

No Stage Fright

International Success for Directors from the Low Countries

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In Summer 1999 the Rotterdam company Ro Theatre enjoyed great success at the Edinburgh Festival. The critics were unanimous in their praise for *The Lower Depths*, after Maxim Gorky, which was directed by Alize Zandwijk (1961). A year later, the production was equally acclaimed at the Wiener Festwochen, a prestigious arts festival in the Austrian capital. And a couple of years after that Zandwijk was invited to Hamburg's Thalia Theatre, one of Germany's leading companies, as a guest director. There she directed Chekhov's *Ivanov* and Gorky's *Summerfolk*, which were again both highly praised by both press and public. And this is only a small part of the renown she has won abroad.

Zandwijk, who has been Ro Theatre's artistic director since 2006, is just one example of a director from the Low Countries who has triumphed in theatres abroad over the last decade. On top of which, she is one of the few women to have done so, and the fact that she seems to be even better known abroad than in her own country makes her position even more remarkable.

The big names

In some cases the interest from abroad is not confined to a number of performances or an occasional guest directorship: sometimes directors are even invited to take on the artistic leadership of a company. This was the case, for example, with the Fleming Luc Perceval (1957): in 1999 a German version of his ten-hour production *Ten Oorlog!*, based on Shakespeare's history plays, was staged by the Salzburg Festspiele and the Hamburg Schauspielhaus under the title *Schlachten!*. In 2000 this version won the 'Innovationspreis' at the *Theatertreffen* in Berlin and was voted 'Production of the Year' by 39 leading critics.

Not surprisingly, after *Schlachten!* Perceval was much in demand in Germany, and in fact all over Europe. Leading theatres, including the National Opera houses in Berlin and Stuttgart, regularly put on productions of his work. In 2005 he was appointed resident stage director at the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz in Berlin, where his staging of Schiller's *Maria Stuart* in 2006 won him the Friedrich-Luft Prize, awarded by the *Berliner Morgenpost* for the best play of the year - an accolade he had already received in 2003 for his production of



Luk Perceval (1957-).
Photo by Reinhard Winkler.



Ivo van Hove (1958-)
Photo by Jasper Zwartjes.



Johan Simons (1946-).
Photo by Lenore Blievernicht
/ LSD Berlin.



Guy Cassiers (1960-).
Photo by Alex Salinas.

Racine's *Andromache*. And in September 2009 Perceval was appointed full-time 'Leitender Regisseur' (Chief Director) of the Thalia Theatre in Hamburg.

It is not hard to add to this list of successful Flemish and Dutch directors. For example, the Dutchman Johan Simons (1946) also has an impressive record when it comes to working abroad. In 2010 he will take up a permanent post in Munich as 'Regieführende Intendant' (Business Manager and Artistic Director combined) at the Münchner Kammerspiele. Several of the plays he has directed have toured Europe and English-speaking countries elsewhere for years and won many major international prizes. His production of *Voices (Twee Stemmen)*, in particular, with the highly-acclaimed actors Betty Schuurman and Jeroen Willems, has attained almost legendary status. Willems' monologue, based on the radical political writings of the Italian author and film director Pier Paolo Pasolini, toured throughout the world for a good twelve years, from Berlin to Paris and from New York to Los Angeles, in German (*Zwei Stimmen*), French (*Deux voix*) and English versions, and won a multitude of prizes.

Tryptich of Power. Part 3:
 Atropa. Avenging Peace
 (Triptiek van de macht.
 Deel 3: Atropa.
 De wraak van de vrede).
 Toneelhuis Antwerpen.
 Directed by Guy Cassiers.
 Photos by Koen Broos.



The Fleming Guy Cassiers (1960) is another of these artistic lions. In 2008 La Scala in Milan and the National Opera Unter den Linden in Berlin invited him to stage the whole of Wagner's opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* between 2010 and 2013. In 2009 he received the Prix Europe pour le Théâtre, in the New Theatrical Realities category, which Johan Simons had won nine years previously. Cassiers was commended above all for the innovative visual idiom he employed in such works as *The Triptych of Power*, a three-part cycle in which he concentrated on the complex interconnection of art, politics and power. In recent years several of the plays he has directed for the Toneelhuis company in Antwerp have been on the programme at Avignon, Europe's most important drama festival.

