THE 💚عطاء.POET
JAN LAUWERS & NEEDCOMPANY

THE BLIND POET

ON THE LIES OF HISTORY

A Needcompany production.
Coproduction: Kunstenfestivaldesarts, KunstFestSpiele Herrenhausen, FIBA - Festival Internacional de Buenos Aires, Künstlerhaus Mousonturm. With the support of the Flemish authorities.
THE BLIND POET is the latest play by Jan Lauwers, in close cooperation with the composer Maarten Seghers, which will premiere at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts in the spring 2015. How much has the history we know actually been determined by lies, chance encounters and events along the way? Jan Lauwers starts out from the performers’ family trees and is writing a new story based on their various nationalities, cultures and languages. About strong women who throw stones and end up at the stake. About a crusader in armour that’s too small.

When the mind is uncertain,
It is overwhelmed by the world,
A weak man kissed by a whore.

When the mind has become self-assured,
Then the world is a respectable lady,
Who rejects her lovers’ caresses.

(Abu al-ala al-Ma’ari, c. 950)

The poem above is written by the blind Syrian poet Abu al-ala al-Ma’ari.

The idea of ‘The Blind Poet’ arose when I was visiting the great mosque in Cordoba. In the middle of this unique building with its three hundred columns, the Catholic church knocked down a number of columns and stuck in a cathedral. This cathedral looks small and pretty ridiculous in the middle of the sophisticated ‘Moorish’ architecture. I stood there looking in astonishment at all this historical bungling.

Cordoba was the capital of that world. Between 300,000 and 1 million people lived there. Women held positions of power and translated Plato, and atheism was common. It had several libraries and more than 600,000 books and much more besides. By comparison, the largest city in the Christian world was Paris, with about 30,000 inhabitants. The largest Christian library had 60,000 books and Charlemagne was illiterate.

What does this actually mean? Why does history always lie and deceive us? History is written by the victors. By men. By the few who tell the masses what to do.

In 11th-century Cordoba women were men’s equals. Islamic women at least. The Christian women found them too bold, too dangerous.

This Cordoba story is only one of the many examples of how history comes back to us. ‘The Blind Poet’ journeys through history via the family tree of all Needcompany’s members. In this way we found that everyone had a link or similarity to everyone else. One of my forefathers was an armourer at the time of Godfrey of Bouillon and went on a crusade with him. They travelled through Germany, where Grace Ellen Barkey’s ancestor received them as a mayor.
With God I aim for honour and glory, and proudly go my own way
To my lover I offer my cheeks, and my lips I give to whoever wants them.

Wallada bint al-Mustakfi (Cordoba, 1000 AD)

How much has the history we know actually been determined by lies, chance encounters and events along the way?
About strong women who throw stones and end up at the stake.
About a crusader in armour that’s too small.

Jan Lauwers

‘The Blind Poet’ is composed of 7 portraits. Here are a few extracts from the play, which was written by Jan Lauwers:

GRACE ELLEN BARKEY
It was only when we were off the coast of Sudan that we felt safe. We can hardly imagine that now. So I was a boat refugee. That’s good too. It’s important that I am a refugee. If you see what I mean. My mother’s only luggage was a reed basket. All it contained were her wedding dress and a hand-embroidered tablecloth with matching napkins. When I arrived in Rotterdam we spent two years in a pension. When I first stayed with a Dutch family there was no tap or even a bottle of water in the toilet. Just a roll of paper. I later learned that the Dutch call this toilet paper. I asked my sister if she would smell my bottom to see whether I didn’t stink too much.

ANNA SOPHIA BONNEMA
Everything is connected to everything else. The same wind often brushes unnoticed across everyone’s skin. The same sunlight pierces everyone’s eyes. The dust from Krakatoa is sucked up into the stratosphere and flutters down onto countless bodies and links everyone together. That’s why I am everyone and the world is me. And that’s why it’s good to talk only about ourselves. Because that is the true history. That is the true love. Everything else is a forgery.

