

BILLY'S VIOLENCE

Jan Lauwers & Needcompany

A Needcompany production

Co-production: Festival Grec de Barcelona & Teatre Nacional de Catalunya

Produced with the support of the Belgian Federal Government and Flemish Government's Tax Shelter

BILLY'S VIOLENCE

Text based on the 13 tragedies of William Shakespeare

Adaptation Erwin Jans, Jan Lauwers, Victor Lauwers

Direction, set, concept Jan Lauwers

With Nao Albet, Grace Ellen Barkey, Gonzalo Cunill, Irene Escolar,
Romy Louise Lauwers, Victor Lauwers,
Yonier Camilo Mejia, Juan Navarro, Maarten Seghers

Music Maarten Seghers

Dramaturgy Erwin Jans, Elke Janssens, Victor Lauwers

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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. Quentin Tarantino is a choirboy by comparison to the sheer brutality evoked by Shakespeare. 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?

In 'Billy's Violence', Shakespeare's 13 tragedies are explored and rewritten to create a new story. Shakespeare's violence: the impossible fifth act of King Lear, Caesar's gruesome death, the brutality of Titus Andronicus, and so on. Is this gratuitous, entertaining, necessary or impossible?

Jan Lauwers: 'Shakespeare wanted an audience in his theatre, but on the street in London there were dog fights, people being tortured, women being burnt on the squares, and public executions. These were large-scale festivities that brought many people together on the street, and Shakespeare was obliged to use baits such as sex and violence to attract the public to his theatre. This is absolutely fascinating. It is not dissimilar to Quentin Tarantino. Is it gratuitous or is it necessary? 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's not true. The majority is not violent, and there is enormous solidarity. If we look back at the past, and when I do that I always come up against Shakespeare's tragedies, then there is perhaps something to be found.'

Victor Lauwers: 'Shakespeare continues to be a relevant dramatist, and with Hamlet, for example, has created one of the seminal characters in Western literature. The prince who is torn asunder by fate is a figure who tries to purify himself but who does not know which way to turn. When he finally commits the act which he believes has been imposed upon him by a ghost from the past, the young man perishes together with his family. Where the psychological landscape of inner conflict ends and the downfall of mankind begins is a question with an answer. Tragedy seems not to exist without action. The horror of inertia is the inability to die: *For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil?* But the story has to end...'

Erwin Jans: 'When the curtain falls on Shakespeare's tragedies, order is restored. Over a mountain of corpses, peace and balance once more descend. In what precedes this – the 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?'

TEXTS ABOUT PREVIOUS SHAKESPEARE ADAPTATIONS

EXERCISES IN REGICIDE

Dramaturgy and Space
in Needcompany's Versions of Shakespeare

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 neighbour, 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 over-interpreted. 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 an 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, rational 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 honour 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 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 coloured: '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 coloured 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 honour 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 behaviour of Lear's court. While engaged in this dialogue the actors 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.

BEAUTY AS A WEAPON AGAINST THE UNBEARABLE CRUELTY OF BEING IN NEEDCOMPANY'S KING LEAR

Christel Stalpaert

Jan Lauwers started rehearsals for Needcompany's King Lear in the autumn of 1999, venturing, after Julius Caesar (1990), Antonius und Cleopatra (1992) and Needcompany's Macbeth (1996), into yet another adaptation of Shakespeare. Staging King Lear presents a number of challenges, not the least of which is how to deal with its notorious oversized tragic power. Over the centuries, King Lear has after all been labelled as "too huge for the stage"¹ and often thought unsuitable for theatrical performance. The cruelties the characters suffer are so horrible that even a seasoned director does not always succeed in staging everything convincingly. Lauwers saw the 'hugeness' of King Lear from a different angle. He was attracted to the risk of tragic saturation because it gave him the opportunity to introduce a new tension to the notions of 'beauty', 'cruelty' and 'tragedy'.

King Lear is generally interpreted as a tragedy about literal and figurative blindness. Lear cannot, or chooses not to, see the difference between the false flattery of Goneril and Regan and Cordelia's sincerity. Gloucester is literally blinded because he fails to distinguish between Edgar's sincerity and Edmund's dissemblance.