Lastly, Ivo van Hove (1958), another Flemish director, also attracts world-wide attention. His productions have been performed all over Europe and the United States. He has directed at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg, the Staatstheater in Stuttgart and the New York Theatre Workshop. He was especially successful in New York, where he won several Obie Awards, the highest award for off-Broadway productions. In 2008, also in New York, he had extremely good reviews for *Opening Night*, an adaptation of the script of the 1977 film of the same name by the American director John Cassavetes. Robert Falls, curator of the Eugene O'Neill Festival in Chicago, where Van Hove's version of *Mourning Becomes Electra* was performed in 2009, calls Van Hove a 'brilliant Belgian director' and his company, Toneelgroep Amsterdam, 'one of the most



interesting theatre companies in Europe. Van Hove's choice of mainly American writers – O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Susan Sontag – has probably also played a part in this striking American recognition of his abilities.

At about the turn of the last century, for both Flanders and the Netherlands, out of the whole spectrum of the arts theatre became an export product whose value could hardly be overestimated. For convenience' sake we shall limit ourselves to adult theatre, even though children's and youth theatre from Flanders and the Netherlands also has a tremendous reputation all over the world. Although the real boom now appears to be over, the quality of children's and youth theatre in the Low Countries is still internationally recognised and respected. The fact that in this field, unlike works from the adult repertoire, the language forms hardly any barrier has considerably aided this expansion: after all, children's and youth theatre relies much more on mimicry and visual and musical elements.

Mourning becomes Electra
(Rouw past Electra).
Toneelgroep Amsterdam.
Directed by Ivo van Hove.
Photo by Jan Versweyveld.

No Stage Fright

There's a saying in the Low Countries, used mainly in a culinary context: *'anything from a long way away tastes good'*. Although Flanders and the Netherlands do not owe their success in the performing arts to this aphorism alone, it does contain the seeds of an explanation. In the hopeful expectation that other coun-

tries have something new to offer, something theatre-lovers want to be able to talk about, the doors to the rest of the world are wide open, and the same applies to the Low Countries when they are on the receiving end. During such events as the annual Holland Festival in Amsterdam and the Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels there is always a lot of publicity about and public interest in the performing arts from neighbouring countries and also from further afield, from the non-Western world.

Among all this international ambition and appreciation we must not forget the Netherlands and Belgium have a long history of staging each other's productions. For Dutch and Flemish directors, actors and producers 'abroad' is never far away. In fact, the shared language and geographical proximity make performing in Belgium or the Netherlands so natural to both sides that many theatre-makers hardly think of their neighbouring country as 'foreign'. If we take just the directors, for several decades now directors born and bred in Flanders have been appointed as the artistic heads of Dutch companies, and the reverse also applies to much the same extent.

Dirk Tanghe (1956) was the first Flemish director to head a civic theatre company in the Netherlands: from 1996 to 2008 he was artistic director of De Paardenkathedraal in Utrecht. The Fleming Ivo van Hove has been at the head of Toneelgroep Amsterdam, the Netherlands' largest theatre company, since 2001. From 2005 to 2010, the no less important NTGent in Ghent was headed by the Dutchman Johan Simons. From 1997 to 2006 the Fleming Guy Cassiers was artistic director of the Ro Theatre in Rotterdam. And the list goes on, especially when we also include co-productions and guest directors. So there is no sign of stage fright when it comes to working in a foreign environment, thanks to the low threshold between the Netherlands and Belgium.

We can illustrate this low threshold more generally with a few figures: between seven and eight hundred Dutch performances (theatre, children's and youth theatre, dance, cabaret, music and musical theatre) are given in Belgium every year and roughly the same number of Belgian performances in the Netherlands. On closer examination, however, the statistics make it clear that where the export of theatre is increasing, Belgium and the Netherlands are increasingly leapfrogging each other and shifting their attention to other countries both in and outside the European Union. In Europe, Germany is by far the largest consumer, with Great Britain a close second; outside Europe, the United States scores well.

Germany as a Host Country

Why, one wonders, is Germany so receptive to Dutch and Flemish theatre when it has its own deep-rooted theatre culture, in which directors occupy an extremely prominent position and as a consequence of the repertory system are constantly in the public eye. In Germany, almost all productions remain in the repertoire for a long time, so that each week several productions by the same company can be seen in a single theatre. This means that some productions can last for as much as ten or twenty years. This sort of approach naturally requires a meticulous logistical planning quite unknown in the Low Countries, where the first night is immediately followed by an average of about thirty performances and revivals are more the exception than the rule.

