

MAISONDAHLBONNEMA & NEEDCOMPANY

THE BALLAD OF RICKY AND RONNY – A POP OPERA



© Maarten Vanden Abeele

A Needcompany / MaisonDahlBonnema production
With support of the Flemish authorities.
With the cooperation of the Kaaitheater (Brussels),
ImPulsTanz (Vienna International Dance Festival)

THE BALLAD OF RICKY AND RONNY – A POP OPERA

By Robert Steijn

Anna Sophia Bonnema and Hans Petter Dahl sing to the audience in the guise of their alter egos Ricky and Ronny. While in the world outside the machinery of war keeps on turning at full power, these two singing characters, with their naive trust in the manipulability of individual happiness, represent a sense of contemporary life. It is the mindset of the new middle class, whose horizon is defined by what goes on behind closed doors. They think they have the right to everything, and when life takes a different course they see it as an injustice which they cannot accept. They prefer to escape into a fantasy world where everything is still possible. The glamour of the imagination is maintained to the extreme.

There is no room for intellectual detachment in what Ricky and Ronny proclaim. Because they sing about everything that comes to mind, they live entirely in the present and do not foster evil in their hearts. But this uncensored musical expression does not bring relief. On the contrary, the more they sing the more they lose sight of reality and become entangled in the turbulence of their disturbed hearts and minds. Ultimately they skim dangerously close to the edge of their own insanity, which only increases their mutual incomprehension. But there is no way back, and they sing their way into the world of excess. Wishes become the father and mother of imagination. An adopted child materialises out of snow and seed, and people who jump from buildings transform into human snow.

Despite the impossibility of reaching each other in the disappointments and desires each has in life, it seems there is still some love between Ricky and Ronny. It can no longer be consummated, however. Riveted together by words once pronounced – ‘I do’ – they have long forgotten exactly why that was. Their dialogues become bogged down in bickering in song. For the time being, their relationship functions as a bastion against the evil world outside, but the rot can already be seen in the foundations, from the inside out, from the caverns of the tormented mind.

All this is brought to life by Anna Sophia Bonnema and Hans Petter Dahl with lashings of empathy. We, the audience, start to care increasingly about these characters when they find themselves thrown from an initially kinky soap situation into a hallucinatory exploration of their two minds. Their lines undoubtedly contribute to this: they are unprecedentedly complex: alternately blunt and sensitive, cynical and humane, coarse and poetic. The music is seductive in a similarly elusive way. It is obsessively conceptual in its overall structure of sequences – without the slightest let-up, with a pop-like commercialism in some songs – that cut deep into the sentiment.

In *The Ballad of Ricky and Ronny – a Pop Opera*, Anna Sophia Bonnema and Hans Petter Dahl continue their quest for the ideal combination of stage play and concert. This time they have come up with a really extreme form which the glamour of a psychological kinky soap is able to broaden into a psychedelic concert with lyrical outbursts.

This production reminds us of their first, very private, theatrical concert, *Tantra & Western* (1995), in which they sang of their love in the form of oriental philosophy packaged in the poetics of Western songs. In Ricky and Ronny, fictionalisation has fully hit home and has made the private subservient to a product with a critical relationship towards its source. That makes this production a logical sequel to the discussion of the reality value of art that appeared in their spoken piece *Not the real thing* (2005). In *The Ballad of Ricky and Ronny – a Pop Opera*, singing oneself free from reality has to be taken very literally. Free of everything: free of the world, free of others,

but also free of oneself. Ultimately unacceptable. A conclusion that Ricky and Ronny in the end come to themselves.

CREDITS

Conceived and performed by

Anna Sophia Bonnema and Hans Petter Dahl

Libretto

Anna Sophia Bonnema

Music

Hans Petter Dahl

Costume and light

MaisonDahlBonnema

Animation

Jan Bultheel

Production director

Luc Galle

Surtitling and assistance

Eva Blaute

A Needcompany / MaisonDahlBonnema production
With the support of the Flemish authorities
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MAISONDAHLBONNEMA

MaisonDahlBonnema is the name adopted by the duo *Hans Petter Dahl* and *Anna Sophia Bonnema*. These two performing artists have since 1999 played an important part in Jan Lauwers & Needcompany's stage productions. Hans Petter Dahl had previously been a co-founder of and for many years a performer with the Norwegian cult group BAK-TRUPPEN. In 1995 Dahl and Bonnema set up *Love & Orgasm*. Since then they have created ten performances as a duo or with other artists, at the meeting point of composed music, art, literature and theatre.

