

# JAN LAUWERS & NEEDCOMPANY

## ALL THE GOOD



ALL THE GOOD © JAN LAUWERS

*All the good tells a story about loss and hope. A love story at a time in which Europe is sacrificing its values and a large group of people are succumbing to hate and incomprehension. The story of a family of artists with their everyday cares and the omnipresent death, which mercilessly imposes itself both in the seclusion of their home and in the outside world.*

A Needcompany production  
With the support of the Flemish government.

In 2014 Jan Lauwers met the Israeli elite soldier and war veteran Elik Niv who, following a serious accident and a long rehabilitation process, became a professional dancer. They had long discussions about his military operations and his development as a dancer in the safely subsidised world of the living arts in Germany. It was during these conversations that the bombs exploded at Zaventem airport and Maalbeek metro station.

*All the good* is a story with a double autobiographical background: Elik's life on the one hand and Lauwers with Grace Ellen Barkey and their children in their house, an old bakery and workplace in the infamous district of Molenbeek, on the other.

*All the Good* also tells the story of a young girl Romy, who is convinced that the world is good. During a trip through China, she meets the soldier Elik while she is vomiting in an alleyway after drinking snake's blood. This meeting changes her life.

*For the least well-off among us, identity is sometimes the only life-saver and the only form of self-respect. But it is a false image. It is a dishonest image and in the hands of nationalist forces it can become destructive. Artists must do all they can to make sure that their 'poetics' provide a powerful response to the all-devouring political suffocation we now find ourselves in. Brexit, Trump, Erdogan, the abuse of our planet, the terror of the expansion economy and the loss of solidarity all have to be tackled politically. But poetics have to take care of humanity. - Jan Lauwers*



**Text, direction, set** Jan Lauwers

**Music** Maarten Seghers

**With** Grace Ellen Barkey, Romy Louise Lauwers, Victor Lauwers, Jan Lauwers, Sarah Lutz, Benoît Gob, Elik Niv, Yonier Camilo Mejia, Jules Beckman, Simon Lenski, Maarten Seghers, Elke Janssens

**Costumes** Lot Lemm

**Dramaturgy** Elke Janssens

**Lighting Design** Ken Hioco, Jan Lauwers

**Sound** Ditten Lerooij

**Production Management** Marjolein Demey

**Technical director, set** Ken Hioco

**Masks** Lot Lemm, Benoît Gob

**Assistant technical director** Tijs Michiels

**Stage assistant** Nina Lopez Le Galliard

**Tour technician** Saul Mombaerts, Bram Geldhof, Dries D'Hondt, Jannes Dierynck

**Assistant costumes** Lieve Meeussen

**Intern costumes** Marion Thomasson

**Intern P.U.L.S.** Lisaboa Houbrechts

**English language coach** Helen McNamara

**French language coach** Anny Czupper

**English translation** Gregory Ball

**French translation** Anne Vanderschueren

**German translation** Rosi Wiegmann

**A Needcompany production**

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## PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A MAN ON THE TURN

We cannot know his incredible head,  
where the eyes ripened like apples,  
yet his torso still glows like a candelabrum,  
from which his gaze, however dimmed,  
  
still persists and gleams. If this were not so,  
the bow of his breast could not blind you,  
nor could a smile, steered by the gentle curve  
of his loins, glide to the centre of procreation.

And this stone would seem disfigured and stunted,  
the shoulders descending into nothing,  
unable to glisten like a predator's pelt,  
  
or burst out from its confines and radiate  
like a star: for there is no angle from which  
it cannot see you. You have to change your life.

