increasingly convinced that we need to find a different way of thinking which shows that all people are against violence. We think that everyone is bad, but that is not true. The majority is not violent; there is great solidarity. If we go back in history - and I keep coming across Shakespeare and his tragedies - then maybe we can find something.'

# Credits

**Text** Victor Afung Lauwers

**Music** Maarten Seghers

**Direction, scenography, costumes** Jan Lauwers

**With** Nao Albet, Grace Ellen Barkey, Gonzalo Cunill, Martha Gardner, Romy Louise Lauwers, Juan Navarro, Maarten Seghers, Meron Verbelen

**Dramaturgy** Elke Janssens, Erwin Jans

**Lighting design** Ken Hioco

**Technical and production** Marjolein Demey, Ken Hioco, Tijs Michiels

**Costumes and props assistant, surtitles** Nina Lopez Le Galliard

**Production** Needcompany

**Co-production** Festival Grec de Barcelona, Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, Teatro Español y Naves del Español en Matadero, Teatro Central (Sevilla, Spain), Les Salins - Scène Nationale de Martignes, Cultuurcentrum Brugge

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**Duration** approx 120 minutes

**Language** English / Spanish

**Surtitles** Multilanguage

**Pictures by** Maarten Vanden Abeele (except front and pg 19: Pieter D'Hooghe)



# Fragment from 'Portia'

(Julius Caesar 1599 - 1600)

71. portia

tell me  
was it decided you have to keep everything secret from me  
that you don't have to say anything to me  
am I only your equal under certain conditions  
then what am I good for  
to eat with  
to sleep with

72. brutus

no  
of course not  
*of course not*

73. portia

to talk with  
are you *so* indifferent to me

74. brutus

*of course not*

75. portia

if I'm no more to you than that  
then I'm not  
your w  
w  
wife  
what am I then

76. brutus

you are my only deeply beloved w  
w  
w  
w  
wife  
as precious  
as the red drops  
in my tender heart

77. portia

the red drops in your tender

78. brutus

my tender heart

79. portia

if that's so

80. brutus

uch

81. portia

then tell me what it is

82. brutus

dearest calm down

83. portia

I'm a w  
w  
w  
w  
w  
wwwwwwife I'll admit  
but I am the w  
wwwwwwife that you chose