Dahl and Bonnema are constantly redefining themselves: from *Love & Orgasm* through L&O Amsterdam to *MaisonDahlBonnema*, which opened in 2003 as a virtual concept establishment that launches new collections of ideas in the form of clothes, music, video and writing.

Their performances display a radical preference for the autonomous juxtaposition of the various means of stage production. The audience itself has more than once also become part of the overall setting. Dahl and Bonnema work out everything themselves: the writing, the music, the design, the acting itself.

MaisonDahlBonnema is now generating a new project under the wing of Needcompany. It is called *The Ballad of Ricky and Ronny – a Pop Opera*. A mini-opera. Singing to bring about alienation, to explore new registers, to present stories and ideas in a different way.

Rough but gentle too, beyond its own imagination but nevertheless indisputably itself. *MaisonDahlBonnema* as a form of life, paying much attention to processes and change: nonsense conceals and upsets, but the completeness of the transformation will make it painful!

ANNA SOPHIA BONNEMA

From 1982 to 1986 the Dutch Anna Sophia Bonnema studied at the theatre school in Amsterdam. She staged several plays and also wrote a great many, including *De bomen het bos*, staged with the Nieuw West theatre company, and *Tegenmaat*. Since 1995 she has worked with Hans Petter Dahl in the L & O Amsterdam performance group. They have created several pieces including the love show *Tantra & Western* (1995), *What have you done with my poem? - Sing-Dance #1* (1996), *Made in Heaven – Sing-Dance #2* (1997), *Attention - Sing-Dance #3* (1998) and the multidisciplinary performance *Post coitum omne animal triste est* (1999), with a different improvising dancer every night. For these projects they worked with people from several disciplines such as Liza May Post (artist), Oyvind Berg (writer), Tom Jansen (actor) and improvising dancers including David Zambrano, Laurie Booth, Eva Maria Keller and Michael Schumacher. In 1997 they did a coproduction with Bak-Truppen called *Good Good Very Good*. As a duo they created the performances *Nieuw Werk* (2001) and *Shoes and Bags* (2003). The latter was made on the occasion of the opening of their virtual house for fashion, art and concepts, *MaisonDahlBonnema*. In 2005, they made their thoughtful piece *Not The Real Thing* together with Robert Steijn (as performing dramaturg). Their latest pieces, *The Ballad of Ricky and Ronny – a Pop Opera* (2007) and *Ricky and Ronny and Hundred Stars – a Sado Country Opera* (2010), receive production support from Needcompany.

Needcompany's *King Lear* (2000) was Anna Sophia Bonnema's first production with Jan Lauwers. Since then she has also appeared in *Images of Affection* (2002), *Goldfish Game* (2002), *Isabella's room* (2004), *The Lobster Shop* (2006) and *The Deer House* (2008). In *No Comment* (2003) she replaced Carlotta Sagna. She has already written several things including pieces for *Needlapb* and *The Liar's Monologue* for *Isabella's room* (2004).

HANS PETTER DAHL

From 1987 to 1995, Hans Petter Dahl worked with the Norwegian company Bak-Truppen. In 1995, together with Anna Sophia Bonnema, he founded the L & O Amsterdam performance group. They have created several pieces including the love show *Tantra & Western*, *What have you done with my poem? - Sing-Dance #1* (1996), *Made in Heaven – Sing-Dance #2* (1997), *Attention - Sing-Dance #3* (1998) and the multidisciplinary performance *Post coitum*

omne animal triste est (1999), with a different improvising dancer every night. For these projects they worked with people from several disciplines such as Liza May Post (artist), Oyvind Berg (writer), Tom Jansen (actor) and improvising dancers including David Zambrano, Laurie Booth, Eva Maria Keller and Michael Schumacher. In 1997 they did a coproduction with Bak-Truppen called *Good Good Very Good*. As a duo they created the performances *Nieuw Werk* (2001) and *Shoes and Bags* (2003). The latter was made on the occasion of the opening of their virtual house for fashion, art and concepts, *MaisonDahlBonnema*. In 2005, they made their thoughtful piece *Not The Real Thing* together with Robert Steijn (as performing dramaturg). Their latest pieces, *The Ballad of Ricky and Ronny – a Pop Opera* (2007) and *Ricky and Ronny and Hundred Stars – a Sado Country Opera* (2010), receive production support from Needcompany.

It was in *Needcompany's King Lear* (2000) that he first worked with Jan Lauwers. Since then he has also appeared in *Images of Affection* (2002), *Goldfish Game* (2002), *Isabella's room* (2004), *The Lobster Shop* (2006) and *The Deer House* (2008). In *No Comment* (2003) he was one of the six composers. He also composed music for *Needlapb*, *Isabella's room*, *The Lobster Shop* (2006) and *The Deer House* (2008).



