

## **Not simply a 'best of'** **JURY REPORT HET THEATERFESTIVAL 2019**

When artists start to release 'best of' albums, the end is near. Usually they haven't got that much more to say and want to pat themselves on the back once more, before plunging into the hereafter while whistling a tune, or, as in most cases, bemoaning their fate. Sometimes it's just a necessary measure in order to fill up the empty cash register. And if that doesn't work out, there's still the last option of the band reunion. But rarely we see overview albums that go beyond such opportunism. These albums manage to achieve unity in diversity. Think of *Decade* by Neil Young. *Of Staring at the seal* by The Cure. Overview works which aren't simply sums, but selections that make individual songs resonate with each other as a new story. Their compilation makes the total (even) stronger than the parts.

Exactly the same effect is pursued by Het TheaterFestival: to bring several voices and perspectives together, to allow a dialogue between them. And above all: with the audience. The selection of Het TheaterFestival is therefore not simply a 'greatest hits' of the past season of performing arts in Flanders and the Netherlands. Neither is it a top X, or yet another list of pre-tested performances, and certainly not a series of suggestions. You get those every day in the newspaper and on social media, enough to cause an indigestion. After a complete season, Het TheaterFestival wants to report on the state of affairs, contemplate, commemorate and question; doing so with a little bit, not too much distance. It does that by highlighting a number of performances that are highly worthwhile for various reasons. Not just because those are the best pupils in class, but because they make a difference in one way or another. Because they have something urgent to tell, because they make strong and revitalising choices concerning their form or rethink their relationship towards the audience, because the voice of a special artist resonates.

'Interesting,' is the term that keeps popping up. A vague and difficult concept. Because, interesting for whom? From which perspective? What is interesting, depends on the context. Not everything is equally interesting at every moment. And that couldn't be different: theatre is the contextual art form by excellence, which by definition intervenes in a present time. A performance is also interesting if it manages to transcend private taste patterns: those of the maker, but mostly those of the audience. A performance should be able to move beyond its own niche, it must be generous and shouldn't hide itself behind self-referentiality or trouble making. A performance can be difficult, but that's another story. A production doesn't have to be perfect in order to be important. It can cause friction, spin out of control, be incomplete or sometimes even unfinished. It wants to share and communicate. It is internally consequent and contextually relevant. At least in theory, in practice these matters are slightly more unruly.

### **The primacy of passion**

During the past season, between the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 2018 and the 30<sup>th</sup> of April 2019, the jury attended performances in Flanders, Brussels and the Netherlands. Those performances have to be created by Flemish or Dutch artists or be produced by an entity in Flanders or the Netherlands. A coproduction of a foreign lead producer is not eligible. Moreover, a performance must be staged at least three times in Flanders or Brussels in order to be included in the selection.

Seven professional viewers scoured the Low Countries, from Ostend to Ghent, from Brussels to Groningen. Sometimes they came back thrilled, sometimes disappointed. Together they saw 375 performances, and that within all segments of the funded, professional field: (text) theater, site specific

performances, dance, performance, youth theater, installation, intermediate forms of all kinds and now and then even a circus performance.

Every jury member has his or her own specialization, preference and blind spots. How do you arrive at one balanced selection then? Every jury member can nominate performances he or she attended for the long list. When a performance ends up on that long list, two other jury members head out to watch it. In case those also return passionate, the entire jury goes to see the performance. Herien Wensink, journalist at De Volkskrant, kept, as a Dutch antenna, her finger on the pulse in the North. The long list is then filtered out during several intermediate substantive sessions. Arguments and counterarguments are put on the table, pleas are entered. Ultimately, a definitive selection is made during a final jury weekend. This is invariably a tricky exercise. There are always many more *coups de coeurs* than selection spots. Therefore, in any case, some performances don't make it, sometimes after long debates, gnashing of teeth and with heavy hearts. In that balancing act, we have sought a broad-based selection, but it cannot be a compromise. We do not look for the central point where we spare each other the most. Again this year, some of the selected performances had fierce supporters and opponents. *La Reprise, Histoire(s) du théâtre I* by Milo Rau / NTGent & IIPM is one of those. Or *Permanent Destruction – The SK Concert* by Naomi Velissariou & Theater Utrecht. And yet we have chosen to always let passion take precedence over nuance. Not a bit of this and that, but a collection of performances that have astonished an important part of the jury.

### **New tendencies**

Once again, a number of general observations emerged. Some have been returning since a couple of years, others are new (or noticed for the first time). Performance sequences are generally becoming shorter and performances are circulating less and less widely. Many performances were dropped because they couldn't reach three performance dates, sometimes to the great disappointment of jury members who did manage to see them. A lot of beautiful work hardly gets any play opportunities. The issue of distribution therefore deserves the caring, but strict attention of the sector and policymakers in the years to come.

Dutch companies are, with a few exceptions (De Warme Winkel, Dood Paard, Internationaal Theater Amsterdam, Theater Artemis,...) hardly present in Flemish theaters. And that's a pity, as Dutch theater seems to be going through a very interesting generational shift at the moment, while at the same time fascinating experiments are being conducted with new models for big venues for instance. Go and see the moving and highly relevant family drama *People, Places & Things* by Toneelgroep Oostpool. Or discover *Don Caravaggio* by Charli Chung / Frascati Producties, and you'll notice, like we did, how refreshing, witty and pointed repertoire and stage plays can be.

The Flemish city theaters in Antwerp and Brussels, on the other hand, seem to have some difficulty with clearly implementing their guidelines. It are the smaller performances such as *AREN* by Benjamin Verdonck, *new skin* by Hannah De Meyer and *Ouder Kind* by Raven Ruëll & Bruno Vanden Broecke, which were selected by the jury of Het TheaterFestival from the season of Toneelhuis and KVS, rather than the large stage creations. In the case of Milo Rau, who has finished his first and particularly remarkable season at NTGent, we did choose the large creation *La Reprise, Histoire(s) du théâtre I*, although this is a coproduction of IIPM and Théâtre National.

