

a Needcompany production
Jan Lauwers & Viviane De Muynck

Molly Bloom

Based on the final chapter of James Joyce's Ulysses

BACKGROUND

In 1999, Viviane De Muynck and Jan Lauwers set to work with the last chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses* for the first time. Joyce's grandson, Stephen J. Joyce, explicitly forbade them the use of the material with a number of offensive letters. Despite this ban, a few clandestine readings took place in Germany, which were positively received by the press.

21 years later - now the copyright on Joyce's work has expired - De Muynck, the 74-year-old *grande dame* of the European theatre, puts herself back in the shoes of Molly Bloom, the unfaithful wife of Leopold Bloom, and approaches the text with new questions.

While writing this radical monologue one hundred years ago Joyce must have thought that 'behind every famous man there's a woman watching in astonishment'. Today, the aftermath of #metoo movement shows the burning necessity to create a space to talk openly about emancipation, equality and sexual freedom of women. That perspective sets a landscape for a new embodiment of Molly Bloom's statement.

To quote Viviane de Muynck: 'It is a universal text about the impossibility of getting to know each other totally and accept the difference'. De Muynck herself says this is her best part ever.



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PRESS

She is her. Viviane is Molly. She transforms a dramatised reading into an hour of thrilling spectacle. Molly is a self-confident woman who nevertheless still expects more from life, without knowing precisely what. She brushes off this uncertainty with a deep laugh or a giggle. Then Molly is Viviane, or is Viviane Molly?

- Die Welt

Here, desire and a zest for life are presented as important female principles. This is an exceptionally vital presentation of a literary figure and her sensuality. Over the course of an hour, we witness an animated actress creating a Molly who refuses to let you go, and who to a large extent is also Viviane.

- Berliner Morgenpost



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IN HER OWN WORDS

'Bearing in mind that the entire final episode of Joyce's *Ulysses* can only be fully appreciated by a reader, who discovers the different layers of this monologue according to their capabilities, we were confronted with the necessity of making choices.

We arrived at this theatrical adaptation through a process of elimination, filled with admiration and wonder for the ingenuity of the writing and construction, and taking into account that certain elements of the story might be too complex with a view to direct communication with an audience which may not be familiar with *Ulysses* as such, or with Irish social and political history in particular. We therefore concentrated on Molly Bloom.

We profoundly regret that certain passages could not be retained, and that we were obliged to condense others, in order not to threaten the clarity of our point of view. We trust that we have achieved our goal; presenting an excellent selection from this rich material, to be heard rather than read, to be felt and understood rather than being clinically analysed. In doing so, we will hopefully inspire the audience to rediscover James Joyce's work.'

- Viviane De Muynck

TO SAY 'YES' TO LIFE

Viviane De Muynck in conversation with Kasia Tórz

After twenty years, you are Molly Bloom again. How does it feel?

I'm very glad to be able to do it for the first time, after our first 'underground' attempt, twenty years ago. When I started working on the text, I was surprised that it all came back.

What has changed in these two decades?

We have lost a lot of freedom. Covid-19 has changed our world completely – we can't shake hands, we can only see a chosen few in our bubble. But this distancing is also due to more than just the virus. #MeToo rightly revealed the schism between life as it is and the excesses. This has to do with abuse of power more than with sex in itself. I am curious about how Molly Bloom's monologue – which is so full of lust for life, a description of how to do it – will be seen and felt. Twenty years ago these things were still more open. Molly's monologue is political because of the provocative, straightforward way it addresses sexuality, describing in detail how men see sex and how women see it. 'All the pleasure these men get' is something Molly says very often. It is like an orgasm – easier for a man than for a woman.

Does it bother you that this text was written by a man?

No, not at all. I love the work of James Joyce. He was very honest and very observant in writing about things nobody else wrote about. It is one of his great strengths. His unique power is also to be able to create a world or to take from reality elements which he transports into literature. In the text, Molly is getting older. She speaks about the changes of life and how to reflect on them. That makes it a universal text about the impossibility of getting to know each other totally and about accepting the difference.

If Molly Bloom is a twentieth-century Penelope, who is the Penelope of here and now?

My personal view is that I wouldn't like to be a twenty-first century Penelope. The world has become more puritan, more politically correct. Feeling now mostly has to do with safety and with not creating problems. We have become a society in which people are afraid of the unknown. We need subcultures and they shouldn't be hijacked by the system, as happened in the 1970s.