84. brutus

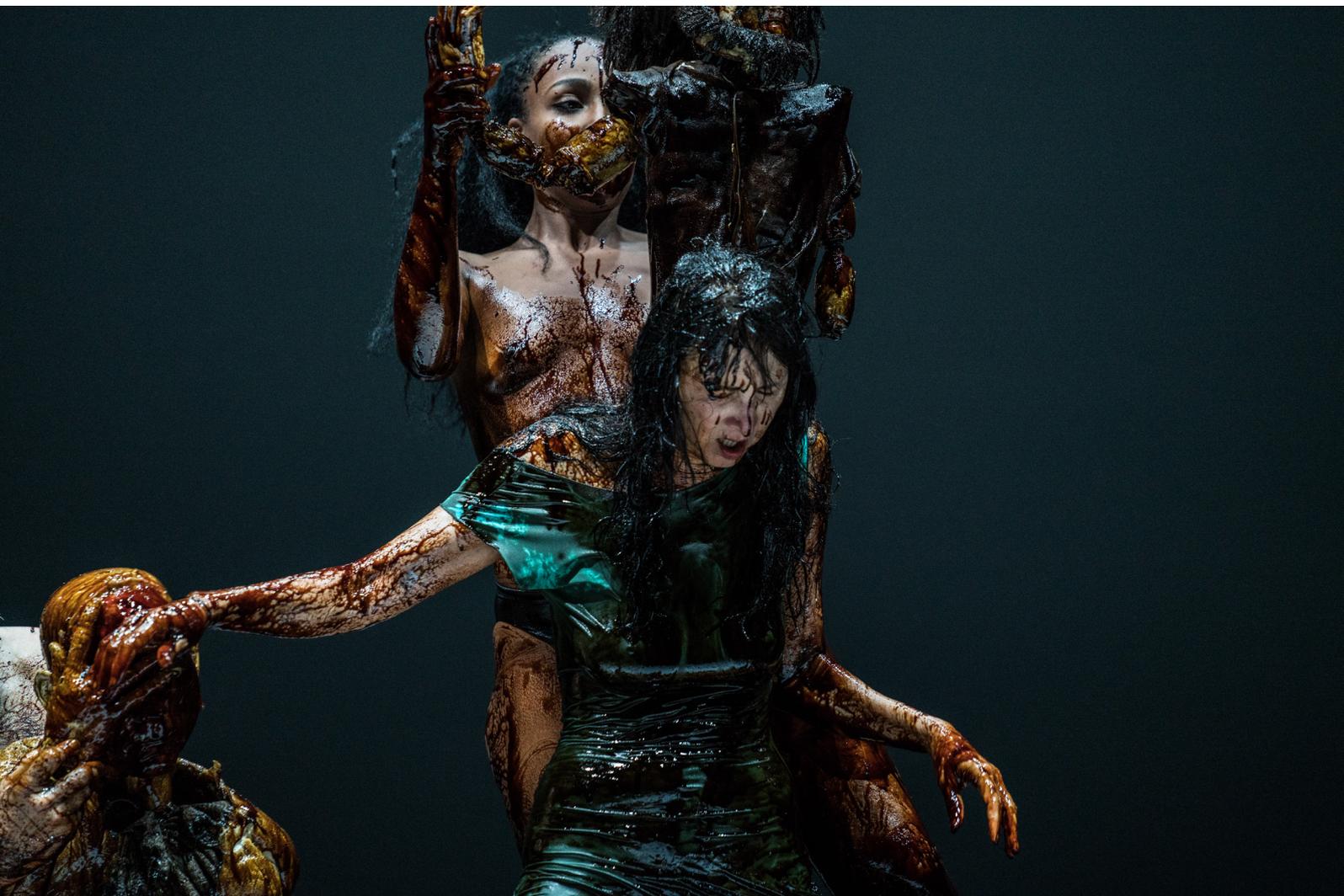
come  
I

85. portia

I'll show you  
how *strong* my devotion is  
look  
I slit my veins

86. brutus

goddammit



# Victor Afung Lauwers on text

First of all, I want to say that I am not worried about any discrepancy in the audience's knowledge of what Shakespeare's tragedies mean or don't mean. Virtually every edition of Shakespeare's work is introduced with the necessary historical information that a canonical text requires. My interpretation of the text is emotional rather than intellectual. That interpretation presupposes the freedom of my work as a poet, which I do not have to explain before the text becomes accessible to the audience. But I understand that the audience's experience is enriched by providing information. At the end of the day, we want to entertain.

Right before the start of the first lockdown, I was asked by my father, Jan Lauwers, to join him and Erwin Jans in investigating the tragedies. At the time I was in a rather bothersome situation, having just lost my own company. Jan's original idea was to make a selection of the most brutal and violent scenes from the tragedies. He was inspired in this by *Titus Andronicus*, an early work by Shakespeare which, although included in the collected tragedies, is not originally by Shakespeare. It is categorized as inferior to the great tragedies in terms of quality. In the end, Erwin, Jan and I agreed that we would each tackle one tragedy before coming together a month later to see if a joint work method could emerge. The play I chose was *Romeo & Juliet*.

During my reading of *Romeo & Juliet*, I realized that I did not want to incorporate dramaturgically the essence of the play, i.e. the impossibility of love between Romeo and Juliet due to the political quarrel between their families. What I did find fascinating was the idea of having only the two title roles speak, though in a slightly modified version. I designed a method to reduce *Romeo & Juliet* in its entirety to a dialogue between both characters, without unnecessarily undermining the tension of the play in the process. When Jan and Erwin then read my text and I theirs, we concluded that, because of the personal and perhaps somewhat peculiar nature of my dialogue, they would withdraw as writers and I would take charge of the whole work.

While in the tragedies of the ancient Greeks it is the gods who are defied, in Shakespeare's tragedies it is great men who are defied – army commanders, kings and princes. I have tried to stage, neither deities nor great men, but human beings. Especially human beings as lovers. The true violence of *Billy* is love. In the world of Shakespeare's tragedies, war and cruelty are surrogates for unfulfilled love.

I was aware that I was not drawn to the idea of bringing only physical violence to the foreground. But there was another problem. Shakespeare's tragedies are, as I said, war paintings. But at the time I felt unable to write about war.

One of Shakespeare's most bombastic characters, Mark Antony from *Antony & Cleopatra*, can barely utter his lines and seems confused. I drew inspiration from articles on COVID describing puzzling cases of memory loss in COVID patients who talked of suffering from 'brain fog'. COVID is relevant to the performance of Shakespeare since he too had to isolate himself during an epidemic. The parallel of the disease continues the theme of globalization that began with the voyages of discovery in Shakespeare's time and that greatly excited the public's imagination. Imperial violence was rampant at the time and the popular heroes of the day were men like Francis Drake.

I then consistently applied my method to every tragedy – with the exception of *Coriolanus*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Timon of Athens*. I found the last two rather weak. *Coriolanus* is a famous play, but the aim of my method, i.e. to distil a dialogue between a man and a woman from the original texts, was not very applicable to *Coriolanus*.

The biggest stumbling block was *Lear*. I believe that *King Lear* is the work of someone who is isolated and who, in his demonic inspiration, couldn't care less whether the play is performable or not. Shakespeare was sheltering from an epidemic while thunderous weather was simultaneously raging over England. The language is particularly fierce and stormy. I spent days translating the work to understand it but I lost my way completely, to the point where I had to distance myself from the play. It is only at the very end of my research that I understood that *Lear's* madness, which stems from nothing more than the realization that life means nothing, was best reflected in his relationship with his daughter *Cordelia*. *Cordelia*, however, originally hardly has anything to say. My feeling was that *Lear* is a chimera of Shakespeare himself and that *Cordelia* in turn is a hallucination of the old king. He sees her appear and clings to her, sick old man that he is. Thanks to this dreamy logic, I was still able to write something about the tragedy of *King Lear* and his daughter.