What is tragic in Lear is that he uses his daughters' oath of love as a measure by which to know 'the truth', and he divides his kingdom on the basis of the wrong 'truth'. But what is 'knowledge' of 'reality'? What is the 'truth'? What is 'the wrong truth'? And also, what is 'truthful' and 'sincere' in the theatre, where everything is illusion, and where only theatrical make-believe guarantees the principle of mimesis and identification?

Postmodernism has countered man's confidence in the possibilities of knowing the truth with scepticism. Reality is not assessable in terms of truth and falsity. For Gilles Deleuze, for example, "philosophy does not consist in knowing and is not inspired by truth". In his critique of the dogmatic model of recognition and representation, he maintained a rigorous distinction between knowledge, understood as the recognition of truths, and thinking, understood as the creation of concepts. Truth must be regarded then as "solely the creation of thought". In this sense, it has become pretentious to think that reality can be represented and that we can actually make statements about its truth. The alternative image, of thought as creative, exceeds 'pat' images of the real and instead tackles the unrepresentable and a-presentative. It is a matter of invoking a rhizomatic view of reality, of encountering multiplicities and open-ended systems of multiple differential elements.

The tragedy of King Lear, in which 'knowledge' is constantly challenged by madness, lends itself to the deployment of such insights. Jan Lauwers agrees that this idea is an important element in his Shakespeare adaptations: "Shakespeare uses ambiguity as a basic idea: what you see is not what you see, what you hear is not what you hear". In the classic Illusionsbühne versions, the fool and Cordelia make Lear aware of the fact that he fails to know 'the truth'. In Needcompany's King Lear, Lauwers triggers the audience to question the value of knowledge and 'common sense' in order to think creatively. Lauwers described Lear as someone imprisoned "in his own web of insubstantial appearance, and only those who are prepared to play along with the comedy he has staged may count on his goodness and generosity". Cordelia refuses to play this game of representation. Lauwers therefore stages her as a crack in the unity that 'common sense' provides, a concept of unity that characterizes not only Lear's universe, but also the 'universe' of traditional dramatic aesthetics. What follows is not a summary of the pictures that go with the

words. It is a fragmented account of the mental and physical journey I undertook as a spectator, a selection from the kaleidoscope of subjective theatrical experiences collected while watching Needcompany's King Lear. The central question here is not 'what does it mean?' I want to ground my wonder in the question 'how does it work?'. How does this theatre-maker let such concepts as 'beauty', 'cruelty' and 'tragedy' operate in the Lauwers machinery? I would like to zoom in on moments in the play that have not only been burnt into my retina, but contain also a corporeal memory. After all, in addition to the story of Lear, Needcompany's King Lear is also and above all a matter of aisthesis, of sensory communication. The spectator's cognitive faculties are beset by what Lehmann calls "an independent auditory semiotics", "a visual dramaturgy" and "the aura of physical presence". Instead of attempting to stitch these moments together into a narrative, I will linger over these moments of corporeal memory.

Lear and the Tragic Game of Representation

The monologue by the now mad Lear. Inhabiting the role of Lear, Tom Jansen makes a stately entrance on a diluted stage, his head adorned with a garland of flowers shaped to look like giant Indian feathers. As he delivers his monologue he steps on and off a small platform at the centre of the forestage. He addresses the audience frontally, as if he wished to gain their sympathy and pity. Lehmann aptly remarked that in postdramatic theatre, actors inhabiting their role do not actually create the solid illusion of being fictional characters. Similarly, in Needcompany's King Lear, the aside, soliloquy or monologue does not completely fit the fictive reality of the play or narration. Accentuating the theatrical context, Jansen here exposes the game of representation. Identification, opposition, analogy and resemblance are revealed as the tools of representation the actor uses in order to appear as a recognizable king-hero. The first words of Lear's monologue — "I am king" — outline the representative rules of the game and its notion of identity. The words "I am king" form the foundation of the ontological proposition of the univocity of being, insofar as representation reduces manifold entities to a single sense unit.