How can theatre contribute?

It's not that theatre wants to shock, but there is beauty in wildness, in taking risks. And that is something fundamental. It's like the big life questions in ancient Greek theatre. What is sacred? That is something we have lost. These must be always boundaries in society, but the most interesting things happen on the borders of those boundaries. And when people step over those boundaries, they give something else a push, they bring the

unexpected to light. Molly Bloom is an instrument that helps us to understand or feel these boundaries. And step over and come back again. She says 'yes' to life – even if you face hardships, have trouble defining yourself. If there is no risk, why bother? I've never been afraid of landing with my face in the mud.

How did you build Molly's character?

It goes from here to there. And that is the way I like to act. I can offer Molly, and every woman will recognize something of Molly in them. And the men too. Because they were confronted with feelings they didn't know. They may look at their wives or a friend and think, Is that how you see me? Is that how you experience my life, my love? It's very confronting. Jan's direction for me as an actress was, Stay with the character, with personal things. Joyce painted Molly on his wife Nora. She reacts spontaneously to the situation. There is no censorship. There is only the brutal, painful, happy feeling of the moment. She doesn't transform it into a story that has been filtered by rationality. It is the way of being that is exceptional, because she is so blunt, so open and has such a good sense of humour.

Did you feed Molly's persona with your personal experiences?

I never start by looking for a character. I search for the thoughts and they make up the persona. Molly Bloom goes into the rawness of her memory, her feelings, her hopes. It is not very often that there is a text that deals with menstruation. My story as a woman is different from hers. I had a severe upbringing, and the only wild spell I experienced was in the late 1960s. This abundance of flesh that she has, I didn't always have that. The two hardest things for me in life are: to love yourself and to forgive yourself. To accept who you are. Now young women are much freer and much more self-assured. In my times that was different. In a way, Molly is in isolation. That is very female. She is a woman who cannot sleep at night because she is waiting for something to happen. He is sleeping off whatever he has done. And women worry. More than men. Men accept things and they move on. But there are certain wounds, which women especially have, that never heal. There is only a slight form of healing. The scar remains. And it doesn't take much to make it open again. Molly Bloom is lonely because she reflects on different stages in her life. That is why you get the feeling that her personality is very complex.

What is the persona of Viviane De Muynck now?

My virtual life in all the roles that I have played is bigger than my private life. My persona is bigger than my person. The chance to explore this wide range of humanity which has been given me is not possible in one lifetime. Males, including actors in theatre, often want to know who is winning in their scene, whereas I believe there are no winners. I believe there are attempts, but the balance between winning and losing is a moment-to-moment thing. I have worked with very good directors, but Jan Lauwers is one of the few to be so woman-friendly. He doesn't see it as a softness. He has an extreme regard for women, for their strength. He has this universal humanity that doesn't think that the world of feeling is not important. Jan has given me the opportunity to examine a range of women and men. There is a wildness to him. That is why I like working with him.

Antwerp, 9 July 2020



MOLLY, MY FRIEND

In January 1931 Virginia Woolf gave a speech at the London and National Society for Women's Service. She shared the experience of her profession, being a female writer who must deal with the Angel in the House¹, a persona embodying the principles of a woman of the late Victorian era: immensely charming, pure, flattering, utterly unselfish, sacrificing herself daily and excelling in 'the difficult arts of family life'.² But above all, the Angel in the House always sympathizes with the minds and wishes of other. Woolf confesses that if she hadn't killed it, the ghost 'would have plucked the heart out of my writing'.

The Angel in the House is never fully gone. Another demon lurks behind its wings – a demon restricting freedom of imagination, which can only be practised without restrictions. Because in order to write, one needs to have a clear opinion and the courage 'to express what she considers as truth when it comes to human relations, morality and gender', argues Woolf. Yet, she predicts that 'it will be a long time still (...) before a woman can sit down to write a book without finding a phantom to be slain, a rock to be dashed against'. This is because for female writers, telling the truth about their own experiences as a body and about passion is regulated by many factors that decide what is fitting and what is not, where a boundary of shock and misbehaviour is set.