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PERFORMANCE CALENDAR SEASON 2006-2007

Work-in-progress

Théâtre Garonne, Toulouse	2 December 2006
Centre for fine arts, Brussels	20, 21 April 2007
ImPulsTanz, Vienna International Dance Festival	12 August 2007

PERFORMANCE CALENDAR SEASON 2007-2008

Opening night

Kaaitheaterstudio's, Brussels	11, 12, 13 October 2007
Bit Teatergarasjen, Bergen (Norway)	17, 18 October 2007
De Brakke Grond, Amsterdam	23, 24 October 2007
La Rose des Vents, Villeneuve d'Ascq	22, 23, 24 April 2008

PERFORMANCE CALENDAR SEASON 2008-2009

Theaterfestival, Antwerpen	22, 23 August 2008
Noorderzon, Groningen	26, 27 August 2008
Ex Ponto, Ljubljana	15 September 2008
MOT Festival, Skopje	19 September 2008
Kulturhuset, Stockholm	3, 4 October 2008
Inkonst, Malmö	6, 7 October 2008
Théâtre Garonne, Toulouse	17, 18 October 2008
Kaaistudios, Brussels	24, 25 October 2008
Teatro Central, Seville	14, 15 November 2008
Teatro Alhambra, Granada	18, 19 November 2008
Teatro Cánovas, Málaga	21, 22 November 2008
Théâtre d'Arles	25 November 2008
Monty, Antwerp	28, 29 November 2008
KCnona, Mechelen	13 December 2008
Le Cuvier, Artigues-près-Bordeaux	27, 28 January 2009
CC Maasmechelen	10 March 2009
Centro Parraga, Murcia	20, 21 March 2009
Blackbox Theatre, Oslo	27, 28 March 2009
Cracow Theatrical Reminiscences, Cracow	22 April 2009

PERFORMANCE CALENDAR SEASON 2009-2010

4+4 Days in Motion, Archa Theatre, Prague	9, 10 October 2009
Post Mainstream Performing Arts Festival, Spiral Hall, Tokyo	16, 17 January 2010
Eurokaz, Zagreb	23, 24 June 2010
Theatre Junction, Calgary (Canada)	13, 14, 15, 16 October 2010
Cultuurcentrum Brugge	28 October 2010
Trøndelag Teater, Studioscenen, Trondheim	3, 4 December 2010

PRESS ABOUT *THE BALLAD OF RICKY AND RONNY – A POP OPERA*

BELGIUM

WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF II

By Elke Van Campenhout

Does any artist still dare talk about love these days? About that sentimental extension of the middle-class mentality? That feeling of marital bliss that's paved with compromises. Or, even worse, romantic love, *Sehnsucht*, which the cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek compares with a Kinder Surprise Egg: I don't actually want the egg, only the extra that is hidden somewhere inside it. And to get to it I am quite happy to smash you to pieces.

'Been there, done that', says the average theatre-maker. Nowadays love is no longer suitable for the stage. It is too explicit, too sensual, too touchy-feely. Not a weapon for the intellectual aesthete or the political activist. One is in serious danger of lapsing into romantic clichés, be they sugary or bloody. And that is the last thing any contemporary theatre-maker wants to be associated with. So love goes out of the window, unless it ends up in the impossible hands of Josse De Pauw, or lies concealed in the tangle of Marcel Proust's brilliant reflections.

And yet there is occasionally a theatre-maker who takes up the challenge, tacking between the overly personal and the painfully recognisable. Who dares to show love in all its truth and lies, in all its male and female vulnerability. In *The Ballad of Ricky and Ronny*, Hans Petter Dahl and Anneke Bonnema have written the chronicle of a lost era. Their exhibitionistically exposed bodies breathe the last breath of an era of free sex and hallucinogenic foolishness. But in the meantime the war is raging outside and the excited sweat of the sixties has cooled to form a clammy second skin that envelops their glorious bodies like a straitjacket. What remains is banality, boredom, fear and despair. But this has done nothing to diminish love.