Another intervention was the omission of the character of Iago in the tragedy of Othello. By developing the relationship between Desdemona and Othello and leaving out all the other characters, Desdemona's perspective, despite the brutality of the violence, suddenly came into focus. Ethnicity, incitement and jealousy lost all relevance, because it was about Desdemona, not about Othello or Iago. Femicide is a deep and topical subject, and the notion that Othello's killing of his wife was provoked by Iago is less so, in my opinion.

And so, I have tried to highlight in all the tragedies the violence and madness of intimacy in the Shakespearean world view. For me, there is a difference between Shakespeare the playwright and Shakespeare the philosopher-poet. I chose the latter. Thus, the revenge tragedy of Hamlet becomes the tragedy of Ophelia who succumbs to bullying and paternalism. The effect of desperation comes to the fore and is thus negated.

The main character of Julius Caesar is completely left out, although the secrecy and pressure placed by the senators on Brutus to kill his mentor weighs on him and is something that drives Portia to self-mutilation and suicide.

There is at times a considerable difference in quality between the tragedies. For Pericles, for instance, I chose to only reproduce the scenes between Pericles's daughter, Marina, and the managers of a brothel on the verge of bankruptcy. But I couldn't get much more out of the play. I also changed the roles, so that Marina is only addressed by the woman who wants to exploit her.

The same goes for Titus Andronicus. There is indeed much to be said about this play, and I understand why my father, who was looking for a way to bring Shakespeare to the stage at a time when the relevance of canonical authors is being questioned, was drawn towards it. Moreover, when making his previous play, All The Good, he had to face a certain dissatisfaction among some members of the audience regarding the violence of one particular scene. The scene is about the rape of Artemisia Gentileschi, which is rendered realistically. The question that Jan was concerned with at the time, I think, was how important it was to take an unvarnished approach. My view is that it is best not to put a gloss on cruelty, because in doing so one is turning away from the nature of history. So what remains of Titus Andronicus in Billy's Violence is nothing more than the brutal rape and mutilation of a woman.

Like the romantics, I was moved by the gentle eroticism of Cymbeline and the tenderness of Imogen's character. For me, her love for Posthumus – she does not know that the mutilated corpse she finds and weeps over is not actually his – is typical of Shakespeare's impertinence. Love actually survives death even when the beloved is dead and all that remains of him is a torso with neither head nor limbs. That is when love becomes delirious and expresses its appreciation in its most honest and lucid form: the intangibility of loss.

Finally, I wanted to shed light on the aspect of language. Poetry – which belongs to neither fiction nor non-fiction but essentially connects to both facets through language – has much to do with magic. I wanted to create a certain conjuration through repetition and the refining of sentences, similar to the way we humans speak to each other and wish to dominate each other. For my adaptation of Macbeth, I wanted to suggest that Macbeth's program gets bogged down, meaning he is no longer able to express himself properly. Lady Macbeth, the stronger character of the two, must ultimately suffer the same fate.



33 arco : zoals een vlieg

Vln. *gliss.*

Vc.

Cb.

Vib. (sustained) *p*

35

Vln.

Vc.

Cb.

Vib.



# Shakespeare or Everything and Nothing

Erwin Jans

“There was no one inside him, nothing but a trace of chill, a dream dreamt by no one else behind the face that looks like no other face (even in the bad paintings of the period) and the abundant, whimsical, impassioned words.” Thus begins the short story *Everything and Nothing* by Jorge Luis Borges. The man it concerns is Shakespeare. As an actor on the boards, Shakespeare was everyone, but beyond that, he feels like no one and is empty. His only existence is that abundance of whimsical and impassioned words that he spoke on the stage in the skin of his characters, and which we now know as his *Collected Works*. The tale ends as follows: “The story goes that shortly before, or after, his death, when he found himself in the presence of God, he said: ‘I who have been so many men in vain want to be one man only, myself.’ The voice of God answered him out of a whirlwind: ‘Neither am I what I am. I dreamed the world the way you dreamt your plays, dear Shakespeare. You are one of the shapes of my dreams: like me, you are everything and nothing.’”