Molly Bloom – a character conceived by James Joyce, Woolf's exact contemporary – is a child of the same era. Molly is a ghost, too. However, unlike the Angel of the House, she is free, vital, adventurous and down-to-earth. She doesn't meet expectations, she doesn't restrict herself, she lets go – of the stream of thoughts, of language (far from sophisticated English), of her desires, impulses, contradictions. The starting point for the performance directed by Jan Lauwers is his long collaboration with Viviane De Muynck. 'In Molly Bloom two giants meet: Joyce and De Muynck', says Lauwers, emphasizing that he doesn't want to be a director, but a companion to the actress in finding her own way to this 'very vivid but also obscure text'. In this work, Jan Lauwers, literally speaking, gives De Muynck the floor. She is alone with the text and she makes it enchant, provoke and move the audience.

But what is a monologue? What does it mean to speak? Where do all these words – unspoken, muffled during our lifetime – go? Molly Bloom – a woman lying next to a drunken man, her husband – is a universal figure of 'the impossibility of getting to know each other totally and accepting the difference', as De Muynck puts it. In her speech, Molly Bloom shows a woman's life through layers, she employs her own body as an archive. She represents dozens of versions of Molly, of Viviane De Muynck, of our projections of the women we are, we know, we desire. De Muynck turns the words into flesh and blood,

acknowledging their density, weight, lightness, the air that enters the pause – bringing relief or a blow of dramatic silence. The eyes of this gorgeous 74-year-old figure of European theatre are sometimes sharp and cheeky, sometimes misty and tired. She escapes any classification. What is truly confronting and liberating is Molly's attitude: she is not ashamed, doesn't let her imagination be enslaved by 'what is appropriate', enjoys performing the richness of her personalities, moods, desires, is a vigilant observer and doesn't hesitate to express it.

We meet Molly Bloom now, in 2020, in the epicentre of the #MeToo aftermath. When gender equality and the right to intimacy on the one hand are confused with so-called 'sexualization', on the other hand shut down freedom of self-expression; when women still need to adapt to the roles suggested by a patriarchal society and face various forms of violence and hate; when there is less and less room for the affirmation of life, the body, connections, because fear and a lack of trust loom over them. It feels like communication is getting harder and harder. The old demon of self-censorship hasn't been extinguished, though the Victorian epoch is over. In the heart of democratic and outwardly liberated Europe, there are still many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome. Molly is here to speak up and doesn't comfort anybody.

The challenge of contemporary feminism is that the discourse and practice of emancipation must go much further – to exceed the restrictive binary opposition between 'male' and 'female' and, at the same time, to continue the tedious fight for minimum standards for equality and dignity for those who are excluded, vulnerable, subject to abuse of power. It is shocking that years of struggle, demonstrations, texts, manifestos and feminist art have not managed to change the solid foundations of misogynist thinking. At the core of this petrified reality lies the conviction that a woman's life, body and choices are a public matter. Apparently, there is no end to imposing, suggesting or advising solutions, images and roles. While women in the upper classes often fail to see the problem of inequality because they have resources and privileges, the majority faces discriminations related to their gender, ethnicity or economic status.

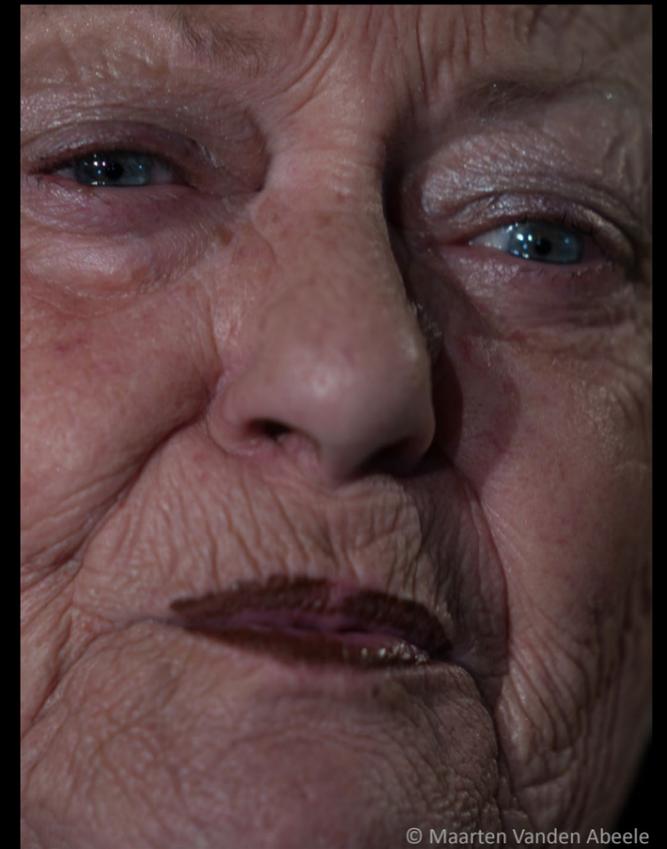
I am writing this text in the centre of Europe, a cradle of human rights. Every day I walk through a district where I see women and men. Women push strollers with babies, or pull shopping trolleys full of groceries. I see them queuing even before a shop has opened. At the same time, men sit at the corner café, drinking, smoking and enjoying their time. I avoid coming to this area in the evening because I don't feel quite safe and I can't wear what I want. My gay friend has been sneaking through the