(Translated by Sarah Stutt)

### 1.

In his now well-known 1908 poem *Archaische Apollotorso*, Rainer Maria Rilke describes an aesthetic experience which, a hundred years later, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we may perhaps no longer be entirely able to follow and which for various reasons we have even come to distrust. The situation described in the poem is as simple as it is telling: the poet is walking in a museum, probably the Louvre in Paris, and suddenly notices that he is being looked at by a torso of the god Apollo. The sculpture has no head, but the gaze of the Greek god still glows in its breast. The poem ends with the surprising and mysterious lines: "denn da ist keine Stelle,/ die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern." It is as if the sculpture of Apollo looks at the poet from every angle and a voice emerges from the stone that calls upon him to change his life. "there is no angle from which / it cannot see you. You have to change your life" is the English translation by Sarah Stutt. It is not the viewer who is looking at the work of art, but vice versa: the work of art is looking at the viewer. In this reversed situation, the aesthetic experience becomes an ethical appeal. The poem describes how far-reaching and decisive the encounter with a work of art can be, how powerful its call. It is clear that this is a hierarchical relationship: the work of art has the absolute authority to address the viewer with its imperative demand. It is a call that seems to come from a completely different, higher sphere. The work of art reminds us that we do not live completely, that we do not yet really live. It asks for, no, it demands an inner revolution. It is perhaps not without importance that the setting of the occurrence is a museum. A museum is after all one of the sacred places isolated from everyday realities that are perfectly suited to enabling aesthetic experiences. Everything that might be a distraction is excluded. The visitor comes face to face with the art object. But the aesthetic experience is not only a matter of the space the museum creates, it also has to do with the time, tradition and history that are concentrated inside the walls of the building. Is it a coincidence that it is an archaic Greek torso that calls down the centuries to the poet and appeals to him to change his life? Less than ten years and one World War later, Marcel Duchamp exhibited his urinal in New York under the title *Fountain* and thereby profaned the whole twentieth-century aesthetic experience.

### 2.

"The theatre is in the city and the city is in the world and the walls are of skin"; this is how the dramaturge Marianne van Kerkhoven described the communication between theatre and reality in 1994. The appeal of these words lies in

the organic metaphor of the skin, an extremely sensitive and delicate film that both separates and unites the inner and outer worlds. But we have moved on twenty-five years since then. How much of the world does art tolerate? What would a museum visitor at the beginning of the twenty-first century experience when face to face with the archaic torso of Apollo? He would probably ask questions about the museum as an institution, its administrative hierarchy, its finances, its relations with the art market, its ecological footprint, its public participation, its elitism and its approach to decolonisation. He would want an insight into the social, economic and political circumstances in which the torso was made. He would criticise the Western canon and its pretensions to universality. He would denounce white privilege in the art business and its domination by hetero males. The torso no longer speaks, but finds itself in a whirlwind of voices with loud and imperative questions about legitimacy, democratisation, activism, diversity and so on. That's more than enough to make you keep quiet.

### 3.

In *All the good*, Jan Lauwers takes up a position in the middle of this storm. And he does it literally. He himself is played by Benoît Gob, who stands in the middle of the stage: "Benoît is my self-portrait". Lauwers remains physically present on the stage, but on the fringes of the story. He watches himself from a distance in the mirror of theatre. "In a mirror, a *Mensch* sees a *Mensch*. An ape sees an ape", says his daughter Romy at a later stage. What does Lauwers see when he looks at his alter ego? "An artist imprisoned in a web of doubts. A sombre romantic." This is made clear by such statements as "Someone has to do it. ... To be against everything", and "The world no longer deserves poetry" and "The world is not the world, but a figment of the imagination". The storm raging in his mind and heart also rages around his house, which shakes on its foundations more than once during the performance. Does this herald a great calamity? The possibility of a catastrophe (a war, a terror attack) hangs over the whole show like a shadow.

"All the attention is focused on him and him alone", proclaims Lauwers at the start of the show, referring to himself, as befits a sombre romantic who likes to be the focal point of the world, though this will turn out to be an illusion. The world is much too big and changes too fast. His story and his doubts as an artist are overrun by the others' stories. He finds himself in an existential and artistic crisis. The installation he is working on and that was intended to represent "a crystal-clear destiny that sweeps everything aside" is starting to look more and more like a Christmas tree. He even gives up all forms of sex since this is of benefit to his artistic energy, but the only effect is that his wife uses Tinder to start an affair with Camilo, a friend of the family. What's more, his daughter is in a relationship with Elik, a former Israeli soldier who had fought against Hezbollah in Lebanon. History and the world barge into his house uninvited and unashamed, whereas it should have been 'a sanctuary for radical beauty'. On the contrary, his house becomes a place of domestic worries and arguments, love affairs and sex, larded with discussions on the sense or nonsense of art. "Art should swing and sing and send the bullshit flying"; this is what Maarten, the jester, the man with no identity, claims. Simon, the Habsburg crow, has decided that art can now no longer shock, only the world can still do that. Grace is engaged in a study of 'the impossibility of the invisible', but doesn't want to say anything more about it.