According to Deleuze, classical representation was established under Aristotle, the Greek thinker whose main concern was with the recognition of the identical and not with the distinction of the different. In classical dramatic aesthetics, grounded as it is in the representative model, difference vanishes into nonbeing. Jansen draws explicit attention to his use of the building blocks of classical dramatic aesthetics: cognitive recognition, and imitation or mimesis. The cracks in his role-playing, however, reveal how the actor reverts to invariables to form an identity that can be 'recognizable' as a king-hero, by way of a central core and in spite of all the differences from fictional reality. In other words, Lear's monologue is presented as a vain attempt to bring to a standstill the continuous movement of difference.

Tom Jansen, who questions the limits of representation from within his role, uses theatrical magnification to demonstrate the suffocating principles of representation. Muriel Héroult and Dirk Roofthoof, who 'inhabit' the role of Cordelia and the fool respectively, venture on a sort of post-representative line of flight.

The Body Writing Scenic Poetry

In Act V the storm scene and the final section coalesce into a chaotic, hallucinatory assault on the spectator's senses. There is no doubt that the condensation or saturation of signs here. Dirk Roofthoof emerges as an ambiguous entity. Acting as property master on stage, he dictates which objects need to be present for the start of Act V: a table, a chair, another chair. Holding a script in his hand, he strikes the figure of the director;

he screams the stage directions through a microphone, and calls out the names of the characters to the actors, who are weighed down by the soundscape and are not able to deliver their lines 'properly'. Roofthoof shouts, waits, commands, directs, acts and puts up a fight against the saturated stage.

The auditory component bursts at the seams. The actors who have no lines to speak wage war; they blow the sound of gun shots into the microphone, shriek chilling cries expressive of the fear of death, and produce an amalgam of sounds that pierce the audience to the marrow. The actors who are speaking their lines do not use a microphone. They try to raise their voices over the hail of auditory bullets, over the chaos and sensory violence. They reel off their lines fast and in a flurry, as if driven on by the saturated stage. In the end even the supertitling goes into overdrive.

The spectator's experience is one of disorientation. The solid narrative ground slips away from beneath our feet. We no longer know what to think or in what direction our thoughts should go. In this scene, the script is no longer used as something to go by, as a guide taking everything in the right direction. Lauwers here uses what Erwin Jansen calls a deliberate excess of language, something that explodes in an indefinable amalgam of sounds: "it seems as if language is constantly pushed to the limits. ... language somehow becomes 'disbanded'".

As a result of this surfeit of information, language fails at the task of the unambiguous communication of meaning; it is "as if language were taking revenge on the story (on our understanding of it as such)".

In Act V, the paradigm of logocentric, linear-successive perception gives way to a multiple sensory experience, in which the narrative of Shakespeare's play is no longer treated as the central and hierarchically supreme good. The spectator has to deal with multiple and ambiguous layers of the signifying material and has to let go of the familiar viewing experience of cognitive recognition.

As a result of the de-hierarchization of the narrative as the all-embracing bearer of meaning, an energetic or intensive connection unfolds between the bodies of Tom Jansen/Lear, Muriel Héroult/Cordelia and Dirk Roofthoof/the fool, quite separate from the narrative, linear-successive mechanism of the text. In his aesthetics of intensities, Gilles Deleuze unfolds an open-ended, post-representational mode of thinking, in which connections are not tied up into relations between fixed identities. This plane of immanence with energetic or intensive connections signals the triumph of 'becoming' over 'being'.

This aesthetics of intensities establishes "an energetic or intensive connection which develops relations of speed and rest ... the value of the affects to explain the state of the body in relation to surrounding bodies denies the representative value accorded to ideas. All production depends here on the contact and intermixing of different bodies".