MOHAMED TOUKABRI
Above my father’s worktable in Tunis hangs the portrait of Abu Al-Ala Al-Ma’arri, the blind poet. And that takes us back to the eleventh century. In 2013 they chopped off his head in Syria. The world is afraid of freedom. When I came to the north my task was to rediscover freedom. That requires the deepest concentration. It causes confusion, ecstasy, disappointment and sometimes hilarious moments. I know Wallada and Al-Ma’ari, but I had never seen a painting by Bruegel. I had never read a sonnet by Shakespeare. I know the great thinker Ibn Rushd, who is known here as Averroes, whose books Thomas Aquinas buried because they were too dangerous for the people. Our blind poets are not your blind poets.
Massacre in Antioch, Gustav Doré
THE BLIND POET

Jan Lauwers & Needcompany

Text, directing, set design
Jan Lauwers

With
Grace Ellen Barkey, Jules Beckman, Anna Sophie Bonnema,
Hans Petter Melø Dahl, Benoît Gob, Maarten Seghers, Mohamed Toukabri

Music
Maarten Seghers

Costumes
Lot Lemm

Lighting design
Marjolein Demey, Jan Lauwers

Sound
Ditten Lerooij

Assistant to the director & dramaturgy
Elke Janssens

Production manager
Chris Vanneste

Technical manager
Marjolein Demey

Trainee
Lisaboa Houbrechts

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THE BLIND POET
PERFORMANCE CALENDAR

OPENING NIGHT

Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Kaaitheater, Brussels 12, 13, 14, 15 May 2015
KunstFestSpiele Herrenhausen, Hanover 13, 14 June 2015
Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, Frankfurt 19, 20 21 June 2015
FIBA - Festival Internacional de Buenos Aires September 2015
Scène Nationale de Sète et du Bassin de Thau, Sète 5, 6 November 2015
WORK FOR THEATRE – JAN LAUWERS & NEEDCOMPANY

1987  Need to Know
Opening: 24 March, Mickery, Amsterdam

1989  ça va
Opening: 18 March, Theater am Turm, Frankfurt

1990  Julius Caesar
Opening: 31 May, Rotterdamse Schouwburg

1991  Invictos
Opening: 18 May, Centro Andaluz de Teatro, Seville

1992  Antonius und Kleopatra
Opening: 14 February, Teater am Turm, Frankfurt

1992  SCHADE/schade
Opening: 21 October, Theater am Turm, Frankfurt

1993  Orfeo, opera by Walter Hus
Opening: 23 May, Bourlaschouwburg, Antwerp

1994  The Snakesong Trilogy - Snakesong/Le Voyeur
Opening: 24 March, Theater am Turm, Frankfurt

1995  The Snakesong Trilogy - Snakesong/Le Pouvoir (Leda)
Opening: 11 May, Dance 95, Munich

1996  Needcompany’s Macbeth
Opening: 26 March, Lunatheater, Brussels

1996  The Snakesong Trilogy - Snakesong/Le Désir
Opening: 6 November, Kanonhallen, Copenhagen

1997  Caligula, No beauty for me there, where human life is rare, part one
Opening: 5 September, Documenta X, Kassel

1998  The Snakesong Trilogy, reworked version with live music
Opening: 16 April, Lunatheater, Brussels

1999  Morning Song, No beauty for me there, where human life is rare, part two
Opening: 13 January, Lunatheater, Brussels

2000  Needcompany’s King Lear
Opening: 11 January, Lunatheater, Brussels

2000  DeaDDogsDon’tDance/DjamesDjoyceDeaD
Opening: 12 May, Das TAT, Frankfurt

2001  Ein Sturm
Opening: 22 March, Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg

2001  Kind
Opening: 21 June, Het Net, Bruges

2002  Images of Affection
Opening: 28 February, Stadsschouwburg, Bruges

2003  No Comment
Opening: 24 April, Kaaitheater, Brussels

2004  Isabella’s room
Opening: 9 July, Cloître des Carmes, Festival d’Avignon
2006  All is Vanity
Opening: 8 July, Théâtre Municipal, Festival d’Avignon