In Flanders, the socio-artistic practice has meanwhile developed into a fully-fledged practice, which does not only build new communities, but also produces strong performances. Think, for example, of the

wonderful *Underneath Which Rivers Flow* by Globe Aroma & Decoratelier Jozef Wouters. Theatre makers are developing their own methodologies and models of cooperation to work with vulnerable groups, to tell a story together and, at the same time, to question the dominant power relationships in our society. Theatre in which the audience becomes a participant also continues to boom. Peter Aers's intense conversational performance *The Pain Of Others* makes the fate of a refugee and the complex political system in which she operates physically tangible. Powerful, the amount of empathy that can arise within a group of strangers.

The boundary between professional and non-professional players is becoming increasingly blurred and this results in very interesting performances, such as the dance performance on rap music *8.2* by Radouan Mriziga / hetpaleis, FABULEUS & Mousseem. The distinction between youth theatre and theatre for adults is also becoming increasingly porous. Studio ORKA knows again and again, as now in the case of *Craquelé*, how to strike the right chord for all generations, but also other performances – such as *Paradise Now (1968-2018)* by Michiel Vandevelde / FABULEUS – happily blend different target audiences together. The time when companies had to neatly determine their pursued audience, seems to be gently ending: makers increasingly succeed in developing a language or universe that transcends generations.

### **What do the makers tell us?**

Distilling all themes from the selection is impossible. The preoccupations of the chosen makers are too diverse to do that: from the (im)possibility of revolution (*8.2, Paradise Now (1968-2018)*), to posthumanism (*new skin* by Hannah De Meyer / Toneelhuis) or violence and homophobia (*La Reprise, Histoire (s) du théâtre I* and *Studio Shehrazade* by Haider Al Timimi & Gorges Ocloo / Kloppend Hert & ARSENAAL), to playing with illusion and the exciting border between fiction and fact (*Ouder Kind, True Copy* by BERLIN), and aging (*Eg er vinden, Ik ben de wind* by tg STAN and Maatschappij Discordia). In addition, it is striking that we're talking mostly about productions in which the artist himself takes over and organizes his collaborative partners and production context, thus developing the production with his or her partners-in-crime. Marriages conceived and arranged by cultural institutions often do not lead to the sharpest artistic results.

Two recurring dynamics, however, emerge again this year. Some artists try to reconsider their own interests out of an ecological perspective. Some, such as Benjamin Verdonck in *AREN*, literally recycle their own work and ask pertinent questions about our constant compulsion to productivity and the dogma of innovation, or rather "novelty". Michiel Vandevelde and Milo Rau investigate, in respectively *Paradise Now (1986-2018)* and *La Reprise, Histoire (s) du théâtre I*, the (impossible) repeatability of history.

A second issue that keeps popping up urgently, is the tension between representation and cultural identity. Even more than in the previous season, the discussion about the decolonization of institutions and repertoire raged with great intensity. This is not only an interesting, but also a very necessary debate: it highlights power relations and exposes privileges and blind spots in the jury's frameworks. At the same time, this discourse does not always (or better: not yet always) translate into sharp artistic proposals. In the past season, some productions stumbled over their own good intentions in a painfully clumsy manner. Yet there are artists who succeed in rethinking the theatre language precisely starting from their cultural background and thus re-enrich the theatrical imagination, in order to hold up a confronting mirror to the audience. Pitcho did that last year with the impressive *Kuzikiliza*, and Haider Al Timimi and Gorges Ocloo are doing the same this season. The hybrid theatrical language in their *Studio Shehrazade* really leads to sharp insights.

Making a selection is choosing. But unfortunately also losing. Many excellent performances did not reach the finish line for various reasons. In our opinion, however, this selection paints a beautiful picture of the wide variety of theatre practices that color the Netherlands, Brussels and Flanders today. This is our gift to you, highly respected audience. Each of these performances is worth your curiosity and love!

## **The Pain of Others**

**Peter Aers**

*The Pain of Others* by artist Peter Aers is not a 'normal' performance, but a participative conversational performance. It's the fourth part of the cycle called *Everything Depends on How a Thing is Thought*: a series in which Aers brings together a small group of participants to investigate thorny philosophical issues. This episode concerns an investigation into our ability to share compassion and suffering with the other, inspired on Susan Sontag's *Regarding The Pain of Others*.

A small group of participants - mostly strangers to each other - comes together in an enclosed space: a wooden box set up in or near a psychiatric hospital. Aers presents us a case via an audio interview: a raped refugee is questioned by an immigration official. We are asked to represent the characters in the space using the technique of the family constellation. What's at stake is the story of the refugee, but what makes *The Pain Of Others* impressive, is the dignity with which our group handles the task.

It is touching how closely this simple exercise brings the participants together. There is a feeling of great commitment, without the conversations becoming anecdotal or sentimental at any time. The participants listen carefully and speak thoughtfully - Aers functions all the time as a modest master of ceremonies, who cleverly mediates the various opinions and feelings. *The Pain of Others* is not just about trying to understand each other, this work forces you to put that attempt into practice immediately, in the here and now. This is how *The Pain of Others* succeeds at what other performances only hope for: forming a community of fellow human beings. It is impressive when theatre can achieve that.

**Evelyne Coussens, Charlotte De Somviele, Filip Tielens, Pieter T'Jonck, Mia Vaerman, Karel Vanhaesebrouck and Herien Wensink, jury of Het TheaterFestival 2019**

Ghent, the 28<sup>th</sup> of May 2019