An excellent example of this ‘everything’ – but from a more human perspective than Borges’s - is the study that the American professor Harold Bloom wrote about Shakespeare with the revealing title: *The invention of the human*. The manner in which we experience ourselves as human, according to Bloom, is the consequence of the writings of Shakespeare: “We are lived by drives we cannot command, and we are read by works we cannot resist. We need to exert ourselves and read Shakespeare as strenuously as we can, while knowing that his plays will read us more energetically still. They read us definitively.” We don’t read Shakespeare, but Shakespeare reads us. In other words: Shakespeare, or rather Shakespeare’s plays, know more about us as humans than we know ourselves. Perhaps the director Peter Brook articulates this even more powerfully when he states of the thirty-seven plays of Shakespeare’s that have been handed down to us: “It is not Shakespeare’s interpretation of the world, it is something that resembles reality. A proof of this is that every word, every line, every character and every event not only allows a great number of interpretations, but an endless number. And that is precisely the characteristic of reality itself... What Shakespeare wrote is not interpretation. It is the thing in itself.”

Until not very long ago, that ‘thing’ was the beating heart of the (western) theatre repertoire. It was the artistic litmus test for every self-respecting director and actor. What has happened to that canon? In *On the open road* (1992), a theatre text by the Serbian-American author Steve Tesich, two men, two post-apocalyptic Beckettian outcasts, pull a cart full of stolen art-works through a land torn by civil war. They hope to ultimately gain access to the free world with their collection of the best and most profound that humanity has produced artistically. But in vain. It is an ironical, if not cynical metaphor for our relationship to tradition. The canon is no longer a safeguard. No longer a currency for our time. No universal qualitative value that stands above all suspicion. Our contemporary is how the Polish theatre critic Jan Kott referred to Shakespeare in an essay from 1964. Such an intimate familiarity is unacceptable now, half a century later. Shakespeare is no longer our contemporary. Too patriarchal, too racist, too misogynistic, too violent, too much a child of the sixteenth century. And a contemporary of who anyway? Who is ‘we’? In short: Shakespeare is too toxic. Fossil fuel. The abundance of Shakespeare’s whimsical and impassioned words can no longer read us, moderns. We can no longer be deciphered by the canon. This is the message. The cart full of art will not ride into the new world of tomorrow. In his play *Die Hamletmaschine*, Heiner Müller drew the ultimate conclusion: “I was Hamlet. I stood on the coast and talked to the surf. BLAHBLAH, behind me the ruins of Europe. (...) I am not Hamlet. I no longer play a role. My words no longer have anything to say to me. My thoughts suck the blood from the images. My drama no longer takes place. The sets are being built behind me. By people, not interested in my drama, for people that have nothing to do with it. It doesn’t interest me any longer either. I no longer take part.” God no longer dreams in the form of Shakespeare. Shakespeare is dead, get over it!

And what if we do keep performing Shakespeare? Despite all death notices. Against better judgement. What if we accept Nothing and still continue fighting for Everything? Jan Lauwers: “People have been telling me for thirty years that we can no longer perform Shakespeare. Annoying. I think we should present the old, white bard even more mercilessly. Defend him even more radically.” The confrontation with the tragedies of Shakespeare runs as a common thread through the theatre work of Jan Lauwers and Needcompany: *Julius Caesar* (1990), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1992), *Macbeth* (1995), *King Lear* (2000), and *The Tempest* (2001). For Lauwers, the cruel poetry of Shakespeare has been an artistic life-long sparring-partner, to come to grips with the world in which he lives. Tacking between self-written, made-to-measure stories by Needcompany on the one hand, and the great tragedies of Shakespeare on the other, Lauwers searches for images to give

form to, and to dispel, the unrest of our time in performances that are theatrically bursting at the seams.

In his previous performance, *All the good* (2019), Lauwers portrayed himself as “an artist caught in a web of doubt”. The storm that rages in the mind of the artist is doubled by the storm around his house that howls around its foundations more than once in the performance. Does it herald some calamity? The possibility of a catastrophe (a war, an attack...) hangs like a threatening shadow over the whole performance. The story and the artist’s doubt are overrun by the stories of the other characters and a rapidly changing world. Art has ended up in a whirlpool of societal questions concerning identity and representation, white privilege and de-colonisation, heteronormativity and #MeToo, climate change and the ecological footprint, radicalisation and polarisation... This has all swept through the performances of Needcompany for some time. Is there anything left of the old world that can help to find answers? Is there anything left in that cart full of art that is usable on the other side of festivalitis, urban branding, commercial success and media attention? It is perhaps no coincidence that *All the good* ends with a meditation on *The Descent from the Cross* by Rogier van der Weyden, painted between 1432 and 1435, one of the great masterpieces of western culture. The operas of Claudio Monteverdi are perhaps also to be found in the cart: In 2018, Lauwers staged *L’incoronazione di Poppea* (1642). And the *Collected Works* of Shakespeare, of course. “We live in fast and superficial times. Decisions have to be taken immediately without very much attention paid to the grey zones of the intellectual. For me, the confrontation with writers like Shakespeare and composers like Monteverdi have something to do with the necessity for slowness and depth. They are ambiguous works in which black and white, good and bad are never clearly positioned.”

