

'Bought by Judgement of the Eye'

Dutch Theatre Looks at the State of the World

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[JOS NIJHOF]

Shakespeare's drama has in recent years been more popular than ever in the Netherlands. In the 2012-13 theatre season at least ten of his plays, some of them revivals, have been performed on the professional circuit. Ivo van Hove, artistic head of Toneelgroep Amsterdam, says: 'I see Shakespeare as a contemporary. Even though his work was written more than four hundred years ago, it always turns out to be surprisingly up to date.' It's not only Van Hove who points out this timelessness, but other theatre-makers, too, and they all seem to like nothing better than to link the social phenomena of our era with the oeuvre of the great playwright.

Obviously Shakespeare never wanted to make a statement about the enormous expansion of social media, but in a festive adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing*, director Jos Thie of De Utrechtse Spelen very clearly wants to broach the subject of the superficiality of media such as Facebook: 'The world Shakespeare drew is still very recognisable. As a director you look for a key that allows you to shape this recognisability, and in our case it's Facebook.' In the same vein, another director links *The Comedy of Errors* to the present financial crisis, and yet others, more obviously, associate *Othello* with present-day xenophobia, and *Macbeth* and *King Lear* with the despotism and delusions of grandeur associated with certain of today's leaders.

It seems that stage directors, and not only those working on Shakespeare, are almost compulsively looking for an answer to the question of how and how much we can use the classical repertoire to portray and comment on current affairs. How can we approach today's problems by making use of plays from the past? How are we to transpose the classical masterpieces of Shakespeare, Chekhov, Euripides and so forth to the present, and how are we to make the ideas and conflicts of the past merge with those of our own era?

Between stage and society

Until about ten years ago leading stage directors, guided by an unshakeable ego, tried to make their mark on theatre very emphatically by means of unexpected angles and highly individual interpretations. That period, the heyday of

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what was called 'director's theatre', gradually made way for the view that art in general, and theatre in particular, should stand up in its own right and should not have to act as a vehicle for personal obsessions. Directors faded into the background somewhat and more attention was paid to quality and the talent of individual actors and actresses.

The debate about the significance and commitment of theatre was probably cranked up again as a consequence of a number of drastic and 'dramatic' events in the Netherlands, such as the murders of the politician Pim Fortuyn and, a couple of years later, the controversial film and programme-maker Theo van Gogh and – definitely connected – the unexpectedly rapid advance of the Party For Freedom (PVV), a populist anti-Islam party whose frontman is the equally controversial and by now internationally notorious Geert Wilders. These events led to a great deal of political turmoil and debate in society, as was the case more recently with the global banking crisis, floundering European ambitions and the unexpectedly rapid ecological decline of our planet.

The directing naturally still determines the extent to which plays from the classical repertoire are geared to current affairs, and the pursuit of recognisability leaves considerable room for manoeuvre. For example, a director may be of the opinion that a production with a marital conflict at its heart can be used as a parable of a society in which people may or may not be able to accept the fact that other people are different. This is at least more or less how Ivo van Hove justified the four-part 'marriage series' (based on plays by Shakespeare, Ayckbourn, Ingmar Bergman and Charles Mee) that he directed at Toneelgroep Amsterdam between 2004 and 2006. It was a reaction to an

attack made by his colleague Johan Simons, who criticised Van Hove, as head of the Netherlands' biggest theatre company, of directing noncommittal productions and thus remaining remote from the drifting society around him.

In Van Hove's view, loosely translated, the transfer from stage to society should take place in the spectator's experience, but the question is whether the existing classical repertoire is dynamic enough to generate this, even if theatre-makers expressly intend it and mould the classics to such an extent that it rubs the audience's nose in their – more or less clearly defined – intentions. They might for example direct *Elektra* or *Orestes* as traumatised African child soldiers; to contribute to the debate on integration they would have Ophelia walking around in a headscarf; they have the *Cherry Orchard* cut down with chain saws instead of axes, from which the audience is intended to understand something concerning current environmental problems.



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It is not only the directors themselves who seem to be pretty fed up with these brilliant ideas, but audiences too. They have in the meantime been largely taken up by amateur theatre, where a new generation of directors uses every possible means to avoid giving the dreaded impression of outmoded dilettantism. Current affairs appear to be dragged in at the drop of a hat, but this does not always lead to the communication of any unusual point of view that gives cause for reflection.

