

How *Ontroerend Goed* Widened Its International Circuit.

In the last few years the performance theatre company *Ontroerend Goed*, from Ghent, have built up a remarkable circuit abroad, with exotic repertoires and ecstatic reviews. What's their secret?

Let's take a step back in time. At the end of the nineties the company consists of a pupils' club (Alexander Devriendt, David Bauwens, Sophie de Somere, Joeri Smet) giving poetry performances in cafés in Ghent. The live aspect is crucial from the beginning. The presence of an audience determines the form and, with it, the content, the search for the relationship between performer and public, in the here and now. In 2001 it is time to make professional choices. Poetry recedes into the background in favour of performance, and the *PORROR* trilogy (an absurd review of porn, poetry and horror) is a first step in the direction of "seriousness". When *PORROR* receives an important award, *Ontroerend Goed* enters the (new to them) landscape of Flemish theatre, and has to adapt to it. The company is picked up by the arts centres and granted their first project subsidy for *Exsimplicity* (2004), and the crazy club suddenly has to produce "real theatre". The fact of having to face these expectations leads to productions such as *Exsimplicity* and a sequel *Killusion* (2005) which fail to make much of a stir. As if the lack of self-confidence is also reflected in what they produce, *Ontroerend Goed* continues to examine the medium itself and the extent of its own imagination – "what is theatre, actually?" Typically the "fringe project" *The Smile Off Your Face* (2004), a performance given on the margins of a festival, is more successful. Members of the audience are put in a wheelchair and taken on an intimate sensory tour – a mad idea that could only occur because of the total lack of expectations. It's gradually dawning on them, *Ontroerend Goed* seems to function best under the motto of "nothing obligatory, anything possible". But how do you keep that freedom when, as a young com-

pany, following two project subsidies, you are given a state grant (2006-2008)? The government money puts considerable pressure on the theatre group in addition to the artistic pressure.

The result is *Soap* (2006), a series of five shows that have to be produced within the space of three months. The spectacular, but unachievable, idea is a huge flop, and *Ontroerend Goed* collapses in a crisis that in two respects will lead to an impressive restart on the international circuit. First of all the failure leads to a somewhat paradoxical decision to go to the Edinburgh Festival with *The Smile Off Your Face*, because "in times of crisis you need to invest". Maybe it's also a psychological flight from Flanders, where the four untrained dramatists had been received with some reserve and *Soap* had proved the critics right. The Edinburgh Festival proves to be a good bet. The fringe project wins the Total Theatre Award there in 2007 and in 2008 the Adelaide Fringe in Australia too. A chain reaction is set in motion, the Sydney Festival and the New Zealand Festival can't follow fast enough. Unlike Flanders foreign countries seem to take *Ontroerend Goed* to their hearts straightaway.

There's another consequence of the failure of *Soap*, it obliges *Ontroerend Goed* to redefine themselves artistically. *Soap* had brought a latent feeling of doubt into focus: were the attempts at "real theatre", with a written script and professional actors really authentic? Alexander Devriendt decides to change tactics and does his next production with thirteen teenagers from the youth theatre company KOPERGIETERY. Once again it's the freedom of free verse that leads to success: *Pubers Bestaan Niet* (2007) – English title *Once And For All We're Gonna Tell You Who We Are So Shut Up And Listen* – is a rough ride during which the youngsters examine clichés about themselves. Thanks to their earlier production *The Smile, Once And For All* had it made on the international scene, and in 2008 this performance also carries off the Total Theatre Award in Edinburgh. Two triumphs in a row, and with two very different performances *Ontroerend Goed*



*Ontroerend Goed, Once And For All We're Gonna Tell You
Who We Are So Shut Up And Listen, 2004 © Phile Deprez.*

couldn't wish for a better visiting-card. The merry-go-round has taken off and, after the English-speaking countries, Morocco, Japan, Jerusalem, Singapore, Italy, Germany, The Netherlands and France succumb.

What's to explain the brilliant success of *Ontroerend Goed* abroad while the reactions in Flanders are much less hysterical? Let's put things in perspective, the big festivals in the English-speaking world set the tone abroad. Performances such as *The Smile* and *Once And For All* were acclaimed enthusiastically at these festivals, and more recent performances such as *Teenage Riot* (2010) and *Audience* (2011) even cause a stir, with incensed reviews and people leaving the auditorium shocked. To understand how these performances "push the boundaries" we need to go back to the beginning, *Ontroerend Goed's* research into its relationship with

the audience. In the context of the theatre in the English-speaking countries this relationship has the value of a contract, the spectator is safe. The spectators of a comedy show know that they're not safe, the participants in reality TV know they'll be put under scrutiny – but they've opted for this. However, don't do to the unsuspecting public what you do to the comedy audience, remove it from its safe and comfortable seat.

And that's precisely what *Ontroerend Goed* does. In *Intern* (2009) the audience's trust is won and then abused; in *Audience* the public is caught on camera. In *Teenage Riot*, in which teenagers jeer at the audience, yet another power relationship is overturned, that between youngster and adult. Even Lyn Gardner, a leading critic on *The Guardian* and an *Ontroerend Goed* fan from the very first moment, found it unheard of for youngsters to be telling adults what they ought

to do. In a vertical society like in Britain such a thing's apparently *not done*.

Ontroerend Goed has found its track. But doesn't that carry a risk too? In the past *Soap* forced them to stop and think. Will they stop and think again now *Ontroerend Goed* is on an international high? Business leader David Bauwens: "It's part of theatre that you fail from time to time. I think there'll always be crises that mean we have to redefine ourselves." Another risk is the organizational structure. In the coming round of subsidies (2013-2016) Alexander Devriendt bears sole responsibility for all the projects. Devriendt is surrounded by a network of almost lifelong friends, sympathizers, fans, fathers and girlfriends – even the board is a friends' club. Something that's developed historically and that's understandable, but isn't that in-crowd in need of a bit of critical opposition? Isn't an organization with such a narrow base extremely vulnerable? According to Bauwens the company is working on broadening its base via "*Ontroerend Goed Supports*", a new track which will give young authors an opportunity. The first project under this banner was a show by two very young women who also took part in *Once And For All*. They've grown up in the *Ontroerend Goed* school. Are they likely to come up with an alternative form of artistic expression?

Maybe these objections are premature. *Ontroerend Goed* has been able to rediscover itself in the past. The secret of their international success? The courage to change track, a stubborn instinct for doing their own thing mainly, a mad passion for work and a certain amount of luck in timing. If *Ontroerend Goed* can keep their feet on the ground in the years to come, the sky may well be the limit.

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