

The Lessons of Medea and La Falstaff

A Tribute to My Theatre Work

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[TOM LANOYE]

In the mid-1990s, when director Luk Perceval invited me to join him in embarking on the twelve-hour marathon production which *Ten Oorlog* (To War) was to become, I did not hesitate. Despite having previously only written a handful of plays and a couple of novels, stories, poems, et cetera, I immediately said yes. Correction: I only hesitated for a couple of days. Not out of an aversion to Shakespeare or Perceval, but because I found so few roles for women in the source material, which consisted of eight of Shakespeare's history plays, beginning with *Richard II* and finishing with *Richard III*, a cycle often referred to as *The Wars of the Roses*.

Only when it dawned on me that the lack of women and their suppression was part and parcel of the universal power cycle we were to stage, and after Perceval promised we would make Falstaff into a subversive transvestite, did I decide to agree. Our Falstaff was even permitted to fall in love with the young Prince Henk, later to become the soldier King Henry V, or *Hendrik de Vijfden* as he would be known in our version. In the end I even gave La Falstaff a couple of adaptations of Shakespeare's love sonnets, as a lament after he/she is dumped by his young love Henk, who unexpectedly chooses to grow up, do the honourable thing and become king after all.

Elsewhere in *Ten Oorlog* I also worked in countless references to famous poems or phrases, songs or speeches, from Dutch-language and world literature, from Flemish poet Paul Snoek to American record label Motown. Sometimes they served as meaningful echoes, sometimes they were purely entertaining parodies. Why would I avoid such interventions, which purists make out to be unnecessary and even sacrilegious? Shakespeare himself was certainly not averse to quotes and pastiches. It was from him that I learnt to do it, and from the many directors and actors educated in his teachings. When he was just twenty-eight he was accused by a competitor, the snob Robert Greene, now barely known, of being an 'upstart crow', showing off with the feathers and treasures of others.

A kleptomaniac crow, a thieving magpie... At fifty-eight I would still consider it a title of honour. In fact it is a vocation, particularly in theatre. Nothing is original, everything is adaptation. The greatest flash of inspiration is a clever appropriation, brilliantly disguised as authenticity. Literary theorists and pur-



Hamlet versus Hamlet
Photo by Kurt Van der Elst

ists fail to understand one thing. On stage everything is possible and permissible, as long as it works. Writing drama is a celebration of freedom. Nowhere else do you have freer rein than in a play script. Even film cannot compare, however much it is indebted to theatre. I take my hat off to the scripts of David Mamet or Quentin Tarantino but, as in all scenes for the screen, major monologues are limited to between thirty and forty seconds. You can get away with eight lines, ten maximum.

On stage, dialogues can last four to five minutes, giving you two pages. *Ten Oorlog* ended, after more than eleven hours of theatre, with a monologue of almost half an hour, the morbid swansong of *Risjaar Modderfokker den Derde* (Richard Motherfucker III).

Man should aim to build cathedrals

Before we were ready to go, I had been given twelve hours to jumble up idioms and styles into a 'diachronic language spectacle'. I'm not sure what it means, but that was the way a glowing review put it.

Perceval and I constructed our own storyline based on the historic facts and Shakespeare's interpretation, supplementing them with our imagination and sometimes pulling them brazenly apart, in our desire to sketch a kind of history of power and at the same time all of humanity through the ages. There was no shortage of ambition; we were both under forty, back then. 'Man should aim to

build cathedrals,' said one of my other teachers, Gerard Mortier (1943-2014), director of De Munt/La Monnaie in Brussels, the Opéra de la Bastille in Paris and the Teatro Real, Madrid's opera, as well as the very first Ruhrtriennale in Germany, and before that artistic director of the Salzburg Festival for many years. I see him as the Sergei Diaghilev of his time and I would like to mention him here because he enabled us to produce *Ten Oorlog* in German. We premiered at the Salzburg Festival in 1999, in coproduction with the Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg.

In the German version, again, each of the six kings had his own language. The first, our *Risjaar Deuzième*, spoke in frivolously meandering verse, peppered with archaisms, internal rhymes, enjambment and French flourishes. The second, our *Hendrik Vier*, expressed himself in surly, wooden rhyming couplets. Those who belonged to the court of the newly crowned king subserviently adopted his manner of speech. At the same time the language became progressively more slippery, cynical, grotesque, filthy.