Yet, the slowness and depth of the encounter with the Old Masters brings no peace of mind and no certainty. Lauwers’ new performance is not called *Billy’s Violence* by coincidence: “Quentin Tarantino is a choirboy compared to what Shakespeare has written on brutality. Grace told me that the present-day world has more need of *Billy’s love* than *Billy’s violence*. This too is stimulating. What do I see in front of me? A performance that lends our times a pitch-black clarity. A heap of excerpts from his work that are only moments of violence without psychological or moral standpoint. A table, some chairs and eight actors who destroy each other. With nothing but the poetic power of Shakespeare. I feel that a long series of excerpts, performed by eight good actors (four women, four men) will not come across fragmentarily. But will lead to a tableau in which eight people survive. The performance will perhaps become an ode to the power of humanity, which in spite of everything, continues to search for happiness.”

*Billy’s Violence* is exceptional for more than one reason. On this occasion, Lauwers doesn’t stage a Shakespeare play, or a play of Shakespeare’s that he’s adapted, he stages Shakespeare as he is dreamt by Victor Lauwers, his son. Do dreams have their own history? Did people in the old days dream as they do now? About other things? Maybe. But has the structure and build-up of the dreams changed too? Do speed, technology, media, medicines and other modern developments have an impact on how a dream presents itself? Are modern dreams more complex, less narrative, more layered, more complicated? And have they also developed a modern or post-modern variant, as literature has? No idea. But father and son Lauwers undoubtedly dream Shakespeare differently.

At first sight, *Billy’s Violence*, Victor’s dream, is a sacrilegious nightmare. Victor Lauwers dreamed ten tragedies together: *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Pericles*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Cymbeline*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*. What did he do with all of those words? A Shakespeare play amounts to an average of 22,500 words. Hamlet even has more than 30,500. The Hamlet-adaptation by Victor Lauwers’ son consists of a little more than 1500 words! Twenty times less than the original. Thereby, he places ten plays one after another. Each less than a quarter of an hour long. Shakespeare has rarely been so brazenly de-boned and provocatively stripped. Obscene, hard and poetic. Words. Words. Words. But there are hardly any words left. Only moments of recognition that briefly flash like lightning against a dark night, and equally quickly disappear again. Just long enough to recognise the landscape, but too short to light the way. Anyone who doesn’t know Shakespeare’s tragedies well will probably not recognise much in Victor Lauwers’ adaptation. The names and all other historical references are missing. And for anyone who does know the tragedies well, maybe the same is true.

Meanwhile, God has dreamt all forms of Shakespeare. Everything is possible with his texts. Every adaptation is a possibility. Shakespeare’s plays are the ‘commons’ of culture. Copyright free. Belonging to everyone and no one. Everything and nothing. Victor Lauwers has dreamt his own Shakespeare. Without reservation, he dived into the deep sea of Shakespeare and has brought back to the surface what the breath in his lungs

allowed. Coloured by the unrest of youth and the confusion of the times. The violence in *Billy's Violence* is not the same political and military violence as in the history plays. It is the tragic violence in the family, in the most intimate relationships: man-woman, father-daughter, brother-sister. Ten scenes from a marriage. Why not? Ten primal scenes: banal, obscene, tender, brutal, etcetera. All tragedies are family tragedies. In their re-worked version, the ten tragedies have been given the name of the female characters: Portia, Desdemona, Juliet, Ophelia, Marina, Lavinia, Imogene, Cordelia, Gruoch (the name of the historical Lady Macbeth) and Cleopatra. But, a female perspective is not immediately created, although it is an eye opener for the self-evident way in which the tragedies bear the names of the male heroes. So, Victor Lauwers explicitly probes one of the soft spots of many Shakespeare stagings: the absence and the silence of the women. And so, the son finds himself in the tracks of the father. Jan Lauwers, too, sought for that other gaze in performances such as *Isabella's Room*, *Molly Bloom*, *War and Turpentine*.

Victor Lauwers' adaptation is whimsical and impassioned. Merciless and radical. Desdemona is strangled, but Juliet spits out the poison and lets Romeo die alone. The violence against women is confirmed and inverted simultaneously. The woman as sacrifice and as goddess of vengeance. The re-writes have no build-up and no ending. No minor characters and no sub-plots. There's no time for this. The adaptations - repeatedly limited to one scene - immediately proceed towards a dramatic highpoint, which is not necessarily the highpoint of the original play. In Marina (Pericles in Shakespeare), this is a dialogue between Marina and a madam in a brothel, and in Imogene (Cymbeline in Shakespeare), this is a monologue by Imogene to a rump in her arms with no head or limbs. The landscape of Shakespeare's texts re-told in craters and volcanoes. The tragedies brought back to their moment of explosion.