2006  The Lobster Shop
Opening: 10 July, Cloître des Célestins, Festival d’Avignon

2008  The Deer House
Opening: 28 July, Perner-Insel, Hallein, Salzburger Festspiele

2008  Sad Face | Happy Face, A Trilogy, Three Stories on Human Nature
Opening: 1 August, Perner-Insel, Hallein, Salzburger Festspiele

2011  The art of entertainment
Opening: 5 March, Akademietheater (Burgtheater), Vienna

2012  Caligula
Opening: 17 May, Kasino, (Burgtheater), Vienna

2012  Marketplace 76
Opening: 7 September, Ruhriennale, Jahrhunderthalle, Bochum

2014  Begin the Beguine
Opening: 1 March, Akademietheater (Burgtheater), Vienna

2015  The Blind Poet
Opening: 12 May, Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels
PUBLICATIONS IN BOOK FORM BY OR ABOUT JAN LAUWERS

- LAUWERS, Jan, *Sad Face | Happy Face, Drei Geschichten über das Wesen des Menschen*, Fischer Taschenbuche Verlag (Frankfurt), 2008.

PRIZES

- Obie Award in New York for the play *Morning Song*, 1999.
- Le Masque, prize awarded by the Académie Québécoise du Théâtre in Montréal, Canada, for the best foreign production, *La Chambre d’Isabella*, 2005.
- Prize awarded by the Syndicat Professionnel de la Critique de Théâtre, de Musique et de Danse in France, for the best foreign production, *La Chambre d’Isabella*, 2005.
- Culture prize awarded by the Flemish Community 2006, theatre literature category, for the *De kamer van Isabella* and *Ulrike* scripts.
- Grand Prix – Golden Laurel Wreath Award for Best Performance / MESS Festival Sarajevo, for *Isabella’s room* (2009).
- Decoration of Honour in Gold for Services to the Republic Austria, 2012.
- Golden Lion Lifetime Achievement Award at the Venice Biennale, 2014.
- Golden Laurel Wreath for Lifetime Achievement Award / 54ste MESS International Theatre Sarajevo, 2014.
- Premio Mayor, Premio Teatro del Mundo, category “Translations”, for the translation by Micaela van Muylem of the Sad Face | Happy Face trilogy, University of Buenos Aires, 2014.
JAN LAUWERS
Jan Lauwers (Antwerp, 1957) is an artist who works in just about every medium. Over the last twenty
years he has become best known for his pioneering work for the stage with Needcompany, which was
founded in Brussels in 1986. Needcompany has been artist-in-residence at the Burgtheater in Vienna
since 2009. Over the years he has also built up a substantial body of art work which was shown in
an exhibition at BOZAR (Brussels) in 2007. Jan Lauwers is awarded with the ‘Decoration of Honour in
Gold for Services to the Republic Austria’ (2012). In 2014, he has been 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
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 ‘80,
and also made his international breakthrough. Epigonentheater zlv presented direct, concrete, highly
visual theatre that used music and language as structuring elements. Their productions were Already

NEEDCOMPANY
Jan Lauwers needs company. He founded Needcompany together with Grace Ellen Barkey. They
together are responsible for Needcompany 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.
Their associated performing artists are MaisonDahlBonnema (Hans Petter Dahl & Anna Sophie
Bonnema), Lemm&Barkey (Lot Lemm & Grace Ellen Barkey), OHNO COOPERATION (Maarten Seghers
& Jan Lauwers) and the NC ensemble, which includes the inimitable Viviane De Muynck. They create
work of their own under Needcompany’s wing.

Since Needcompany was founded in 1986, both its work and its performers have been markedly
international. Its first productions, Need to Know (1987) and ça va (1989) – which received the
Mobiel Pegasus Preis – 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 a transparent, ‘thinking’ acting and the paradox between ‘acting’
and ‘performing’.