A significant tension is created by Muriel Héroult. She presents a point of rest, a counterpart to the saturated image, a local dilution of the signifying material, both in a visual and a rhythmic sense. She performs Cordelia's death scene amidst the chaos and sensory turbulence. With exasperating slowness she repeatedly lets herself slide around a table. She repeats the same choreographic phrase again and again until her body tears itself away from any form of narrative foundation and becomes an autonomous cytosure of forces. Her movements are no longer regulated by a sensory-motor schema of action and reaction. She no longer represents a character that dies by the agency of another character. She no longer inhabits a character that reacts to a situation as part of a plot. She uncouples herself from the narrative and joins up with what Hans-Thies

Lehmann calls "a new kind of aesthetic alchemy" in a "theatre of scenography". Lehmann develops this concept with an eye on Mallarmé's scenic 'graphism'; the description of dance as écriture corporelle, as writing with the body:

A savoir que la danseuse n'est pas une femme qui danse, pour ces motifs juxtaposés qu'elle n'est pas femme, mais une métaphore résumant un des aspects élémentaires de notre forme, glaive, coupe, fleur, etc. et qu'elle ne danse pas, suggérant, par le prodige de raccourcis ou d'élan, avec une écriture corporelle ce qu'il faudrait des paragraphes en prose dialoguée autant que descriptive, pour exprimer, dans sa rédaction: poème dégagé de tout appareil du scribe.

Whereas in the scene mentioned above, Jansen emphatically inscribes Lear as a hero in the story of the King by means of the mechanism of identification, Héroult here 'writes' the scene with her body. She does not "represent an individual human form but rather a multiple figuration of her body parts, of her form in figures that change from moment to moment". Deleuze is convinced that common sense generates a limiting image of the self and the body. By contrast, creative, nomadic thinking surrenders to continuous metamorphoses, it constantly rises above any grounding of bodily images. In becoming, or devenir, the attention shifts from the ideal of statuesque 'being' to the materiality of the here and now, to the contemporain par excellence. Lear cherishes the teleological pursuit of the ideal and because of that he remains stuck in the state of tragic 'being'. Cordelia, on the other hand, seeks the flow, the movement, of 'becoming'. It is as if, in her silence and her physicality, Héroult is writing the scene with the following words by Deleuze: "Stop! You're making me tired. Experiment, don't signify and interpret! Find your own places, territorialities, deterritorializations, regimes, lines of flight."

Repetition as a Weapon of two Different Heroes

In the 'struggle for survival' on stage, both Héroult/Cordelia and Jansen/Lear apply the strategy or weapon of repetition, but each on the basis of a different configuration and with a different effect. This, of course, makes them different sorts of heroes. Lear applies mimetic repetition in the Aristotelian sense of the word. His representation is founded on the principle of imitation and mimesis and is based on repetition understood as analogies and invariables. It is this repetition that Deleuze calls a tragic territorialization: "to proceed by resemblance ... would represent an obstacle or stoppage."

Cordelia, endlessly repeating the same choreographic phrase over and over again, applies the strategy of productive repetition. This is not "repetition of the Same, explained by the identity of the concept of representation"; it "includes difference, and includes itself in the alterity of the Idea, in the heterogeneity of an 'a-presentation'". The repetition Lear employs is static because it is focused on the invariables in imitation, while Cordelia's is dynamic because of the differences in intensity that characterize her repetition. By means of the seemingly endless repetition of the same choreographic phrase, our senses are sharpened and differences are brought to the fore.

The weapon of static repetition is wielded by the traditional dramatic hero. Cordelia, by contrast, is a warrior in Deleuze's sense of the word. She expresses her resistance by proceeding to the unique zone of the line of flight and in this way marks off the border with that which is represented. This heroine is the army's scout, the little everyday warrior who puts up her individual resistance with the aid of her own physicality and the sensory intensities that emanate from it. When, in a recent *Theaterschrift*, Lauwers says, with regard to his Shakespeare productions, that "the power of beauty is

the only power you have against violence”, what he is referring to is the beauty of the lithe and supple warrior who defends the molecularity of the intensities and the impermanent in order to escape the tragic molar ‘being’. Hérault/Cordelia has recovered her bodily space from the representative paradigm. These intensities in the supple warrior form the power of beauty. Beauty as a weapon against tragic ‘being’.