At each transition of power there was therefore a change in idiom and style, while all characters persisted in speaking in iambic pentameters. Even the hunchback monster Richard III and his two brothers – the York brothers – availed themselves of this metrical form, also used by Christopher Marlowe and Shakespeare. But the York brothers' language increasingly consisted of verbal rubbish – swearwords and expletives from bad English-language films and series, mixed with Flemish dialect expressions and vulgar threats from hip hop songs.

Only when we came to the final king, our *Risjaar Modderfokker den Derde*, was the verse form permitted to break down here and there – disintegration of rule became disintegration of language. Risjaar's use of power was based nar-

Hamlet versus Hamlet, Abke Haring as Hamlet

Photo by Kurt Van der Elst



rowly on cynicism, self-pity, narcissism, bloodlust and provocation. At the moments of his greatest abuse of power, such as the murder of his two nephews, whom he also partially consumes in our version – the iambic pentameter falls apart and the monster can only express himself in a kind of linguistic mush composed of shrieks, fragments of slogans, peculiar poetic images and raw cursing. A babbling flood of words reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* or Austrian playwright Werner Schwab. From linguistic ingenuity to linguistic vomit, scabies, leprosy, underlining the theme of our tale of deteriorating power, creating a slowly shifting and eventually explosive idiom, far beyond grammar and classic versification.

Becoming a better writer

Ten Oorlog cost me more than two years of my existence, innumerable fits of despair, countless sleepless nights filled with doubt. But given the chance I would do it all over again, and I advise any colleague to set off on a similar journey if the opportunity arises.

In those four years – including all the rehearsals and the German production – I learnt more than in five years at university, and more than in my previous fifteen years' writing. My collaboration with Luk Perceval made me a better writer on every level. The lesson went far beyond creating dialogues and monologues in verse form; it was a crash course in applied psychology and a bachelor's degree in dramaturgy, constructing scenarios, themes, characters, relationships – all that and more. I marched through it all at great speed.

We scrapped a couple of hundred characters and extras, but retained dozens. Under the whip of a demanding director and his team of playwrights and actors, I also learnt how to explore what a crown can do to its wearer in a series of six connected plays. Six monarchs, six personality types, and six painful downfalls, intensified by everything this world can throw at a mortal. Overconfidence, paranoia, jealousy, betrayal, revenge and – very occasionally – love and compassion.

Finally I also received a lesson in applied political science, amounting to the idea that without collective transfer of power there is no authority and consequently no society is possible. However, if power is transferred collectively, the risk of abuse always arises. The crown itself is pure, glittering temptingly, but the prestige and authority it confers can corrupt or crush its wearer. Generally both at once.

Everything I learnt from *Ten Oorlog* was useful to me in subsequent projects. *Mamma Medea*, for example, was a very free adaptation of Euripides's famous play. I went resolutely in search of a counterpart to our sixth and final king from *Ten Oorlog*, *Risjaar Modderfokker den Derde*. After the greatest male monster of world literature it simply seemed natural to me to turn to the female version.

Medea and her beloved Jason differ not only in background and temperament, but also, once again, in language. Medea and her barbaric compatriots all speak in verse and in archaic jargon, while Jason and his supposedly civilised Greek Argonauts speak in dry, sophisticated prose, highlighting the war of love between the two spouses.



Bourla Theatre
Antwerp

Their passionate fight to the death also continues to the bitter end in *Mamma Medea*. In contrast with Euripides's version, they each murder one of their two sons, as if in a fanatical competition between two people perfectly alike. Having started out as Greek and barbarian, in the end they converge with George and Martha from Edward Albee's modern classic *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

I was able to apply the lessons of La Falstaff and Risjaar Modderfokker extensively in my own prose when I wrote *Het Goddelijke Monster* (The Divine Monster), a family chronical which was soon dubbed 'a pop art Buddenbrooks', after Thomas Mann's family chronical.