This specific approach is also to be found in his adaptations of Shakespeare: Julius Caesar (1990),
Antonius und Kleopatra (1992), Needcompany’s Macbeth (1996), Needcompany’s King Lear (2000) and,
at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg, Ein Sturm (2001). After directing Invictos (1996), the
monologue SCHADE/Schade (1992) and the opera Orfeo (1993), in 1994 he started work on a major
project called The Snakesong Trilogy, which signalled his first full emergence as an author: Snakesong/Le Voyeur (1994), Snakesong/Le Pouvoir (1995) and Snakesong/Le Désir (1996). In 1998 he
staged the reworked version of the whole Snakesong Trilogy.
In September 1997 he was invited to take part in the theatre section of Documenta X (Kassel), for which he created *Caligula*, after Camus, the first part of a diptych called *No beauty for me there, where human life is rare*. With *Morning Song* (1999), the second part of the diptych *No beauty...*, Lauwers and Needcompany won an Obie Award in New York. In May 2000, at the request of William Forsythe, Lauwers created, in co-production with Ballet Frankfurt, the piece entitled *DeaDDogsDon’tDance/DjamesDjoyceDeaD* (2000).

*Images of Affection* (2002) was created on the occasion of Needcompany’s 15th anniversary. Jan Lauwers presented three monologues and a dance solo under the title *No Comment* (2003). Charles L. Mee, Josse De Pauw and Jan Lauwers wrote pieces for Carlotta Sagna (‘Salome’), Grace Ellen Barkey (‘The tea drinker’) and Viviane De Muynck (‘Ulrike’) respectively. Six composers – Rombout Willems, Doachim Mann, Walter Hus, Senjan Jansen, Hans Petter Dahl and Felix Seger – wrote a musical composition for the dance solo by Tijen Lawton. Broadly speaking the themes of this performance are those Lauwers has reformulated and redefined ever since the start of his work with Needcompany: violence, love, eroticism and death. A collection of several thousand ethnological and archaeological objects left by Jan Lauwers’ father urged him to tell the story of Isabella Morandi in *Isabella’s room* (2004) (Avignon theatre festival). Nine performers together reveal the secret of Isabella’s room with as central figure the monumental actress Viviane De Muynck. This play was awarded several prizes, including the 2006 Flemish Community Culture Prize in the playwriting category.

In 2006 he created two pieces for the Avignon Festival, one of which is *The Lobster Shop*, whose script he wrote himself, and *All is Vanity*, a monologue by Viviane De Muynck, which the actress herself adapted from Claire Goll’s book of the same name.

The Salzburger Festpiele has invited Jan Lauwers to make a new production, *The Deer House*, for summer 2008. Together with *Isabella’s Room* (2004) and *The Lobster Shop* (2006) this new production makes up a trilogy on human nature: *Sad Face | Happy Face*. The trilogy as a whole was performed for the first time at the Salzburger Festspiele 2008.

Since 2009 Jan Lauwers is *artist in residence* at Vienna’s Burgtheater. *The art of entertainment* was premiered in 2011, afterwards the leading role was played by Dirk Roofthooft. *Caligula* (2012) and the text by John Cassavetes *Begin the Beguine* (2014) were also collaborations with the Burgtheater.

Jan Lauwers wrote *Marketplace 76* for the Needcompany ensemble. It was premiered in September 2012 during the Ruhrtriennale. The Blind Poet (2015), Jan Lauwers latest play, will premiere during the 2015 Kunstenfestivaldesarts.

**PROJECTS**

In 1999 Jan Lauwers launched *Needlapb*, a one-off occasion for ideas, notes, sketches and random thoughts. *Needlapb* enables one to see the initial stages of various projects in which experimentation gropes its way towards the stage.

*Just for Toulouse* (Théâtre Garonne, 2006) was the first of a series of evenings when Needcompany’s associated performing artists presented installations and performances. In 2007 *Just for Brussels* was presented at BOZAR.

Jan Lauwers was selected in the margin of the Biennale in Venice (2012) for the workshop of Dramatic Arts. Curator Alex Rigola invited a group of prominent theatre makers, resulting in a performance called *The Seven Sins* (2011) and *The Impossible Act* (2013). In 2014 Lauwers presents *Just for Venice* there.