Nomadic Moving and Being Moved

The system of representation fixes the subject’s various faculties (imagination, reason, understanding, sensibility, memory, etc.) in a logocentric unit, unable to conceive of difference in itself. The model of recognition depends upon a harmonious accord among the faculties, determined by the dominant faculty of reason, father of the supposedly knowing Subject. But, according to Deleuze, the subject in question is in fact not logocentric: the faculties operate within a multiplicity, their composition constantly changing. It is only in unambiguous representation that the different faculties become streamlined and attuned. In reality, the ebb-and-flow nature of the observing subject does not correspond to classical dramatic aesthetics, whose ground is the unity of the thinking Subject.

Act V of Needcompany’s King Lear, barrages the faculties of imagination, reason, understanding, sensibility, memory, etc. with a constantly changing configuration. You do not always see what you hear; what you hear overpowers the narrative line; and what you experience cannot always be captured in logical thought. Derrida defined the sensory perception of music as the combination of feelings of deception and loss: in his entrancement, the subject feels sorrow because he cannot grasp what entrances him. For this reason he defined music as the “experience itself of impossible appropriation. The most joyous and the most tragic”. In Act V I underwent a similar sensory experience of intensities and tensions, which means that I was carried along without knowing why.

Lauwers counters cognitive recognition, and processes of dramatic identification that attends it, with an aesthetics of perceptibility: an open perception that is not and cannot be turned off. The énoncé or expression of a postulated idea becomes the énonçable; pure possibility. It is up to the spectator whether he wants to open up his various faculties to the free circulation of affects, or appeal to the logocentric subject of knowledge, which in any case falls short of its centralizing function. Entrancement or frustration. Insight too. Because the monolithic oneness of the subject turns out to be a construction. Recognition based on common sense is an uncomplicated act of comprehension which is, in frustration, exposed as a process of territorialization; “the reassuring familiarity of encounters with the known”. Deterritorialization processes make the spectator reflect on the unrepresentable: “the hesitant gestures that accompany our encounters with the unknown”. When in Theaterschrift Jan Lauwers talks about his horrific discovery that “‘civilization’ has switched-off thinking”, he means also, of course, this last-mentioned form of thinking, this nomadic thinking besieged by all-encompassing ‘reason’ on one side and comfortable but not so innocent ‘common sense’ on the other.

Dirk Roofthoof/the Fool as a Postepic Narrator

In contrast to the tragic ‘being’ of Lear, Hérault/Cordelia and Roofthoof/the fool evolve into nomadic thinkers and precisely for this reason they are able to escape the tragic molar side of being. In fact, Roofthoof demonstrates his qualities and potential as a performer, and he is aware that he is an actor performing. After all, the physicality of the actor, the ‘real’ person of

flesh and blood, is visible in the cracks of the character construction and of the hero’s mask. The actor does not disappear behind a mask, but appears in the mask.

Viviane De Muynck, a highly esteemed Needcompany actress, cultivates a similar way of acting and, as she herself says, employs a “living dramaturgy” that bespeaks a sort of duality in the acting. “Not: the actor who ‘acts so well’ that he loses himself totally in a fictitious character but the actor who remains present, who maintains control over what he is doing. ... I’m not so interested in the ‘total absorption in a role’ because it’s so air-tight. It is perfect, but closed; ... I find it more interesting to see someone’s vulnerability, to see how he uses the material. ... So an interaction arises and you see someone who occasionally holds a mask in front of himself. Not to hide himself, but in order to clarify things.”

In Act V Roofthoof displays a similar vulnerability when, with his entire being, he ‘struggles to survive’ in the saturated stage. It is precisely because he struggles with the material, however, that he is saved from the disappearing trick of ‘acting by entering thoroughly into a role’. On occasion, he, too, literally holds a mask in front of his face. On stage he puts on and takes off his fool’s cap in order to step into and out of his ‘role’ of the fool, revealing with that gesture what classical systems of representation usually conceal. Roofthoof creates a distance between his lines, his position as an actor and his character(s). The result is the shattering of the compositional structures of the theatrical medium. Hans-Thies Lehmann would call this sort of actor a “postepic narrator”. In Deleuze’s terms, Roofthoof/the fool/Kent accepts schizoanalysis and in this way escapes the tragic trap of closed systems. After all, the schizophrenic tolerates a lack of unity and is therefore closer to the idea that reality is a-presentable. He is sensitive to the complex interplay between molar processes that lead to unity or territorialization and molecular processes of differentiation that lead to deterritorialization.