To achieve the latter, one has to take a different approach, not only regarding the classical repertoire, but also when new and original plays provide the basis for the drama. An example of this was the project that the Rotterdam artist Jonas Staal launched at the end of December 2011. Under the title *Society as a Prison*, Staal presented a two-part work on the notion of a closed society versus an open one. The occasion for this was provided by a controversial 2004 architectural design for a prison designed by a PVV member of parliament. The form chosen for the piece was that of an 'all-round work of art', which included not only theatre, but also debate, reflection and analysis.



mightysociety10
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A more recent example, from March 2012, is *Breivik meets Wilders*, written by the writer and journalist Theodor Holman. It is a one-act play about a fictional encounter between the Norwegian mass-murderer, who expressed admiration for Geert Wilders in his writings, and Wilders himself, his great example. The two meet in the VIP lounge at Heathrow Airport before Anders Breivik's horrific deeds of 22nd July 2011. The discussion that follows reveals not so much the affinity between them, but the crucial difference: Breivik was not afraid of using violence to achieve his aims, while Wilders pursues his dreams through politics and democracy. The very topical subject of free speech also came up in passing. The stage Wilders says: 'One can think what one likes, conclude what one likes. That's called freedom. But one cannot do what one likes. After all, there are laws.'

The distance from reality

You cannot get much closer to the present reality than *Breivik meets Wilders*. But at the same time it raises the question of whether it can still be called a play, or is it more of an exposition in which the old rules of drama are set aside in favour of a statement that has to be made at all costs. Projects like those by Staal and plays like those of Holman appear to refer to a period when theatre productions in the Netherlands were quite often defined as current affairs programmes with a very partisan political angle.

In the wake of the *Aktie Tomaat* (Tomato Campaign) – the 1969 movement that opposed traditional repertory theatre – what were called 'informative theatre' groups popped up here and there; these were companies working on a collective basis which took a direct and confrontational look at the dubious practices of big business, from the strawboard industry in East Groningen to the DAF car factories in Eindhoven. Today's opponents of generous arts subsidies would probably call such groups as Proloog, Sater and the Nieuwe Komodie 'left-wing amateurs', and in this case it would not be entirely unjustified. According to one right-wing politician from that period, Proloog was a Marxist umbrella



Wiener Wald © Ben van Duin

organisation which should not be given a single cent more subsidy. Yet, thanks to government support, 'informative theatre' survived until the eighties and this form of theatre has already been sufficiently vindicated in the chronicles of theatre history. Even now there are still productions that more or less maintain its legacy.

To give an example, this applies to some extent to *The Prey* by the Nationale Toneel, a production that attracted a lot of attention in the 2011-2012 season. At the very least it shares with 'informative theatre' a journalistic focus on current affairs and an interest in big business. The play was a dramatisation of the best-seller of the same name by Jeroen Smit, and tells the story of the downfall of ABN Amro, an institution which for almost two hundred years had played a role in the success of the Dutch economy.

Yet the need for a mission that goes further than a plain statement about avaricious bankers showed through in this production too. As the director Johan Doesburg puts it: 'The play says something about bankers, but also about every one of us. The lust for money is in our very fibre. It is the story of a struggle with no winners.' We also see this need for a transition to a more general truth, a truth that goes beyond mere anecdote, in other productions in the 2011-2012 season whose subject is the 'crisis'. For example, *San Francisco* by the young company De Warme Winkel, and *Boiling Frog* by Toneelgroep Oostpool, a play about 'the devastating power of the economy and the addictive discontent it arouses in us'.

Current affairs times ten: mightysociety

It is generally accepted that the director, Eric de Vroedt, and the changing actors and staff of mightysociety are among the best-known makers of contemporary politically-engaged theatre. They have made a series of ten productions since 2007, with management and publicity support from Toneelgroep Amsterdam. This series is very prosaically numbered, from *mightysociety1* to *mightysociety10*. Since the start in 2004, they have dealt with a varied range of subjects including terrorism, globalisation, the fear of Islam and the war in Afghanistan.

The penultimate production, *mightysociety9*, a three-part play 'on life and love in an era of poison scandals', was based on the notorious Probo Koala case. The story of this 'chemical odyssey', with the Panamanian ship the Probo Koala in the leading role, is extremely complex and the last word on it has not been written yet. To summarise, it describes the illegal dumping of four hundred tons of poisonous waste at various tips in Ivory Coast, for which the Dutch Trafigura company was responsible. This had disastrous consequences. According to some reports, hundreds of people suffered as a result of the dumping of this waste and there were at least ten fatalities. The incident led to the fall of the Ivory Coast government in 2006 and the legal aftermath is still continuing today.