Power versus art

Other projects of mine would have looked very different without the lessons of *Ten Oorlog*. In *Bloed en rozen. Het lied van Jeanne & Gilles* (Blood and Roses. The song of Jeanne & Gilles) I wrote my version of the life of two *monstres sacrés* of French history, the people's heroine Joan of Arc and the noble paedosexual serial killer Gilles de Rais, who together liberated the city of Orléans from the English. Both underwent notorious trials, both were executed, both remain the subject of speculation and discussion today, but what connects them for me is again the chiaroscuro of power and human impotence. Who is the true monster and who is the most human? Neither Jeanne nor Gilles is entirely one or the other.

Under the same motto I also wrote down my vision of another two Shakespearean classics. In *Koningin Lear* (Queen Lear) the elderly monarch is transformed into Elisabeth Lear, the leading lady of a former family contracting firm once started up in Flanders, and nowadays a global multinational. Despite her progressive dementia Elisabeth Lear senses the approach of a colossal, all-encompassing economic crisis, a perfect storm for the financial sector. Despite her earlier business intuition she makes a disastrous decision, dividing her entire empire without preparation between her three sons. The only condition? Like Lear's three daughters in the original play, they must publicly profess their love for their mother.

The youngest refuses to cooperate in what he calls an exhibition of bad taste and insincerity, to the frantic rage of his old, sick mother, who disinherits him on the spot, thereby exacerbating the approaching disaster. Her monstrous narcissism, inflated by her dementia, eventually leads to the unfortunate death of her youngest, the apple of her eye – who happens also to be the child of an extramarital affair, like the 'little red-headed monkey' Jonas, the murdered son of Katrien Deschryver from *Het Goddelijke Monster*, described above.

In *Hamlet versus Hamlet*, as the second adaptation is called, I cut out Hamlet's friend Horatio, making the young Danish prince even lonelier than he already was, but I introduced a brand new character as partial replacement, the spirit of the jester Yorick, who accompanies Hamlet and sometimes challenges him.

In my version the play therefore has two ghosts: that of Hamlet's murdered father on the one hand, demanding that his son take bloody revenge and claim the power due to him as prince by right, and on the other hand the ghost of Yorick. He constantly reminds Hamlet of all things frivolous, artistic and truly worth the effort in life, averse to all Machiavellian intrigues. Power versus art: that is a fundamental choice tearing 'my' Hamlet apart from the first scene. To grow up definitively, or not yet, after all?



Mamma Medea

Els Dottermans as Medea

Photo by Phile Deprez



Minard Theatre

Ghent



Mamma Medea. Gilda De Bal as Mamma Medea (Chalkiope/Kirke)

Photo by Phile Deprez

Director Guy Cassiers shared my analysis. I easily persuaded him to have my prince played by a young, androgynous actress, who would further underline my central interpretation. Note that our Hamlet was not a transvestite like La Falstaff in *Ten Oorlog*. Dutch actress Abke Haring interpreted the part of a young man, just as all women's roles were played by boys in Shakespeare's day.

This Hamlet does not simply live between appearance and reality, between thought and action, between revenge and fear... He inhabits that no-man's land because he himself is 'unformed'. He exists in a space between adolescence and adulthood, between purity and political realism, between feelings of revenge and regret, remaining unformed. He still feels pure, untainted by the machinations of power, and really he would prefer to remain so forever. In order to protect himself he feigns madness, so long and intensely that he really goes mad and condemns himself to eternal inaction.

In my adaptation he ends up the only survivor, on his knees at the front of the stage, apparently finally ready for action. He will throw himself upon his own sword, as his rival in love Laertes did with such conviction before him. But even now Hamlet, the young philosophy student, gets no further than interminably conjugating the verb to be.

'I am. *(weeps)*

I was. *(laughs)*

I was. *(stops, nods)*

I am. *(curtain)*

A magnificently lying world

Two other fictional novels of mine, like *Het Goddelijke Monster*, are tributes to my theatre work. In *Het Derde Huwelijk* (The Third Marriage) an old, terminally ill homosexual accepts payment to enter a sham marriage with a young African woman, with the aim of helping her gain Belgian nationality. Everyone betrays everyone; not even the social security inspectors and family members of the two main characters are interested in the truth. Everyone fashions their own persona and stages their own innocence, to combat betrayal by others. Nevertheless a bizarre and sincere affection grows between the two false spouses – with dramatic consequences for all involved.