### 4.

Lauwers has taken as his basis stories told him by his actors. At the start of the play he says: "Writing about these people, I get under their skin". And that can be taken quite literally, because three of the actors on the stage are the members of his family: his wife Grace, his daughter Romy and his son Victor – and the others are intimate friends with many of whom he has worked for years. He knows their stories. But he also calls himself 'the misleading narrator': "My truth is not yours. Nor theirs". So many people. So many truths. So many lines that cross. All the stories ought to be told, but it's not possible. Some are too long. Some would only be a distraction. Moreover, not everyone may simply tell everything. There are limits to appropriation and to speaking 'in the name of'. Jules is able to tell Elik's story because he is also a Jew, but Sarah isn't. After all, although her father is Jewish, her mother is not. There is no Palestinian onstage, so the story of Mahmoud, one of the last glass-blowers in Hebron, who made 800 little vases for the production, all different, cannot be told. Each of these vases holds the soul of a work of art that has somewhere

lost its way. Lots of vases get broken during the performance. The house no longer provides any protection for them either.

Cities are 'the world's contact zones': where cultures and people that until now have been separated by geography, history, race, religion, ethnicity and so on are 'forced' to deal and negotiate with each other in the same space, and this in a context of historical traumas and unequal power relationships plus a permanent experience of being 'lost in translation'. New social sensitivities come into conflict with existing patterns of behaviour and cultural traditions. While diversity expands, ethnic, cultural, religious and other identities become more sharply delineated and converted into societal and cultural claims. The right to speak is redistributed. Those on whom silence was imposed now speak and tell their stories. The voices of all possible minorities are mobilised to counter the pretensions to universality and normativity found in the hetero white man's way of speaking. To claim a place, a story and an identity of their own. "Too many wrong choices lead to approved stories. Approved stories lead to approved identities. They will lead unremittingly to those huge mistakes that are called history. We need silence in the arts world", says Simon the crow to Benoît.

## 5.

But what is the objection to taking this crisis seriously and not immediately wanting or having to know the answer? Why not experience the crisis for a time and sweat it out like a sort of fever? This appears to be the position taken in the discussion on artistic diversity by the South-African art historian Sarat Maharaj, who works in England. He expresses the current situation very clearly: "The autonomy of artistic criteria is one of the achievements of Modernism. Independent artistic criteria do exist, and a large part of the Western art world functions on their basis. I don't think we can simply say that this is nonsense. There is a dialogue going on that gives an account of the non-artistic criteria that were repudiated in the arrogant moments of high modernism. It was thought that they were forever over and done with, but now it turns out they are coming back to the surface. Dialogue, and also conflict, the echo of Homi Bhabha's notion of negotiation starting from the boundary line, all force the debate to open up. We have purely autonomous criteria and at the very same moment that we affirm them we are unable to close the debate and then we swing back in the other direction, into the non-aesthetic criteria. And when we continue in that direction, it does not take us closer to our goal either and so we have to return to the field of artistic criteria again. I think that this is the echo of that double movement in which we favour neither the European perspective nor the non-European."

We have ended up at a political and cultural point in time where the future presents itself as something we have overlooked in the past: a return of the suppressed, the forgotten or cast out. So we are getting some sort of second chance, but in other (more difficult?) circumstances. Sarat Maharaj again: "If we accept the concept of art as a permanent crisis and see art as a critical activity that throws into a crisis all the concepts by which we move towards a new artwork; if we link this to the tension between intrinsic factors, purely aesthetic criteria, and all those demands of an aesthetic sort which we thought we had left behind in early Modernism, but which have returned to avenge themselves and have gathered in the metropolises like dark immigrants and women and sexual minorities and who ask such questions as: why can't I judge this work on the basis of my own culture, my femininity, why can't I talk about this work from the point of view of my homosexuality? I think that the presence of the non-aesthetic moment may perhaps be able to give us an idea of the permanent crisis, and also that we have to incorporate this as an element of the evaluation process in our search for quality".

