

Growing up in Public

Josse De Pauw, the Marlon Brando of Flemish Theatre

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[G E R T S E L S]

In Avignon they once called him 'the Marlon Brando of Flemish theatre'. Then what would one call Josse De Pauw (1952) as a film actor? Or as a writer, director or head of a theatre company? Underlying everything he does is a great sincerity.

His story is one of 'nature finding a way'. For many years the desire to do only what he wanted to do made De Pauw hesitant about joining large companies. He was afraid of becoming a pawn in someone else's game and afraid of having to make big compromises. On the other hand, his dream of setting up an organisation around himself and a few artistic kindred spirits came up against an economic reality. Requests for subsidies to fund such an organisation were rejected several times. Not productive enough, it was said.

Despite this, he has always continued to do his own thing, and in the way he wanted: not being thrown off balance by production pressures or the pursuit of profit. He has always considered integrity paramount. This has meant he has not always been financially secure. Even so, he has yet to do his first advertising spot.

There have been periods of intense theatrical activity, while at other times film has come to the fore, and sometimes writing. A busy bee? Not really. His guiding principle could easily be that talent shouldn't be strewn around too often, but when it is, it should be by the shovelful. Circumstances have turned De Pauw into something of a maverick, who has managed his entire career in such a way as to let him do what he likes. He needed the space to ventilate his mind and allow ideas to incubate.

This maverick approach defines the portrait of the artist. He allows others the same breathing space as he seeks for himself. Consequently, for him each artistic project begins with an alliance, with the various participants on an equal footing. This has an impact on his work as a director. More about that later. Another aspect of this maverick role is that there is nothing he is obliged to do. He doesn't have to strive too much for anything. This makes his artistic work restrained and pure. There is a great sincerity in everything he does. He is sincere towards himself, towards his subject and towards his audience.



'Light acting'

The artist's sincerity towards himself begins with a substantial dose of self-knowledge. Josse De Pauw knows that his technique has its limitations. He obtained his diploma in acting by the skin of his teeth: one mark fewer and... As a result, such skills as voice projection, breath control and body-movement are not his greatest concern when on stage. Nor is he the type of actor who sets up milestones in the course of a performance. He finds tricks and gimmicks too futile even to consider. He is not interested in transforming himself into some character or other and creating the illusion of being someone else. We have never been able to applaud him as Macbeth or Caligula. Whether on the stage or in front of a film camera, it was always very much Josse De Pauw who was standing there.

It is as if he had taken the acting style of contemporary theatre as his model. The character almost disappears. Such external features as costume or make-up are no longer used. And even the metamorphosis of the actor's physical behaviour is reduced to a minimum. I can hardly imagine Josse De Pauw on stage other than in a suit of neutral colour and contemporary cut. Usually with his left hand in his trouser pocket and gesticulating with his right, as if conducting his

Josse De Pauw and his wife
Fumiyo Ikeda. Photo by
Michiel Hendryckx.



Under the Volcano (2009)
by Malcolm Lowry.
Photo by Koen Broos.

thoughts. The actor makes himself available to allow the character to come to life within him. He adopts it and offers it temporary accommodation. He does not hide behind a role, but brings his whole personality onto the stage.

This sort of 'light acting' is sometimes associated with acting for film. On a set, an actor acts 'on a small scale'. He does not have to project his gestures or facial expressions out into the audience, as the camera comes and collects it all from him. It is not inconceivable that De Pauw's success in both theatre and film is because of his idiosyncratic interpretation of the actor's craft, which is far removed from the creation of an illusion. Yet it is often conveniently forgotten that film is a much more appropriate form for narrative realism. For this reason, perhaps, the reverse is the case, and it is far more the personality that De Pauw brings to bear that persuades film-makers to engage him. One might in fact call this a noble variation on typecasting.

De Pauw often appears as the incarnation of the 'rough exterior, heart of gold' type. In *Crazy Love* (1987) he played a man covered in hideous spots who is hopelessly in love with a girl. Ten years later, in *Hombres complicados*, he played the incorruptible customs officer who goes on a hike with his brother, a shady delinquent. And could anyone ever forget *Iedereen beroemd* (2000), in which a well-meaning underdog turns to violence to give his clearly under-talented daughter a chance in showbiz? This film by Dominique Derudder was nominated for an Oscar in the 'best foreign film' category. Today Josse De Pauw has more than sixty films to his name.