streets instead of walking normally, as he is used to. He feels an unspecific tension lingering in his body, when confronted with an overwhelming macho masculinity dictating what is right and what is not. I read a newspaper considered a 'progressive, independent and leftist' in which on almost every page I encounter the faces of white middle-aged men in power. Not so long ago, in another, young and hip neighbourhood of Brussels, police arrested a few young women because they had the courage to react against a stream of invective hurled at them by a group of men. While being questioned at the police station, women were advised by an officer to dress more modestly in order to avoid problems in the future. The Angel in the House rustles its wings. These forms of violence are not spectacular, they rather resemble low-register radiation, persistently but imperceptibly changing the substance of my freedom. Every day I pass hundreds of women in the street. And I wonder what they are discussing. What topics do they dare tackle in their personal conversations, and what remains unrevealed?

Molly's monologue is an explosion of an attitude which could be described as I don't have to. Contemporary women still have to do too much, often internalizing the numerous responsibilities imposed on them by others. Molly Bloom was created by a man. James Joyce drew inspiration for this soliloquy from conversations with his wife Nora. What does it add to the story? As much and as little as we want. Maybe here, in this sensational chapter of Ulysses, Joyce settled in the background, engaging his tools as a writer to act as a medium for his muse? Molly is a free spirit, a character whose presence – once given its literary presence by the author – emancipates herself from circumstances and opens up to what comes after. Writing reveals that unlimited interior. Inside, there is always more. Writing is about going beyond. And it is never fully defined, and decided how free the ghosts are – when do they appear and what kind of influence does that offer to the reader.

In re-encountering Molly today – whose presence, body and energy are given us so generously by Viviane De Muynck – the power of fiction is remarkable. It is in her, and thanks to her, that I welcome Molly as my foster literary friend. I reach out to her for advice, inspiration, critical views. I admire her uncompromising choices. She is there for me.

Kasia Tórz
Brussels, October 2020



¹ Woolf refers to the popular poem *The Angel in the House* by Coventry Patmore, an English poet, published in 1854, which praises the Victorian ideal of the perfect wife.

² Virginia Woolf, 'Professions for Women', in *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays* (Orlando: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1942).

VIVIANE DE MUYNCK

Viviane De Muynck is chiefly known as one of Needcompany's central actresses. In the early 1990s, she met Jan Lauwers, Artistic Director of Needcompany, with whom she has steered a splendid course since then. In 2018 she was awarded the Ultima for Overall Cultural Merit by the Flemish government.

She studied drama at the Royal Conservatory of Brussels and was a pupil of Jan Decorte. From 1980 she was a member of the collective Mannen van den Dam and acted in productions including De Pelikaan (Strindberg), Het laxeermiddel (Feydeau), De macht der gewoonte (Bernhard) and Het Park (Strauss). In 1987 she received the 'Theo d'Or' for playing the role of Martha in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Directed by Sam Bogaerts with the company De Witte Kraai. She subsequently joined Maatschappij Discordia and performed in productions including UBU ROI (Alfred Jarry), Kras (Judith Herzberg), Das Spiel vom Fragen (Handke), Maat voor Maat (Measure for Measure) (Shakespeare) and Driekoningenavond.