**FILM PROJECTS**

Jan Lauwers also has a number of film and video projects to his name, including *From Alexandria* (1988), *Mangia* (1995), *Sampled Images* (2000), *C-Song* (2003), *C-Song Variations* (2007) and *The OHNO Cooperation Conversations on the O.H.N.O.P.O.P.I.C.O.N.O. Ontology* (2007). During summer 2001 Lauwers shot his first full-length film with the working title *Goldfish Game* (2002). The script was written together with Dick Crane. *Goldfish Game* is the story of a small community of people who are violently torn apart. The premiere took place at the Venice Film Festival (in the New Territories (**Nuovi Territori**) category. The *Kinematrix* internet magazine (Italy) proclaimed *Goldfish Game* the best film in the *Formati Anomali* (Unusual Forms) category. The jury report said: ‘An innovative style of directing that surpasses the limits of the digital medium’. *Goldfish Game* was selected for the Buenos Aires International Human Rights Film and Video Festival in 2002, the Ghent Film Festival in 2002 and the Solothurn Film Festival in Switzerland in 2003. At the Slamdance Film Festival (January 2004), *Goldfish Game* was awarded the Grand Jury Honour for the Best Ensemble Cast.

In February 2003 Jan Lauwers made a silent short film on violence, called *C-Song*. This film has been shown to a limited audience several times, during the *Needlapbs* at STUK in Leuven and the Kaaitheater Studios in Brussels, and also in ‘War is Not Art’ at the Vooruit in Ghent. In April 2004 *C-Song* had its official premiere at the Courtisane short-film festival in Ghent. It was subsequently selected for the International Short-Film Festival in Hamburg in 2004 and in July 2004 was screened in the old water-tower at Bredene on the Belgian coast as part of Grasduinen 2004, SMAK-aan-Zee.

VISUAL ART

At the request of the curator Luk Lambrecht, Jan Lauwers took part in the Grimbergen 2002 exhibition together with 8 other artists (including Thomas Schütte, Lili Dujourie, Job Koelewijn, Atelier Van Lieshout, Jan De Cock and Ann Veronica Janssens). In spring 2006 his work was included in the DARK exhibition at the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam. In 2007 Jan Lauwers had his first solo exhibition at BOZAR (Brussels), curated by Jérôme Sans (former director of Palais de Tokyo, now at the UCCA). To accompany this exhibition he also compiled the first book to focus on his art work from 1996 to 2006. At the Artbrussels art fair (2007), Lauwers was invited to make a site-specific work for BOZAR. Luk Lambrecht has invited Jan Lauwers to take part in Down to Earth, a group exhibition of ceramics at Strombeek cultural centre, which includes work by Ann Veronica Janssens, Heimo Zobernig, Atelier Van Lieshout, Lawrence Weiner, Kurt Ryslavy and Manfred Pernice. In May 2009 Jérôme Sans invited Jan Lauwers to exhibit at Curated by vienna 09. Curated by brought 18 Viennese contemporary art galleries together with international curators. In September 2011 Champ d’Action and M HKA organised the 8th Time Canvas, during which Jan Lauwers’ “Last Guitar Monster” was shown.

Deconstructions were made by Jan Lauwers using disused museum material. These museum installations have already been shown at BOZAR (Brussels) and the Haus der Kunst (Munich) in 2007. They formed the setting for a six-hour marathon performance by the NC ensemble on which the whole of Jan Lauwers’ mental world converged. The result was The House of Our Fathers, which was shown at the Museum M in Leuven, the 16th Internationale Schillertage in Mannheim (2011). And during Hannover’s Kunstfestspiele Herrenhausen in 2013.
LINKS TO THE BIOGRAPHIES

Grace Ellen Barkey

Jules Beckman

Anna Sophie Bonnema

Hans Petter Melø Dahl

Benoît Gob

Maarten Seghers

Mohamed Toukabri