In recent years, observing him on stage, I have sometimes wondered what his secret is. He is a rather static actor who commands respect through his formidable physical presence. He is a sturdy Brabant carthorse who impresses with his strength. He actually does very little: he hardly stirs, barely moves a step and makes virtually no gestures. In *Weg* he stands there producing funky musical theatre at a microphone. In *De versie Claus* he delivers a two-hour mon-



ologue using the words of Hugo Claus while staying more or less on the same spot. But in Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* we catch him out in a little show of frivolity. He plays Geoffrey, whose life is veiled in a mist of tequila. De Pauw depicts his drunken breakdowns with the elegant spiral movements of a corkscrew penetrating yet another bottle. So he *can* manage a trace of imitation, on condition that it is slightly stylised.

Voice coaches would probably prescribe him a refresher course; it is as if speaking loudly is hard work, and he rather has to force out the sounds. He balances this monumental strength with mental flexibility and alertness. Every sentence he pronounces has been carefully thought out. Which is why he is so palpably involved. And he is exceptionally fast at learning his lines. His stand-in role in *Mefisto for ever* at the Toneelhuis is the stuff of legend. Three weeks before the first night, one of the leading actors dropped out and De Pauw was called in to replace him. Day after day De Pauw crammed his way into the part and in the end came up with a truly impressive performance. It was for his Avignon performance in this production that the French press compared him to Marlon Brando.

De versie Claus (2009).

Photo by Koen Broos.

A dilettante thinker

Whether it's a matter of learning lines, writing a play or working through the rehearsal process, it is always based on a thorough nosing through the material. Josse De Pauw is not an academic theoretician, he is a philosopher of life. Interviewing him is a treat. There are few topics he knows nothing about and on which he has not formed an opinion. De Pauw is a man for café discussions, for deep conversations. He keeps track of current affairs, is open to all the impressions of the metropolis and listens to life stories. He is an amateur thinker, in

both senses: 'unschooled' and 'keen on thinking', and all this in the best sense of the word 'dilettantism'. Knowledge and intuition come together in him. All this has an effect on his acting. Someone who has often worked with him put it like this: 'Every sentence he speaks has the force of a point of view.'

Josse De Pauw's career can be summarised in the title of a CD by Lou Reed: *Growing Up in Public*. He has applied himself to several disciplines and in each has steadily undergone a substantial evolution. It was not a matter of quietly maturing and only then going public. His style was much more a question of quite openly trying things out in public. So it must certainly have taken courage to come out with a play for the first time or to opt wholeheartedly for musical theatre.

His first conquest was language. After all, in the beginning it was not the word. His first theatrical exploits, with the Radeis theatre company between 1976 and 1984, were not based on words. The trio was successful and went on long international tours. They performed humorous sketches and, to avoid them looking too much like mime, gave voice to occasional sounds and cries. One of De Pauw's first projects after Radeis, *Usurpation* (1985), consisted of a collage of well-known fragments of writing to which he added a connecting thread. This made him one of the first actors in Flanders to start writing for the stage. Those close to him could see how, after this production, he moved closer and closer to language. But it wasn't an easy process. Witnesses say that in the dressing room he was often extremely tense.

In the years that followed De Pauw evolved more and more towards speaking and writing. One of the catalysts was the Flemish Media Institute (FEMI), to which Erwin Provoost, now a successful film producer, had invited a Czech-American script doctor. His job was to boost the quality of Belgian scriptwriters, among them Jaco Van Dormael, Marion Hänsel, Marc Didden and Marc-Henri Wajnberg. And also Josse De Pauw and the youthful Peter Van Kraaij.

For these last two it was an important encounter. For material for the workshop De Pauw drew on recollections of his travels. He combined meticulous observation with evocative storytelling. He expanded his characters slightly to make them more interesting than they were in real life. The eight pages he handed in to the head of the course were to form the basis of his first full-length play, *Ward Comblez. He do the life in different voices* (sic). He asked Peter Van Kraaij to act as sounding board as he worked it up. Later they worked together on the play *Het kind van de smid*.