A collaboration with three theatres in the Netherlands resulted in Count your Blessings with Toneelgroep Amsterdam, directed by Gerardjan Rijnders; Iphigenia in Taurus with Het Nationaal Toneel in The Hague, directed by Ger Thijs; and Hamlet with Het Zuidelijk Toneel, directed by Ivo Van Hove. She performed in two Kaaitheater productions: in 1994 in Pijl van de Tijd (Time's Arrow) (Martin Amis) directed by Guy Cassiers, and in 1995 the role of Odysseus in Philoktetes Variations (Müller, Gide, Jesureen) by Jan Ritsema, alongside Dirk Roofthoof and Ron Vawter. She was also a guest artist with the Wooster Group (New York) in performances including The Hairy Ape by O'Neill and she toured with Relazione Pubblica, a choreography by Caterina and Carlotta Sagna. In 2006 she was awarded the Flemish Culture Prize for Performing Arts. And in 2007 she played the leading role in Ein fest für Boris, a creation for the Salzburger Festspiele. In 2012 she appeared in Ghost Road (Fabrice Murgia), a collaboration between LOD and Cie Artara, the sequel to which, Children of Nowhere (Ghost Road 2) premiered in 2015. Recently, De Muynck also performed in the much-praised Van den Vos (FC Bergman / Toneelhuis) and Tom Lanoye wrote the monologue GAZ. Pleidooi van een gedoemde moeder for her. Directed by Piet Arfeuille (Theater Malpertuis), this production toured extensively in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Since the opera Orfeo (1993) from Walter Hus and Jan Lauwers, she has regularly acted with Needcompany in Lauwers' productions. She appeared in The Snakesong Trilogy (Le Pouvoir, Le Désir and the full version), Needcompany's Macbeth (1996), Caligula (1997), Morning Song (1999), DeaDDogsDon'tDance/DJamesDJoyce-DeaD (2000), Goldfish Game (2002), No Comment (2003), De kamer van Isabella (2004), Alles is ijdelheid (2006), Het Hertenhuis (2008), De kunst der vermakelijkheid (2011) and War and Turpentine (2017) amongst others. She wrote the text for DeaDDogsDon'tDance/DJamesDJoyceDeaD in collaboration with Jan Lauwers. In addition, she took on the adaptation of the text Alles is ijdelheid, based on the eponymous novel by Claire Goll. In 2006 she was awarded the Flemish Community Prize in the Performing Arts category. In December 2017, War and Turpentine premiered at Toneelhuis, with again a central role for De Muynck.

Viviane De Muynck also makes regular appearances in film and television productions. These include Vinaya (Peter van Kraaij and Josse De Pauw), Vincent and Theo (Robert Altman) and The Crossing (Nora Hoppe). She was twice nominated for the 'Golden Calf' at the Utrecht Film Festival: for the film Evenings (Rudolf van den Berg) and for the TV-drama Duister licht by Martin Koolhoven. In 2005 she appeared in Someone Else's Happiness, Fien Troch's first feature film, and later in The Only One (Geoffrey Enthoven), Swooni (Kaat Beels) and The Verdict (Jan Verheyen). For her performance in Flying Home (Dominique Deruddere), she was awarded an Ensor for Best Supporting Actress at the 2014 Ostend Film Festival.

Then followed roles in The Ardennes, the debut film from Robin Pront, A Real Vermeer (Rudolf van den Berg), Me and Kaminski (Wolfgang Becker) and Pippa (Marc Punt). In Speechless, the film adaptation by Hilde Van Mieghem of the eponymous book by Tom Lanoye, De Muynck plays the starring role alongside Stany Crets. In autumn 2017, Many Heavens came out (Jan Matthys, based on the novel by Griet Op de Beeck) and filming commenced for Don't Shoot (Stijn Coninx).

On TV, De Muynck has appeared in series including Oud België, Het goddelijke monster, Met Man en Macht, Professor T, Generatie B, and is soon to appear in Tabula rasa. For her role in Oud België, De Muynck was nominated as Best Actress at the 2010 Monte Carlo Film Festival.

At Film Fest Gent in 2016, De Muynck was awarded the Actors' Guild Career Prize. At the 11th edition of Ostend Film Festival (2017), De Muynck was guest of honour and received the Lifetime Achievement Award.



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CREDITS

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Text based on 'Penelope' from Ulysses by James Joyce, in the french translation by Tiphaine Samoyault © Editions Gallimard for the translation

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Copresentation Festival Temporada Alta (Girona), Festival de Otoño (Madrid), La Rose des Vents (Villeneuve d'Ascq), La Passerelle (Saint-Brieux), Espaces Pluriels (Pau)

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