Shakespeare is the triumph of language in all its possibilities. It moves from the ecstatic heights of the love lyric to the deepest caverns of melancholy and depression. And all with equal abundance, ease and skill. A language that can be spoken so well, sounds dangerous and unbelievable now. With Victor Lauwers, the idiom is direct, raw and brazen. With the aggressive and nervous poetry of film dialogues, pop music, street-language, pornography. Short sentences, fast-paced dialogues, compelling repetitions in which the emotions are open wounds and the words salt. The text is a deforestation. And so is the direction. The performance is without sets. With recycled costumes. The ecologic footprint of the performance is small. The existential one all the deeper.

There's a lot of coughing, hacking and rasping in *Billy's Violence*. It is the language that stutters for a moment. No coincidence perhaps in a text that was written in 2020. The year in which a simple cough could herald a catastrophe, and in which a black man cried at a white world choking him: '*I can't breathe!*' Each cough and hack is in the text, has been counted and is performed with the others as a musical score. After all, it is not only father and son Lauwers that pull the cart filled with bits and pieces of Shakespeare. The eternal fool of the company, Maarten Seghers, dances and sings around them. By means of strings and noise spectrum and his own voice - here too, there is a deforestation and a honing - the clown steers and directs the scenes. Just like a conductor, he indicates the rhythm of the performance. An equally measured and nervous, emotional and atmospheric mix of electronic sounds and historical instruments, narrative and physical at the same time.

As always, the actors and actresses of Needcompany hurl themselves into their characters, and at the end of a scene they step out again just as easily, just like out of their clothes to start a new scene. There is no off stage. Everyone remains continually present. No entrances and no exits. The eight performers tell the story together. Every dialogue is born from the group and returns to it. The zero-point of theatre: now I'm playing Hamlet and now I'm Cordelia and then I'll kiss you and kill you... In a mixture of Spanish and English. Theatre as cruel child's play.

*Billy's Violence*. The violence of ten fragments of tragedy that refuse to be merged and yet are still more than the sum of the parts. A performance like a skeleton, or like a raw piece of meat. Fragment after fragment. Unrest after unrest. A cart full of everything and nothing. We have to keep dreaming the plays of Shakespeare. While we know that his plays dream us even more deeply.



# All These Bitches

Kasia Tórz

## #1

'This show aims to get to the bone of Shakespeare' –Jan Lauwers said at the first rehearsal of *Billy's Violence*. A partner on this journey was Jan's son. During eight months, writer and poet Victor Afung Lauwers worked on the play *Billy's Violence*, distilling from the historical background of Shakespearean tragedies ten portraits of women, ten stories of heterosexual intimacy in which love, desire, hate and power are inseparable.

The text on stage – given to the performers as an elaborated score – is not adapted but embodied. All the performers committed themselves to carrying the story and breathing life into it by employing the different means they have at their disposal: voices, body, gaze, music, costumes, space.

They activate a galaxy that is derived from Shakespeare but that emancipates itself from the heritage of his literature. This journey resembles a séance rather, establishing contact with spirits that comprise their own realness but are far from realism. The galaxy of *Billy's Violence* encompasses many nebulae where planets and stars flare up with varying intensity, transporting us to another dimension.

Unlike realism, realness suggests questions that are not a matter of decoration or appearance, but of the operational set-up of the entire system of relations, desires and primary energies. Realness activates affect, a deep sense of affiliation and belonging. The realness of Shakespeare in *Billy's Violence* goes beyond the realism that one could claim.

## #2

I can't get rid of the image of a bone. Bare and still.

It makes sense to me that the bones survive. Only them. Meat is an accidental substance – grown, slaughtered, extracted, eaten, rotten. For a bone, meat is an adornment that distorts the clarity of what is essential, a clear shape of the body.

Breaking up a bone. Digging into the marrow. Something is being laid down there.

Violence against women is a vast archaeological site. My memory is too short and my knowledge too limited to comprehend what happened to my female ancestors – one hundred, two hundred, five hundred years ago. I can only sense what kind of hell they might have gone through – the result from wars, moral beliefs, superstitions, poverty or class affiliations that determined their path in life.

Violence against women is inscribed in the bodies of all of us – victims, perpetrators, witnesses – as a genealogical experience. Bodies that are sensitive, that react to each other, that make love, that rape, hurt, give birth, are killed in the wars. Bodies as the ultimate containers for everything that is human.

I am trying to undertake the effort of speculation. It is not a cognitive speculation, however, but an affective one. Its guide, its medium are my bones, which – in their mineral molecular structure and the immeasurable will to last – they contain all those past stories that are a part of me.

## #3

In *Billy's Violence* time is on the move. It shrinks and stretches. It holds everything together like a (strong but flexible) fabric that embraces new temporalities and opens up passages of past experiences, weaving them into contemporary forms.

This movement of interweaving is very tangible in the music composed by Maarten Seghers. The music sculpts the atmosphere of the performance, its turbulent intimacy. The crossing of epochs, textures and flavours is represented in both the puppets (the frantic companions of the performers) and the costumes (their second skin). A playful, fluid patchwork made up of modern garments and the old, almost overly theatrical outfits found in the storerooms of the Teatro Nacional de Catalunya creates a mess that blurs the boundaries of representations and their historical backgrounds. That makes the characters free in the constant motion of self-expressing and self-exploring, in the effort of connecting with their multipersonalities and with the group itself.

