

EXTRACTS FROM JAN LAUWERS' LANGUAGE UNION LECTURE ON THEATRE, GIVEN IN ANTWERP ON 30 NOVEMBER 2009

Art is tough. Hard to break. According to Gilbert & George, the big mistake made in the last century was that artists forgot their public. They said that in the twentieth century art was not only made by artists but also only for artists. The visual arts have also been taken over by a very wealthy elite that degrades works of art to the same status as conflict diamonds, so that for the more naïve spectator all that remains is its significance as an event. As a result, Duchamp's urinal has once again become no more than a urinal, not only because the showbiz society has forbidden independent thought, but also because too many people keep their head in the sand.

However, there is one art form that avoids much of this manipulation, and that is theatre. This medium, probably considered one of the most old-fashioned, gamely withstands the attacks of the showbiz society. It is on too small a scale and at the same time involves too many people, which makes it too expensive, yet it is also too fleeting to have any investment value. The beauty of this medium is the idea of collaboration. Not that theatre is the peak of collectivity. Collectivity is a very hazy notion in the arts world. I would rather call it cooperation on a positive conflict.

So why is it that no writers are ever employed full-time by the official theatres, let alone employed to head the theatres? At the very most, a writer is occasionally given a commission, is paid a pittance for it and then hopes to get some royalties. What's more, a theatre-maker who writes his own plays remains just that: a theatre-maker who writes his own plays; he is hardly ever considered to be ... a writer.

Yet it is only normal that a playwright stages his plays himself. Shakespeare, Chekhov, Müller, Molière, Brecht and Claus were not only great authors but also great theatre-makers. Perhaps this is what is not understood. That, as a consequence of the formatting of our society, and the principle of everyone in their compartment, a distinction is preferred between writing for theatre and making theatre.

We are on the verge of a new era. A time when major choices will have to be made; we can all sense this. It makes our era hugely interesting. Whatever choice is made, some things will disappear and be replaced by others. In the near future a great many languages will vanish, and

believe me, history has no regrets. No one laments the fact that we no longer speak Ancient Greek, and that is a language we still recall. A great many languages have vanished unnoticed into the margins of history. Because a language is nothing more than an accident. A writer nevertheless writes in his native language. But is this a necessity? What choices do writers have in a globalised society? Stefan Zweig committed suicide because he couldn't write in any other language but his own. Nabokov didn't write his best works in his native language. Beckett wrote perfectly in two languages. That holy of holies, one's descent – what are called roots – is perhaps still an essential, but also romantic, notion on which too much emphasis has been put at certain moments in history. It is said that we would have to suffer an attack from another galaxy before there could be any global solidarity or common language. That's as far as we have reached in interculturalism.

I see the theatre of the Low Countries evolving very positively. Amidst the possibly unintended elitist attitude held by theatre-makers in the late seventies and early eighties, the most interesting of them, Jan Joris Lamers and Jan Decorte, opted for very small theatres and they were very happy with an audience of ten. I remember the lively conversations led by Hugo De Greef in the mid-eighties, when he asked a significant number of theatre-makers to venture into the larger theatres. (Even an expensive company like The Wooster Group refused to perform for more than two hundred people). There was a passionate dislike of the large official theatres and the official repertory theatre. In Flanders, this sort of theatre was entirely eliminated and a new generation of theatre-makers arose who considered larger theatres definitely worth using. People such as Jan Fabre, Johan Simons, Ivo Van Hove and Guy Cassiers gave the large theatres back their added value. In this way they breathed new life into the moribund theatres, but without losing sight of the 'garage circuit' of their past, increasing their audiences tenfold and expanding the opportunities to give work to playwrights. It must be said that this was an evolution that was not repeated in any other country. We are still living in the aftermath of postmodernism and the anything-is-possible mentality that often led to nothing-is-possible-anymore. And that at a time when art liked being under a cloud. But art is tough and the greatest illusion art has ever come up with is that it is not essential. I know for sure that without

art life in an affluent society would not be worth living. And a life has to be made, not just lived.

Playwrights are undervalued in the Low Countries. Thomas Bernhard was still a hero, albeit much maligned. Even Brecht's most right-wing enemies said they were sorry such a talent had opted for the left. In Chile there are as many literary programmes on television as cookery programmes. Every self-respecting festival in France devotes a lot of attention to the authors themselves. In Mexico the best-known poets read their poems to thousands of people in the national parks. In Austria first readings are regularly given in packed theatres. Alright, it's true we are not the same as them, but we do have a lot of pretension and international festivals are swamped by Flemish productions, and to a slightly lesser extent Dutch productions too, so there is huge appreciation for plays and productions that don't look for their raison d'être only around the parish pump.

This is in fact precisely the strength of small countries. That by being small we can think faster and sometimes more clearly. At the moment we are the world leaders in the performing arts because we have independent artists who know that one's place of birth is incidental, not a place to die for, only to live for. If we can be proud of our Dutch language it's because we don't have any trouble learning three other languages. Because we know that what can be read between the lines is more important than the lines themselves. This is why they have no problem understanding us all over the world and have a lot of respect for us.

I would like to add one more thing, especially for the new Flemish Minister of Culture: Mrs Schauvliege, here in Flanders we have what is possibly the most efficient subsidy system for the performing arts in the world. In this too we lead the way. To look at another example, the Anglo-Saxon model has no international presence and has made England a more culturally impoverished country. You have gold at your disposal, Mrs Schauvliege, work hard for it, and don't forget the writers: they are the conscience of our affluent society. You could make a start by reading them. Because, Mrs Schauvliege, prosperity means that a lot of people have the opportunity to reflect. And that is one of the most important functions of art. After all, anyone can entertain us, can't they?

NEEDCOMPANY

The next few months at
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Needcompany is getting the year off to a vigorous start with two premieres in February.

In **This door is too small (for a bear)**, Grace Ellen Barkey has created her own formal idiom, a part of her quest for 'how to free the mind', for that part of the mind that remains unfathomed. Frank Zappa's motto 'to me, absurdity is the only reality' provides the thread that runs through her new production, which balances midway between the surreal and the psychedelic.

Her increasingly intensive collab-

oration with the artist Lot Lemm resulted in the Lemm&Barkey label. For this new production they have sought out radical poetic images in a grotesque world.

The journalist Sarah Vankersschaever's view of the performance in De Standaard (2 January 2010):

'I'm betting on the powerful fragility of doubt, eroticism that gets stuck in absurd sensuality and, let's not forget, a world that's so funny it hurts. Lemm&Barkey in any case promise 'beautiful failure, the

tragedy of a clown, the clumsy cruelty of sexuality'. An exciting prospect!'

This door is too small (for a bear) will open at the Kaaithheater in Brussels on 25 February and will then tour to Essen (D), Marseille, Frankfurt and Gijón.

In addition, Lemm&Barkey's video of **The Porcelain Project / Installation** has been selected for the 7th International Film Festival on Earthenware and Glass (*Festival International du Film sur l'Argile et le Verre*) in Montpellier.