The Ballad of Ricky and Ronny

Compared to the youthful rapture of *Ijs*, the love in *The Ballad of Ricky and Ronny* has already more than won its spurs. No great gestures here, just the restrained monotony of a relationship in which there are by now no more illusions to be maintained. Anneke Bonnema and Hans Petter Dahl stand alone on a virtually empty stage, accompanied only by a simple rhythm box. Their pop opera is a barely audible echo of the enthusiastic innocence and pathos of the rock 'n roll years and of the belief in ultimate deliverance. The monotonous performance of the songs prevents you from losing yourself in emotion. The two protagonists work their way through their repertoire unmoved: rhythm box on, rhythm box off. The sound is mechanical, the voices restrained and flat. No rock machismo. No adrenalin. No testosterone. Only the essence. Two voices. One rhythm. Which unrelentingly drives on the normality of boredom, loss, and silent despair.

This does not make *The Ballad of Ricky and Ronny* a despondent piece. It is certainly melancholy, but without any form of pathos. The rock duets smoulder somewhere between Nico and Leonard Cohen. Dry as dust, stripped of all their gentle seduction, they reveal only the mercilessness of the ordinary. Of a love that has more than exceeded its own bounds.

It is precisely the two actors' restrained performance, and their decision to dampen the rock element of the show to the point of boredom, that make this piece so powerful. Every song exudes memories, but at the same time expresses the deficit of a lost faith. Ricky and Ronny were children of their time, one thinks. They sought salvation in religion and politics, but not genuinely. In faith and nature, but without much conviction. They are the first generation to have cut sex free from reproduction.

And now, so many years later, they are trying to reconcile themselves to the emptiness of their aspirations. Ronny endeavours to make one more futile attempt at subversion by whingeing his way across the stage in high heels with a stocking on his head. Ricky squeezes into a sexy club outfit, which leaves no aspect of her well-shaped posterior to the imagination. But their fantasies ultimately result in no more than small-minded nonsense. Fear increasingly takes over from the imagination. In the beginning the performance still adheres to the recognisability of the tired and repetitive life of a couple, but *The Ballad* gradually evolves towards absurd lunacy. It starts with an innocent hallucination: one evening, Ronny sees the ghost of a child sit down at the table during a cosy candlelit dinner. He calls his imaginary child 'Freedom', and gives him a room in their expanding and increasingly labyrinthine house. Ricky also increasingly loses herself in the notion of their shapeless afterbirth. The only information the audience receives about the child comes from the pop songs, whose language departs further and further from any recognisable reality. At one point Freedom takes the form of an immature sexual organ in a deathbed of sperm. At another he is no more than a gust of wind that chills the whole house. Or a couple of dark clouds that insinuate the threat of war into their narcissistic lives. Freedom is a child who does not appear to have been born out of lust, but out of loss. Out of the unassimilated mourning for the hope that never came true. Not so much the mourning for a lost love, the one you lost somewhere over the course of time. Nor the mourning for an ideology, political convictions or philosophical twaddle, because they are never mentioned. But the mourning for the more ordinary belief that shaped a whole human life on the basis of these theories: the belief in freedom, and in a sexuality that would throw every boundary open. And yes, in love. Perhaps they do still believe in each other, but they no longer believe that this bond can save them from the outside world.

Ricky and Ronny is the story of a contemporary love, which is still vibrating after the shockwave of the past. It is the story of a lost innocence, of people who float around lost like flakes of snow. Human snowflakes that flutter downwards from blocks of flats. That is the one image of the Twin Towers that no one will ever forget. But in *The Ballad* the bodies never reach the ground. The words, and also the surprising closing scene with its cartoon film, show us these flakes as innocent, comforting groundcover plants, as sperm cells in space, as stars in the Milky Way. Hans Petter Dahl and Anneke Bonnema skate on the boundary between the ordinary and the absurd, and between love and alienation. The intimacy expressed in their presence on stage is a sample of vulnerability that is only very rarely to be found in the theatre.

Etcetera, January 2008

(Dutch-language magazine on the performing arts)

SWEDEN

MAISONDAHLBONNEMA & NEEDCOMPANY AT KILEN, KULTURHUSET, STOCKHOLM
TOUCHINGLY FUN HUNT FOR HAPPINESS
By Johanna Paulson

Bonnema and Dahls pop opera is an absurd depiction of the spoiled middle class´constant hunt for happiness. Johanna Paulsson is both entertained and touched.

"Do you know this feeling where everything feels the same?" Anna Sophia Bonnema and Hans Petter Dahl´s alter egos Ricky and Ronny sing, while monotonous electropop emphasizes the meaningless monotony of tristesse.

(...)

"The Ballad of Ricky & Ronny - a pop opera" is a precise portrait of the global middle class who has relatively little to complain about – who has time to think about if that expensive facial cream really works – but who never

seems to be able to stay happy. Bonnema and Dahl, who respectively wrote libretto and music, together stand for both the concept and the performance.