Roofthoof appears in his mask, Hérault in the folds of her skin. To use Lyotard’s words, one might call it the polymorphous perversion of the skin: “a surface that does not form the boundary of an organic body, but with its folds and tissue transitions is both an inside and an outside at the same time”. Just as in Roofthoof’s hands the mask indicates an inside and an outside at the same time. After all, in schizoanalysis, the binary pairs of opposing concepts are dismantled. In Needcompany’s King Lear, ‘inside/outside’, ‘reality/illusion’, ‘beautiful/ugly’, ‘pleasure/pain’ and so on are no longer hierarchically arranged in such a way that the first pole is allotted a higher value. What is more, the term ‘pole’ no longer applies because the two concepts display another relation. Rather than complying with the concept of dualistic opposition, the two terms are present, but do not lose themselves, in each other. When Lauwers says that the power of beauty is the only power we have against violence, he is also referring to the fact that in his productions “the power of the images transcends the question of beauty or ugliness. ... Beautiful is ugly and ugly is beautiful ... when the struggle is lost and won, it’s winning and losing at the same time”. Even the tension between Lear and Cordelia should not be conceived as dualistic, but as a complex interplay between the molar and the molecular. So in Lauwers’ case it is not only a matter of revising classical dramatic aesthetics and idealist representation. There is more. The otherwise familiar coordinates of Western philosophy — the distinctions between inside and outside, subject and object, image and idea, picture and referent and so on — are constantly shifting and no longer offer the spectator anything to hold on to. In Needcompany’s King Lear, reason does not triumph as the ordering principle of Truth, Goodness and

Beauty. The Cartesian framework that came to dominate philosophical thinking in the seventeenth century proves an inadequate tool to the understanding of Lauwers' universe. The question is no longer 'to be or not to be', but 'how to move when everything is moving'.

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.

JAN LAUWERS

Jan Lauwers (Antwerp, 1957) is an artist who works in just about every medium. Over the last thirty years he has become best known for his pioneering work for the stage with Needcompany, which was founded in Brussels in 1986. In the course of this period he has also built up a substantial body of art work which has been shown at BOZAR (Brussels) and McaM (Shanghai) among other places. From 2009 until 2014 Needcompany was artist-in-residence at the Burgtheater in Vienna. Jan Lauwers was awarded the 'Decoration of Honour in Gold for Services to the Republic of Austria' in 2012. In 2014, he was rewarded with the 'Golden Lion Lifetime Achievement Award' at the Venice Biennale. He is the first Belgian to receive this prize in the theatre category.

Jan Lauwers studied painting at the Academy of Art in Ghent. At the end of 1979 he gathered round him a number of people to form the Epigonensembel. In 1981 this group was transformed into the Epigontheater zlv collective which took the theatre world by surprise with its six stage productions. In this way Jan Lauwers took his place in the movement for radical change in Flanders in the early 80s, and also made his international breakthrough. Epigontheater zlv presented direct, concrete, highly visual theatre that used music and language as structuring elements.

Jan Lauwers needs company. He founded Needcompany together with Grace Ellen Barkey. Together they are responsible for Needcompany's larger-scale productions. The group of performers Jan Lauwers and Grace Ellen Barkey have put together over the years is quite unique in its versatility.

Since Needcompany was founded in 1986, both its work and its performers have been markedly international. And since then, every production has been performed in several languages. Its first productions were still highly visual, but in subsequent productions the storyline and the main theme gained in importance, although the fragmentary composition remained. Lauwers' training as an artist is decisive in his handling of the theatre medium and leads to a highly individual and in many ways pioneering theatrical idiom that examines the theatre and its meaning. One of its most important characteristics is transparent, 'thinking' acting and the paradox between 'acting' and 'performing'.

NEEDCOMPANY

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