Stratification, splitting the substance of the show into threads and layers is set up by the text of the play. Victor Afung Lauwers radically reduced the dialogues to their essence. Cruel kindness and loving pain carry the weight of the old, but they don't need a lot of words. Victor Afung Lauwers managed to invent a new notation – originating in the power of Shakespearian stories but heard in new frequencies. That notation in its rhythmical and precise structure makes every word and sound indispensable. For Victor Afung Lauwers, words are not simply repeated, even if that is what seems to happen in the structure of a dialogue. They are discovered, always anew. In that sense, the spoken text is an act of creating new worlds. The performers activate their bodies as instruments for playing them, for letting the words sound and take over, slip away from descriptive logic, open up the abyss.

#### #4

The threads of violence brought up by Shakespeare come from his eyewitness experience. He saw a lot of death and disaster around him. Public executions, street riots, violent duels. He survived a pandemic. 20 percent of London's population died in 1603 because of the plague transmitted by spread by rat-borne fleas.

But Shakespeare was also a child of the infamous time of witch-hunting. Born a year after the *An Act Against Conjurations, Enchantments and Witchcrafts* of 1563, his writing career began as the witch trials reached their peak in the 1580s and 1590s. Yes, witches are present in his *Macbeth* (1606) as three repulsive women with magical powers. Yet, the facts from the time are less mystical and reveal all possible forms of atrocity, sadism, fanaticism and prejudice against women.

Alleged witches were accused of indulging in sexuality (including carnal union with the devil), of cursing and making men impotent. Most were strangled, burned at the stake, hung, or beheaded. In addition, various forms of torture were applied specifically to women, such as breasts and genital mutilation. Often, the women were abused by those who projected on them their unfulfilled sexual fantasies, suppressed by common morality. Many women executed for witchcraft in Shakespeare's England did not engage in any practices associated with magic at all<sup>1</sup>. They were the victims of a hallucinatory bias against the wild, free, untamed femininity.

It's not surprising that often they were old, economically vulnerable and powerless. Violence against women, including violence of a sexual nature, involves multiple dimensions – economic, social, class-related. Discrimination has always had many overlapping layers whose gravity depends on the social, economic and cultural dynamics. Women from the lower classes, less educated women, migrant women usually face more troubles.

#### #5

Witch-hunting as an institutionalized act was a crusade. It laid the founding stone for the system of violence and suffocating discrimination that has endured for centuries. Today, as we experience a new wave of revelations of global violence against women, some societies are starting to realize that the hatred directed at women is a form of a terror and are seeking to amend the law to have the hatred of women recognized as a crime<sup>2</sup>.

At least 17 million women and girls from poor communities in Africa are forced to walk long distances to collect water every day. This increases their risk of rape, beating, disease and even death<sup>3</sup>.

In many countries, a substantial proportion of women experiencing physical violence also experience sexual abuse. In Mexico and the United States, studies estimate that between 40 and 52 per cent of women experiencing physical violence by an intimate partner have also been sexually coerced by that partner, according to the World Report on Violence and Health<sup>4</sup> published by the World Health Organization.

In June 2020, in Loveland, Colorado, police officers violently arrested an elderly woman, believed to be suffering from dementia. The released footage shows policemen commenting this event: *'I was super excited. I was like, "All right, let's wrestle, girl. Let's wreck it!" I got her on the ground and all that stuff. (...) I can't believe I threw a 73-year-old on the ground'*.<sup>5</sup>

1 <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/witchcraft-in-shakespeares-england#> (accessed 1 May 2021).

2 <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/from-digital-hate-to-analog-violence-the-dark-world-of-extremist-misogyny-a-832ed3cb-21d1-4e84-8c28-089365e91a83> (accessed 1 May 2021).

3 <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/06/access-to-this-basic-human-right-is-putting-17-million-women-and-girls-at-risk> (accessed 1 May 2021).

4 [https://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/global\\_campaign/en/chap6.pdf](https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/global_campaign/en/chap6.pdf) (accessed 1 May 2021).

5 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/apr/27/colorado-walmart-karen-garner-loveland-police-arrest> (accessed 1 May 2021).

On 3 January 2021, Ahlan Yonan, a 28-year-old Syrian woman, was found dead in her apartment in Liège, Belgium, with her hands tied behind her back and a bullet in her head. The only suspect in the case is her older brother who refused to accept her European lifestyle.

