

# BILLY'S JOY

a NEEDCOMPANY production







# INTRODUCTION

**“Billy’s Joy: a liquid comedy, a ‘HYSTORY’, a battle of attrition. Something is rotten in Fairyland!”**

**Victor Afung Lauwers:** “Following Billy’s Violence, which dealt with tragedies, I was asked to write a comedy based on Shakespeare’s comedies. I wanted to write about ‘reconciliation’. It is a central theme in the comedies. But reconciliation proved impossible without love! So I pulled Romeo, that ‘star-cross’d lover’, out of his tragic story and brought him to the place of our comedy: Fairyland. Fairyland, however, turns out to be torn apart and ravaged by fragmentation. Having arrived, Romeo loses his language. Henceforth, he speaks hybrid English, or ‘Globic’. He goes in search of his beloved JULIET. But JULIET has been expelled from the Symbolic Order, from the edifice of narrative itself! Still, Romeo wants to fulfil his narrative destiny by turning himself aside: he wants to turn himself aside to overcome that which separates him from JULIET in death (primarily political divisions and global warming). But... Romeo cannot kill himself because he is in a comedy! Naked and isolated, Romeo must keep looking for love until someone ends him... That someone is Bolingbroke, later Henry IV from the King’s Dramas. Romeo becomes Richard II and they share each other’s fate: Romeo, lovingly disowned, and Richard, lovelessly deposed.”

Shakespeare has been a controversial artist for over 400 years. Sometimes he is the greatest ever, other times he is dismissed as an anti-Semitic misogynist who especially got a kick out of conceiving violent scenes. That's what Billy's Violence covered extensively. In the eighteenth century, people detested the violence and dark twists in his tragedies. Consequently, these were shamelessly rewritten. Romeo and Juliet lived happily ever after! This inspired Needcompany to ask Victor Afung Lauwers to read the comedies and see what they can still mean in our time - a time of great controversies, vulgar polemics, cancel culture, structural racism, climate change, war. What is there left to laugh at? Is humour the coward's weapon or a form of activism?

**Victor Afung Lauwers:** "The essential difference between Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies is that the comedies are not funny. The pages of the comedies are a collection of prisms of eroticism, ranging from pastiche to obscurity. **It can be said that tragedy is a pornography of human suffering and comedy veils suffering with human happiness.**

Little can be said about the relevance of Shakespeare. In fact, performances of canonical texts like Shakespeare's have long ceased to be necessary. It is therefore not my intention to present a repertory piece. Rather, I am concerned with history - that is; with our mistakes. Those who do not want to know the past do not want to know themselves."







*Let us once lose our oaths to find ourselves,  
Or else we lose ourselves to keep our oaths*

Berowne,  
'Love's Labour's Lost', ACT 4, SCENE 3

by **ELKE JANSSENS**

"There is something rotten in Fairyland", writes Victor Afung Lauwers.

Following 'Billy's Violence' - in which Victor Lauwers boned and abstracted ten Shakespearian tragedies into intimate dialogues between two lovers, he gets to work on the comedies. '**Billy's Joy**' transports us to a peculiar fairyland where nothing is what it seems.

## **IT IS ALL AN ACT, THEY DO NOT KNOW**

The character Fluido kicks off the fairy-tale festivities as a singing stubborn mule. Martha, playing a British actress who wants to shine as Caliban, jumps on the bandwagon and throws herself into her role with great conviction while casually asserting: "It is all an act, they do not know." 'They' alludes to all the others who seem to be imprisoned in this comedy. Romeo gets lost while searching for Juliet, who in turn is transformed into Eden, a contemporary version of Juliet. Oberon and Sycorax imagine themselves to be Romeo's parents. They are worried and don't know how to help him. And Pourquoi, the bear, dances roguishly around everyone.

Despite the fact that the start of the performance catapults the viewer into a Shakespearian fairyland, today's zeitgeist with its 'major controversies, vulgar polemics, cancel culture, structural racism, climate change and war' gradually seeps in.

Thus we arrive in a 21st-century stand-alone 'fluid' comedy in which - unlike 'Billy's Violence' - the figurative comes to the fore. The frivolity and banality of a baroque excess of citations, references, images and details bring Victor Afung Lauwers' text to an essential foundation of Shakespeare's comedies, namely the paradox of 'losing in order to find'.

Shakespeare's comedies are a sensory feast in their games and masquerades, with music, dance and a touch of magic. With 'Billy's Joy', Victor Afung Lauwers also provides a generous excess, in the coming and going of characters who may or may not refer to Shakespeare. He conjures up fairies, kings and queens, bears and the seven dwarfs and Snow White. Just like 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' (1595), 'Billy's Joy' is comprised of several realities (a fairy-tale world, a raw, contemporary dressing room scene, a grotesque play-within-a-play, and so on). You are tossed back and forth between various theatrical realities. Between tragedy and comedy. The question that is not answered with this performance is: are these tragic figures in a comedy or comic figures in a tragedy?

Victor Afung Lauwers argues that the comedies employ a more complex logic than the tragedies: "The key difference between Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies is that the comedies are not funny. The pages of the comedies comprise a collection of prisms of eroticism, ranging from pastiche to the obscure. One can say that a tragedy is a pornography of human suffering, and that a comedy veils the suffering with human happiness."