The German system is lucrative, and it undoubtedly meets the wishes of the theatre-going public; but it also has its downside, which is that this sort of rigid organisation can in some cases lead to unintentional artistic concessions. It certainly appears that the rigidity of the repertory system rubs off on other areas in which theatre-makers are active and ultimately affects the nature and quality of the production. The story told by Erik Vos, former artistic head of De Appel, a company in The Hague, about the *King Lear* he directed at the Düsseldorf Schauspielhaus in 1979, is as entertaining as it is disconcerting. In his autobiography he writes: *'The German system is starting to get on my nerves. The jobs in the hierarchy are all officially delineated. The Germans can make the simplest things complicated. I find the relationships between the various members of staff painfully formal.'* He illustrates his assertions by describing, among other things, how extras are dealt with; according to him, in Germany they are organised into a *'Kafkaesque hierarchy'*.

The following statement is subjective, not rationally demonstrable and largely based on intuition: productions by German companies, such as I have seen in Germany or (to give one example) at the Holland Festival in the Netherlands, have a certain closed quality which seems to be the result of a barely decipherable, hermetic system of conventions, codes and laws. The most important pawns in the game, the actors, give their characters a well-defined and solid profile, but they lack the free-and-easy acting style (including the careless but appealing ragged edges) of their Dutch and Flemish counterparts.

The part played by dramaturgy is by tradition also greater in Germany, which led one of the heavyweights of postwar German theatre, the director Peter Zadek (who died in 2009), to say that theatre in Germany is rooted *'too much in the university and too little in the circus'*. By contrast, theatre in the Low Countries is generally characterised precisely by its high level of transparency and flexibility, not forgetting its excesses, which can often elicit a wide variety of reactions. Evidently these very qualities have not gone unnoticed in Germany, which for both Belgium and the Netherlands is of course an easily accessible neighbour.

Innovation as a Criterion

Apart from such considerations and observations, the demand for Dutch and Flemish directors is of course first and foremost a matter of their supposed quality. Are the theatre-makers in the Low Countries, both directors and actors, so good? Undoubtedly they are; but if *'good'* is too subjective a criterion, then perhaps such adjectives as *'uninhibited'*, *'bold'* and *'innovative'* are more appropriate. There have been several events in Dutch and Flemish theatre history that can be called turning points, when tradition was overturned and the (supposed) garbage of outdated form and content was thrown out. Such as the renowned *Aktie Tonaat* in Amsterdam in 1969, when students protested against an overly elitist theatre, and a year before that the founding of *'De Werkgemeenschap'* at Brussels' Beursschouwburg, a collective that distanced itself from the officially recognised companies in a quest for a more committed or even political theatre.

Such turning points set in motion something new which eventually, when it has been imitated too many times, itself begins to show signs of wear, when it becomes necessary to look for new stimuli again. To give one example: as soon

as political theatre became established in Flanders and the Netherlands, with access to all the subsidies granted by local and national government, the need again arose for new forms, with less missionary zeal, more focus on aesthetics, and including elements from music and art. So over the years 'innovation' has become the most highly valued criterion when the quality of theatre is being measured, whether by critics, festival juries or those awarding subsidies.

Molière. Schaubühne am
Lehniner Platz, Berlin.
Directed by Luk Perceval.
Photo by Matthias Horn.

The consequence is that so-called 'director's theatre' probably flourishes more luxuriantly in the Netherlands and Belgium than anywhere else in the world. Meanwhile, it has become generally accepted that directors, with their personal vision, can take absolute control of a production and that the actor's main task is to help implement that vision. This does not necessarily mean that actors are restricted in using their talents, but sometimes they do have to submit to the most awful hardships. For example, Thomas Thieme, the German actor who played the title role in *L. King of Pain*, Luc Perceval's adaptation of *King Lear*, had to go through the entire performance wearing incontinence pants – which provoked varied reactions from the press and public. Even more



controversial was *Aars!*, an adaptation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, which in 2001 had people leaving the theatre in droves, among other things because the dialogue was totally incomprehensible, the soundscape deafening and the movements explicitly sexual. And in 2008 some of the audience also walked out of the performance of *Molière* during its world premiere at the Salzburg Festspiele, even though this compilation of writings by Molière was lighter in tone than the forbidding work that had preceded it. If there was any one thing that outraged the audience it was not so much the fact that Thomas Thieme was again running around in a nappy, but rather the ceaseless, hallucinatory snow that drifted

down from the flies for three and a half hours and which only the most dogged of Perceval fans could endure.

Some of Johan Simons' productions were not to everyone's taste either; one such was in Paris in 2006, when he directed Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra* for the Opéra Bastille in a provocative setting that referred pointedly to the political unrest in the Paris suburbs at the time. After the first night Simons was booed loudly by a large section of the audience, though this did not stop the same company reviving the opera a year later: then those who had not yet seen this version no longer needed to feel they had missed something. Guy Cassiers and Ivo van Hove seem less keen on risk and controversy than Perceval and Simons, but their performances of unprecedented length, experimental stage design and complex scenarios seem to suggest that they too are in search of some form of intellectual radicalism.