Alliances with kindred spirits

And so a writing career was launched. It took on a new dimension when he started applying himself to prose. At the request of a literary supplement, he wrote short pieces for the paper that were populated by his family, his life and Brussels characters (fictional or otherwise). All these pieces were ephemeral, but they were also highly recognisable and observed with a generous and fascinated eye. Here De Pauw showed himself to have the perfect philosophical approach to life, sometimes full of understanding and sometimes, as when faced with administrative hassle and short-sighted chauvinism, brimming over with impatience. Just as in his stage roles, he put his entire personality into his writing, revealing himself to be a magnanimous and broadminded individual whose

Larf (1999).

Photo by Phile Deprez.



basic principles are an acute sense of justice and an existential humanism. The two anthologies of these short pieces, *Werk* and *Nog*, brought him recognition and awards in the literary world.

Another steady evolution took place in regard to music. At the time of *Radeis*, De Pauw got to know the musician and composer Peter Vermeersch. Although Vermeersch had hardly ever been inside a theatre, he was promptly invited to write the music for *Echafaudages*. At that time musicians worked within their own personal limitations: they used the restricted number of chords that they knew. It signalled the start of a long artistic friendship. In *Usurpation* the music was closer to a free jazz idiom, and in *Ward Comblez* it was properly recorded on tape.

Until then, music had played a subordinate role in the productions. It was only in *Weg* (1998) that words, acting and music came together perfectly. One could no longer really call this spoken theatre, and in fact it was nothing less than a theatrical concert. Vermeersch had a soundtrack in mind for this production, because he found the scenes in the play so recognisable and familiar that he saw them as a film. The music sought to go along with these images. For *Larf* (2000) Vermeersch called up his big band. It was up to the actors to make themselves heard above this torrent of sound. In *Die siel van die mier* (2004) he proved that his music could be subtle and delicate too, in dialogues between the violin and cello played by George Van Dam and Jan Kuijken. In the Transparant production *Een nieuwe requiem* (2009), an adaptation of Mozart's famous work, he immersed himself in classical music.

Not only has Josse De Pauw thoroughly explored the worlds of words and music, but he has also steadily expanded his artistic alliances. Initially he was someone who preferred to work with kindred spirits, many of whose names have already been mentioned in this article. No entrance exam is needed for the job. Nor is proof of nobility or a shared background or age required. Several



Over de Bergen (2010).
Photo by Herman Sorgeloos.

people who have become involved say it was enough to make a few pertinent remarks. From then on they enjoyed his absolute trust. In the last few years this has been the case for the young theatre director Lotte van den Berg and the writer David Van Reybrouck.

Bestowing freedom is not difficult for someone who likes it so much himself. He set up many of his projects on the basis of a great sense of shared participation among their creators. In these cases a circle of kindred spirits would set to work almost like a jazz ensemble: 'does anyone else feel the urge to contribute anything?' But even in those productions where he was more distinctly the leader, he did not set himself up as the omniscient director. He was more like the man who created the right atmosphere and space. Instructing or directing others is not really part of the way he sees things. This has considerable consequences for what we understand as the traditional role of the director. For the theatre film *Übung* (2001) he came up with just a few suggestions for the script, by no means obligatory, which allowed the makers' club plenty of space. In that instance the result was miraculously good. But *Volk* (2006), a production based on teeming crowds of people in a city square, clearly suffered from the lack of a director's hand.

Open-minded mastery

Over the last decade, doing his own thing has no longer kept Josse De Pauw from engaging with existing organisations, even large ones. In the run-up to 'Bruges, Cultural Capital 2002', he accepted the artistic directorship of Het Net, an arts centre in that city. Partly because of the momentum of the 'Bruges 2002' event, he was able to set up the large-scale all-round production *SS* (2002), about Nazi sympathisers in the Second World War. After that, to many people's surprise, he turned up in *Death of a Salesman* (2004), a production by the Toneelhuis company in Antwerp directed by Luk Perceval. He had never done that before. After Perceval's departure for Germany, he even temporarily took on the job of director of that company for a year. And later, under the directorship of Guy Cassiers, he put in marvellous performances in *Mefisto for ever* and *Under the Volcano*.

Josse De Pauw has achieved a position where he can allow his skills in acting, writing and working with music to mature without losing any of his originality. He has attained a high degree of mastery while remaining entirely uninhibited. He is now so sure of himself that he is no longer averse to performing his public role in front of a wide audience. ■