(...)

In "The Ballad of Ricky & Ronny" the sound from a laptop fills the air while the scenography is limited to a few single light shifts. There are no huge gestures, just two voices and repetitive rhythms whose formula-like appearance in itself becomes a bearer of meaning. Banal blipping synth pop is to embody a relationship deprived from its content. The music wanders freely from the eighties of David Bowie to rock duets that are like a meeting between Nico and Leonard Cohen

Ricky and Ronny are children of an era of free sex, but the remains of the ideals from the sixties are mostly fear, desperation and a few trips. In a life full of misfortunes and lack of control they have slipped into a bubble where being together turns into a perverse docusoap. Ricky wants to celebrate that they're still together and "pretty ok", even though the outside world is a chaos of war and alarms.

But the emptiness is so infinite that it has to be filled with everything from high heels and kinky sex to an adopted child made out of snow and sperm – literally a fantasy embryo named "Freedom". And on the same way of being turned away from reality, people jumping from skyscrapes turn into human snow in an indestructible memory of 9/11.

The plot seems more and more absurd but the core is never lost. With vulnerability and presence they depict the inability to reach each other in a vacuum where the words "I love you" have since long lost their meaning and where one's own disappointments are blamed on the other. The love that remains is only functional as the binding element in a team against the rest of the world.

The primary for Bonnema and Dahl never seems to be to challenge the limits of performing arts – it sort of happens along the way – but to present their ideas through the intimacy of the human meeting. That's precisely why "The Ballad of Ricky & Ronny" is both a humorous and touching depiction of the abundance society and the hunt for the individual happiness.

Dagens Nyheter, 5 October 2008

([Dagens Nyheter](#) is a daily [newspaper](#) in [Sweden](#). It has the largest circulation of Swedish morning newspapers.)

THE BALLAD OF RICKY AND RONNY - A POP OPERA

by Anette Sallmander

If Needcompany comes to your city, you need to see them.

Needcompany, an international multilingual and multidisciplinary group, based in Brussels, Belgium, has been in existence since 1986, and is still at the forefront of creative stage work. They are currently touring all over the world and it is a must-see!

Jan Lauwers, the company's founder and artistic director, has also produced video projects and a full-length feature film. Co-founder, actress Grace Ellen Barkey, has been deeply involved with the company and has been making her own productions since 1992, on the borderline where theatre, dance, performance and art meet. Some other associated performers are also creating their own work under Needcompany's umbrella, for example MaisonDahlBonnema, OHNO COOPERATION, Lemm&Barkey, . . . this expansion has grown organically from within, creativity without boundaries fosters free and independent artists.

Isabella's room was my first experience of Needcompany. I was blessed. My second was MaisonDahlBonnema presenting *The Ballad of Ricky and Ronny – a pop opera*. Even though the plays are very different, there is a similarity of approach. Investigation is the central part of their work, creating the rough aliveness of a prototype instead of a polished finished product. They do not pretend they are anywhere else than on stage. During the performance they take care of the technicalities like changing light, sound score, projections even as they portray things that are

happening elsewhere or in the past, in a way that draws you into the story. In so doing, they achieve a presence, a being in the now, that makes them real and connected with the audience. For me, this is when theater works at its best.

Does individual love exist? This is the question raised by MaisonDahlBonnema. The couple has composed the music, written the libretto, directed, and choreographed and are now performing the characters in *The Ballad of Ricky and Ronny* - a pop opera. They play with all the details of their composition. Even the choice of the subtitle makes a twist for your awareness, since opera usually is grandiose, but Ricky and Ronny are performing pop in a chamber music format.

In a contained space, they deal with a huge subject—the meaning of life—that becomes relative when it is counterbalanced with world starvation. True artists form their own language, they avoid superimposing form over content. Even serious situations become humorous—when they sing “time typical”, for example, expressions like “fuck you” are repeated in a low-key over and over again, in true opera style.

Ricky and Ronny is a portrait of a middle class couple who have everything they need but the meaning of life. They struggle to fill the emptiness with anti-wrinkles cosmetics, clothing, shopping, but nothing seems to work. They even adopt a child who is merely a figment of their imagination whom they call Freedom. . . . a child made out of sperm and snow. Freedom is a child of our time and it’s cold now. Ricky and Ronny are from the generation of free sex, but they do not know how to use this freedom and end up trying different kinky sex games that gives neither of them satisfaction. Many of us have experienced being in a couple relationship when it is at its worst and we all know how hard it is to bring it to a new level after the “in love” period is over. What does one do, when the worlds “I love you” have lost meaning?

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