The first of the three parts of the play shows how much the media manipulate so as not to disappoint the public, which has particular expectations. The cliché of the African biting the Western benefactor's feeding hand is overturned because this supposedly primitive being now has a mobile phone and a laptop, and in addition there is also an unwelcome love affair with a Dutch presenter. The second part takes us to a press conference given by the management of

a Dutch multinational. The meeting gets completely out of hand, partly as a consequence of the director's dark-skinned wife making an appearance, and they get caught up in a heated dialogue that contains references to the myth of Jason and Medea. In the third part the play reaches a climax when two actors perform a competitive dance - a white office worker versus an inexhaustibly energetic African.

This summary shows how reality increasingly fades from sight in the course of the play, and how the initially realistic settings and chance occurrences dissolve into stylised artistic abstraction. The play ultimately breaks away completely from the Probo Koala issue and concerns itself only with the machinations that underlie certain political-economic developments. As the makers of *mightysociety9* themselves say: 'For quite some time, the whole Probo Koala debate has no longer been about people killed by poison. It is about greed, at the expense of everything else'.

The final part of this huge project, *mightysociety10*, which premiered in January 2013, zooms in on Indonesia, the country where De Vroedt's mother was born and where his father died. This instalment covers the time from a perfect youth spent in Batavia to the commercial nightmare of a luxury resort in Bali. But here, too, it is not essentially about the minor drama itself, but about the big story behind it. Against the backdrop of a vigorous, advancing Asia, it takes stock of a bankrupt Europe at the start of the second decade of this century.

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mightysociety10
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The eye of the beholder

In the end, the main thing in current politically-engaged theatre is to find the right balance between realism and abstraction, fact and fiction, reality and imagination. Theatre-makers who, rather forcedly, try to mould the classical repertoire to fit their own insights and put great emphasis on the here and now run the risk of ignoring the difference in time and thereby generating a performance practice that is not rooted and which will float somewhere in an unrecognisable universe.

I have seen a few of the Shakespeare productions I mentioned above and to be honest not one of them gave me the slightest new insight into today's world. Conversely, not long ago I saw a version of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* by the Arnhem company Keesen&Co that touched me to the quick. The acting and directing were outstanding and this play, more than a hundred years old, suddenly shed new light on the political division into left and right, which, as I realised, is all to do with ideals on the one hand and vested interests on the other, but probably also vaguely had something to do with lethargy and vigour. The world shifted a fraction and life briefly became a little more complex. And this happened at a more or less hallucinatory moment, without feeling that the director and actors were deliberately trying to push me in a particular direction.

In summer 2012, I saw one of the annual open-air performances in the Amsterdam woods. It was *Wiener Wald* (Vienna Woods), based on *Tales from the Vienna Woods* by the German-Hungarian author Ödön von Horváth. A play about Germany in the thirties, it was populated by a procession of characters from the petit bourgeoisie. On closer examination, the play has hardly any points of contact with the present, although a link can of course be made between the years of crisis at that time and our present financial malaise. The director allowed the script to do its job and did not make any radical changes to the historical dimension. The result, again, was a performance that touched me and taught me something about the vexation a society lapses into when money – or rather the lack of it – dominates life and love.

What determines the power of theatre is the appeal to one's own imagination and the individual potential for identification. Theatre should leave the audience room for its own, original, unforeseen insight into current events. Or, as Treplev, the young writer in Chekhov's *The Seagull*, says: 'You shouldn't portray life as it is, nor as it ought to be, but as it appears in your dreams'. I can't formulate it any more concisely and effectively than that.

In the second decade of this century, many theatre-makers have fortunately shifted the accent from the bare reality (or one larded with brilliant ideas) to the dream. It would not surprise me to learn that this development had been brought about precisely by the changes in the political climate and the debate in society. After all, it is only dreams that offer any way out of such tumult. However much an artist does his best to extol the virtues of his goods, in the end it is only the spectator's imagination that will be able to settle the dispute. To quote the Princess of France in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*: 'Beauty is bought by judgement of the eye, / Not utter'd by base sale of chapmen's tongues'. So it is an indisputable truth that the transfer from the stage to society has to take place in the mind of the spectator. And theatre-makers have to be dreamers and share their dreams with the audience. ■

Translated by Gregory Ball

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