In March 2021, 33-year-old Sarah Everard was kidnapped and murdered while walking home from a friend's home in Brixton, London. A police officer was arrested and charged with her murder.<sup>6</sup>

For ages, men haven been conquering the world while women have been trying to survive. This is still a fact. In 2021 the burden of proof in this crime reached a critical point when hatred against women turned out to be a global plague. We women need not only to protect ourselves but also to explain over and over again that the violence is real. As American author and philosopher Rebecca Solnit, an, rightly put it: *"Silence is what allows people to suffer without recourse, what allows hypocrisies and lies to grow and flourish, crimes to go unpunished"*.<sup>7</sup>

Today women fighting for their rights are no longer silent. They are speaking up and their voices are not easy to control. Social media networks have given space and visibility to grassroots movements and individual testimonies, revealing stories that could not be told in the traditional hierarchical media world. The #MeToo movement couldn't have reached that kind of scale and instigated a revolution without social media. The emancipatory impact of virtual communities, shared footages and self-organizing on off-line reality has been enormous.

At the same time, however, the latest technologies of live communication have become an expanding and abusive instrument of power applied against women. Virtuality opens up a vast space for violence: revenge porn, rape footages, the documentation of stoning, bullying, sexist student hazing rituals. The online world provides unlimited space to exhibit hatred and makes it easier than ever to find allies in turning imagined violence into real acts. A vivid example is the growing number of forums gathering *"incels"* – an online subculture, actively hating women, encouraging to violence, spreading far-right views, misogyny and racism.

## #6

When non-fiction contingents of tragedies are freshly delivered through online media, any kind of violence one may fantasize upon is there, displayed on our elegant screens.

So, should I care about Shakespeare today?

Only if this mythology can activate the underground – our unconsciousness.

Only, if these old stories can trigger hallucinations providing the evidence that everything is possible, and so force us to look deeper.

But what happens when we change the vector of our gaze and, with everything we carry under our eyelids, return to the artificial reality of the theatre, where the act of violence is not real? What does the opaque veil of storytelling do to our imagination and sensibilities?

The power of theatre lies in a fact becoming a fiction, in discovering a fossil awaiting excavation.

*Billy's Violence*: jealousy, power games, teenage love, mourning, sexual exploitation, social class slavery. Haven't we heard these stories before?

What lies underneath?

## #7

Imagine taking a knife and opening Billy's body – this phantasmagorical body of Shakespeare – and cutting the skin of the myth.

What kind of realness would it reveal? And what about the temperature of the blood circulating inside? This blood which, warm and remembering, keeps everything alive in its ongoing stream.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/sarah-everard-missing-met-police-b1814958.html> (accessed 1 May 2021).  
<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *The Mother of All Questions: Further Feminisms* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017).

The galaxy of *Billy's Violence* proves that, standing in a split between realness and reality, as we do in theatre, we don't have to push ghosts and hallucinations away, as less legitimated and valid. In fact, they can tell us more than we expect.

The performers are like shamans. They induce the presence of the characters – by blowing air into the figures, by giving them their bodies and energy to reach the archetypal energies of violence, tenderness, belonging, desire. They use their own secret language, one which operates beyond words and their semantics, developing its own solutions to communicate in the trip of the show.

The characters in *Billy's Violence* are fictional but eternally real. They cough. They struggle to breathe, as if everybody was inhaling some contaminated air here. The collective makes an effort to face the violence organizing the realm of the show. Many sources of energy bursting onto the stage. This off-centre strategy – a hallmark of Jan Lauwers' theatre – reveals the nature of violence: scattered, perpetual, down to earth, active across the polymorphic scenic body. Violence is always plural. It needs many of us. It is greedy.

## #8

Imagine the fibres of violence that bind us together.

Imagine the sum of the violence that is happening right now, in this city, as you watch the show.

Imagine that we are built of scars growing on scars, covering wounds. Now they are opening up again.

Imagine that everyone on stage and in the auditorium has experienced violence and caused it. Perhaps in a way that you prefer not to realize.

Imagine that they are you and you are them.

In all despair and hope of healing.

*Antwerp, May 2021*



# Needcompany

Needcompany is an artists' company set up by the artists Jan Lauwers and Grace Ellen Barkey in 1986. Maarten Seghers has been a member of Needcompany since 2001. Lauwers, Barkey and Seghers form the core of the company, and it embraces all their artistic work: theatre, dance, performance, visual art, writing, etc. Their creations are shown at the most prominent venues at home and abroad.

Since the very beginning, Needcompany has presented itself as an international, multilingual, innovative and multidisciplinary company. This diversity is reflected best in the ensemble itself, in which on average 7 different nationalities are represented. Over the years Needcompany has put increasing emphasis on this ensemble and several artistic alliances have flourished: Lemm&Barkey (Grace Ellen Barkey and Lot Lemm) and OHNO COOPERATION (Maarten Seghers and Jan Lauwers).

Needcompany revolves around the individual artist. Everything is founded on the artistic project, on authenticity, necessity and meaning. The medium itself is continually questioned, and there is constant examination of the quality of the content to be conveyed in relation to the form it takes. Needcompany believes in quality, cooperation and innovation. Needcompany is a leading voice in the social debate on the urgency and beauty of art at both a domestic and an international level.



# NEEDCOMPANY

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