Such productions probably do not draw in a new, young theatre audience, but they are a goldmine for the international elite of critics and theatre-goers who have grown up and been hardened in the ways of the theatre. And, incidentally, it is no surprise that theatre directors are increasingly becoming involved in opera. After all, that genre comprises a wide range of different disciplines – drama, music, singing, stage design – in which directors can give free rein to their brilliant ideas, but above all it is the genre most closely associated with the Establishment. It is a conservative genre, which of all the performing arts has probably remained faithful to a particular stereotype for longest, but it is now increasingly the object of an unbridled urge to experiment.

The tone of the above undoubtedly implies that the unrelentingly innovative aspirations of all these directors can sometimes give rise to a degree of distrust. This is illustrated by Alize Zandwijk's comments on the enthusiasm that greeted her production of *The Lower Depths* at the Edinburgh Festival. When speaking to the press she said: 'I could just as well have imagined that people would have got up and left. *The Lower Depths* is not your average production. A naked man walks around the stage tossing himself off, and the set is emphatically not a set at all. They are not used to that kind of thing in England.' (*de Volkskrant*, 27th August 1999). It seems as if here Zandwijk is trivialising the limits she herself has sought, as if the provocative effect of her directing was more important than its artistic integrity.

A Dead - End?

It is only to be expected that in time the cycle of tradition and innovation outlined here should spark a reaction, as for example from Pierre Audi (1957), a French-Lebanese theatre-maker living in the Netherlands who has made a name for himself all over the world with the operas and other works he has directed. In his speech at the opening of the 2009 Theatre Festival in Amsterdam, he argued that theatre should be recognised as an art form that is part of a tradition. He spoke highly of the vitality of Dutch theatre, as attested by the international interest in it in recent years, but he warns an older generation of directors against artistic complacency and expressed his concern at the increasing neglect of the '*classics of an immense heritage of writing for the stage*'.

Further to this, Jan Decler, possibly the greatest Flemish actor of his generation, once said in an interview: '*I observe current developments in the theatre*



The Lower Depths
(Nachtasiel). Ro theater.
Directed by Alize Zandwijk.
Photo by Matthias Horn.

with great anxiety. Everyone who has anything to do with theatre, whether he is building a set or directing a play somewhere, calls himself a 'maker' ... Actors are increasingly becoming superfluous, in fact these theatre-makers would prefer to dispense with actors entirely. Directors deal in projects in which there is no longer any place for the actor.' (NRC Handelsblad, 5/6th September 2009).

And there are mutterings from abroad too. In his opening speech at the 2009 Salzburg Festspiele Daniel Kehlmann, son of the Austrian director Michael Kehlmann and himself a writer, criticised the dominance of *'director's theatre'* and argued fervently for established literary convention and a subordinate role for the direction. In fact, such arguments are in line with the literary theatre critics who in the fifties were already opposed to allowing directors too much autonomy. In the Netherlands the eminent critic and later professor of literature H.A. Gomperts expressed his loathing for the *'fanatics of the theatre, inflated egos, rabbit-shooting bear hunters who think the text is a mere bagatelle, no more than the occasion for the mighty creative force of their acting or directing.'*

If it is correct to conclude that action and reaction is a mechanism that can be found both in Dutch and in Flemish theatre history – tradition followed by innovation which in its turn again becomes tradition – then theatre in the Low Countries may have some exciting times ahead. Will directors, possibly of a future generation, actually go back to the way things once were and acknowledge the playwright as the defining factor? Will they perhaps leave their mark on the canon even more forcefully and comment on it even more emphatically on the basis of their own vision? Or, conversely, will they more often seek out theatre outside the canon: dramatisations of novels, adaptations of film scripts, free compilations? And how will these future developments be rated abroad?

Of all the arts, theatre is the most vulnerable to transience and mortality. It is a discipline that is exceedingly susceptible to hypes and trends. Directors should be on their guard and realise that their fame, both domestic and international, may one day come to an end. Theatre – and especially the theatre of the big, famous companies – is in danger of becoming an exclusive preserve, created by directors from an older generation and applauded by an aging audience.

Where ‘*innovation*’ increases expressive power and stimulates the imagination effectively, expectations may still run high, also on an international level; but where ‘*innovation*’ becomes an end in itself, it is in danger of following a road that comes to a dead end before it reaches the country’s borders. ■

FURTHER READING

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