## TO THE HEART OF OUR ERA

The majority of Needcompany's performances go to the heart of their actors. Characters, stories, etc. often link to reality and contain some ambiguity about truth. 'Isabella's room' (2004), for instance, in which a collection of archaeological objects from the Lauwers family adorned the stage in order to tell a 20th-century tale based on a variety of biographical stories or 'The blind poet' (2015) based on the performers' family trees or 'MALAM/NIGHT' (2021) which takes Grace Ellen Barkey's Indonesian colonial history as its starting point. It starts with the truth in order to create a bigger picture or story.

**Billy's Joy** goes to the heart, the heart of our era. An era in which privileges and values are being redefined and demand a sharpened awareness. With **Billy's Joy**, Victor Afung Lauwers gives the floor to the younger generation, who go in search of their identity. Millennials and Gen Z versus Boomers. Characters mirror or parody figures from Shakespeare's world.

The figure of Martha is based on various characters: on Caliban (Prospero's servant from 'The Tempest'), on Nick Bottom (the overconfident weaver from 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'), on Christopher Sly (a drunken bungler from 'The Taming of the Shrew') and on Martha Gardner herself as a British actress.

Grace Ellen Barkey's character Sycorax is equally complex. Her name alludes to Shakespeare's Sycorax who in 'The Tempest' is simply described as a witch, as the banished mother of Caliban and as a symbol of everything that calls the patriarchy into question. In addition she plays Oberon's wife, which again links her to the Shakespearian character Titania, Queen of the Fairies. She also plays the mother of Romeo and juxtaposes this with the iconic Needcompany image of the Indonesian princess clown that we know from pieces such as 'The blind poet' and 'The House of Our Fathers'.

This causes the actors to search for their character, their identity, and mirrors the contemporary awareness of identity politics. Cultural appropriation is explored by having the black actress Meron playing Snow White. It forces this performance into the straightjacket of the contemporary debate about moral censorship or political correctness. The performance is thus consistent with comedy's ability to reflect or even to correct, as centuries ago Cicero already described comedy as 'an imitation of life, a mirror of custom'.



*“Some philosopher-kings agreed that it is no longer possible to tell a bigger story, that we, humanity, have lost our values and that our little lives have lost their meaning, that we are tired of not knowing the difference between the beginning, the middle and the end of anything.”*

This quote from Fluido alludes to the continually recurring question: which stories need to be told in a world in which we are bombarded with countless stories on a daily basis? What do these stories need to signify? “The narrative has become fluido”, as the character puts it. With ‘Billy’s Joy’, Victor Afung Lauwers reaches across Shakespeare’s comedies to arrive at a new contemporary story which sorely tests the spectator: it is a story that literally bursts out of its seams due to the overload of references and allusions to plays by Shakespeare, Brueghelian proverbs, ideologies of Karl Marx and iconic Grimm fairy tales. In addition, the entire performance is interwoven with literal citations from previous Needcompany performances; for example the kitchen from ‘Morning Song’, the bear from ‘The Lobster Shop’, the princess clown, the hanging of the plumber from ‘Marktplaats 76’...



**Billy’s Joy** evokes a complexity that wants to enforce a freedom to handle text and metatext differently. Jan Lauwers: *“The ambiguity and equivocality of the content is underlined by the physicality of the bodies. The actors substantively employ their bodies and thus become supports for the tragedy.”* What’s more, Maarten Seghers’s music nudges the narrative into a physical experience. Narrative slips into music and music becomes narrative in which language plays a central role. Thus a synthesis is created between Elizabethan English and contemporary English, which Victor Lauwers himself refers to as ‘Globish’, in which the globalisation process with its ‘grammatical errors’ is completely contained, and whereby the story is told by everyone together. All of this makes **Billy’s Joy** an absurd, exuberant celebration in which it entirely conceals its meaning as a mirror, as commentary, beneath a gigantic gaberdine, that beautiful medieval coat, in order to weather the storm of the 21st century.







# **BILLY'S JOY**

*a hystory*

Text **VICTOR AFUNG LAUWERS**

Music **MAARTEN SEGHERS**

Creators **JAN LAUWERS, GRACE ELLEN BARKEY, EMILY HEHL, NAO ALBET, GONZALO CUNILL, ROMY LOUISE LAUWERS, JUAN NAVARRO, MAARTEN SEGHERS, MERON VERBELEN, MARTHA GARDNER and ELKE JANSSENS**

Production **KOEN DE SAEGER, RAPHAEL NOEL, JEREMY MICHEL, DITTEN LEROOIJ, SHARLOTTA SEELIGMÜLLER, LEANDER SCHÖNWEGER**

Production **NEEDCOMPANY**

Co-production **IMPULSTANZ (Vienna), PERPODIUM (Antwerp), LE QUARTZ (Brest), THE SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL (Gdansk), TEATRO CENTRAL (Sevilla), TEATRO ESPANOL Y NAVES DEL ESPANOL EN MATADERO (Madrid), CC BRUGGE (Bruges),**

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Duration : 105 minutes

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