## 6.

The #MeToo movement has really let fly at the arts world. An alternative, female art history shows through in the course of this piece. For instance, Victor and Sarah play an artistic duo called Gentel Art, a tribute to Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652), an Italian painter of the early Baroque and the first woman to be allowed to paint in oils. She

was raped by her teacher, Tassi, and later, during his trial, she was tortured so as to verify her testimony. It is mainly through feminism that her work has been saved from oblivion. In addition to Gentileschi, Camille Claudel (1864-1943) is also mentioned, one of the first women to receive permission to draw the male nude, and whom her brother later sent to a lunatic asylum. Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) and Marina Abramović (1946) also crop up in conversation, though the latter also gets a lashing from Grace, when she matter-of-factly comments that “if Marina Abramović had given birth to a child she would never have cut a star in her belly”. Romy’s judgement of Courbet’s *L’origine du monde* is as hilarious as it is devastating: “Courbet was a headless cock who painted a pussy without a head. Like so many men”. At the same time she films her own vagina with Elik’s miniature spy camera. Since she does it herself, it becomes her own story: “Look at the picture, look, if you didn’t know what it was, what would you see? A mobile abstract blur. But if you look carefully you can see a face in it, or an animal, a painting by Rubens... But look, my vagina encompasses all the images in the world”. She starts playing with Elik’s penis like a puppet on a string. Innocent blissful eroticism that goes beyond pornography? Are Romy and Elik a new Adam and Eve? Beyond the torments of love? “Shall we fuck?” Romy asks, and Elik answers: “As long as we don’t have to make love, that strikes me as an excellent idea.” Is this a mockery of the motto of the play, a line from a sombre and cynical song by Leonard Cohen: “The naked man and woman are just a shiny artefact of the past”?

## 7.

*All the good* ends where this article started, in a museum, face to face with one of the greatest paintings in the Western canon. Just a shiny artefact of the past? Or not? Benoît is standing in the Prado in Madrid in front of Rogier van der Weyden’s *Descent from the Cross*, probably painted between 1432 and 1435. A thoroughly Christian work that depicts one of the most moving moments in the story of Christ, whose dead body is the silent herald of his resurrection. After all the existential and artistic doubt, is this epilogue ultimately a return to the old masters? To the certainty of a canon sanctified through the centuries? To the story of the Great Salvation of our European culture? Is it an expression of the profound melancholy of an ageing artist in a world that is changing too fast and forgets far too much? Perhaps. Why not?

Lauwers looks at the painting not from the angle of religious mystery, but from that of the mysteriously artistic. Not from that of theme, but of material: “Those are the real stories. The stories buried in the substance of the painting”. It is not the future resurrection that Lauwers sees, but the fall, the suffering, the fact that man is lost. And he sees there precisely the beauty that Dostoyevsky believed could save the world: “Look at the meticulously applied tears. ... Those tears are of timeless sorrow. At that point, questions of origin or identity don’t matter anymore”. The identity of the maker no longer has any significance either: “(Rogier van der Weyden) understood better than anyone that he had to make himself unimportant to attain this truth. The truth of all the good”. Art is here not the expression of the self, but a possible way of escaping from it and leaving room for the call in Rilke’s poem. Jan Lauwers says: ‘Art is not about the solitude of looking, but about the solitude of the viewer himself. Solitary in his own period of existence. Works of art are not lonely, they see what the viewer has missed. What all the living and dead missed when they looked too quickly. Did not dare look alone, because ‘all the good’ is so much. ‘All the good’ is an extremely difficult image’. You have to change your life.

Erwin Jans



Jan Lauwers & Grace Ellen Barkey, Cofounders of Needcompany (Photo Phile Deprez)

# 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 Epigonenensemble. In 1981 this group was transformed into the Epigonentheater 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. Epigonentheater 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'.



Photo Phile Deprez

# NEEDCOMPANY

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