In *Gelukkige Slaven* (Happy Slaves) two near-identical main characters come face to face. They are both called Tony Hanssen and look as alike as two brothers, nor do they differ much in other respects. One Tony fled Belgium a couple of decades previously and has since made a mess of his life, running up enormous debts with a corrupt Chinese communist owner of various casinos in Macau, whose wife he allows to abuse him as a toy boy and unsuspecting money courier. During an intense love-making session in Buenos Aires Mrs Bo Xiang dies in Tony's arms, an ecstatic grin on her face.

The other Tony is a computer expert who has fled a failed Belgian merchant bank. He shoots a corrupt guard and a defenceless rhinoceros in a South African safari park, hoping that the trophy, the double horn of the slaughtered animal, will demonstrate that he should be taken seriously. The murder resembles a rite of passage, reminiscent of the Argonaut Jason's reason for travelling to the land of the witch Medea, to win the Golden Fleece and prove his claim to the throne.

The two Tonys first meet in China, the lap of the future, where each realises that the other wants to trick him, but that they desperately need one another if, perhaps, they are to be delivered from their fate. For that, each must play the other, in the hope of them both improving their lot.

In acting the part of an identical person, they shape the deeper theme of the novel, the loss of identity in a globalising world, which lies so brilliantly that everyone can compose their own identity. As long as they have enough money to purchase the right luxury products with the right brand name and look like the photo-shopped Übermenschen from glossy magazines and TV advertisements. The non-existent new gods of fashion. The dazzlingly designed, eternally young, vapid monsters we all emulate, in horror and delight.

Never again speechless

None of my works, however, brings together the influences mentioned above as much as my autobiographical novel *Speechless* (*Sprakeloos*), painful as it is.

Not that I would want to portray my mother, the central character, as a monster. Far from it, although I do not deny a certain form of emotional tyranny and family dominance in her. It was an illness that struck her and slowly drove her towards death which I was compelled to describe as monstrous; aphasia following a cerebral infarction which destroyed the speech centre of her brain.



Vooruit Theatre, 'Art Ennobles', Ghent

The language I had designed for *Risjaar Modderfokker den Derde* in *Ten Oorlog*, described above as 'linguistic mush composed of shrieks, fragments of slogans and raw curses', and as a 'babbling flood of words' reminiscent of an oral *Waste Land* – the same language now afflicted my poor mother. For *Risjaar* the linguistic mush reflected the complete decomposition of power. For my mother the gibberish formed a harrowing sign of loss of strength, and of everything she had considered worthwhile, in short her own expressive, powerful language so rich in imagery.

She had made use of that language from morning till night. At the breakfast table she would vividly describe her strange nightmares, adding some equally strange interpretation, while at the same time commenting in detail on what she found in her newspaper, which she had been reading out of the corner of her eye as she spoke.

In the course of the day she talked incessantly at my father's butcher shop, where to be honest she was never particularly enthusiastic about helping. She concealed her revulsion by working doubly hard and showing a disposition of cast-iron cheerfulness. Self-effacing and self-sacrificing, with little sign of irritation, day after day, like most women of her generation.

She succeeded, despite her rebellious temperament, because once in a while there would be an evening in which she had something other to do than just filling in the accounts, darning her large family's socks or preparing the next days' meals in advance in her tiny, cramped kitchen. Those were the evenings in which she indulged her heart's desire as an amateur actress. She declaimed and triumphed in rehearsal rooms behind popular pubs or on stage at the constantly busy theatre of the provincial town from which she and I hailed.

Everything I know about theatre, everything appealing and fascinating about language, everything that has made me devoted to art, begins with her and the unintentional lessons she gave me, long before *Medea* and *La Falstaff*, without either of us realising at the time that they were lessons. The scene might look as follows: she would be ironing the washing while I sat on the other side of the table, her script in my hands, *A View from the Bridge*, by Arthur Miller, or *Our Town*, by Thornton Wilder, or sometimes, less to her taste, a slapstick

comedy such as *Boeing Boeing*. I would correct her when she made mistakes in her lines and read all the other parts myself, in accordance with her double goal, as 'multitasking mother before her time', of simultaneously improving my reading and memorising her role. And all the while she coolly and calmly did the ironing.

That she of all people should lose her capacity for language: I saw it as a cruel, monstrous punishment for a crime she had not committed. Hearing her version of the language leprosy I had so presumptuously and cheerfully created for Risjaar years before – my interpretation of one of the most popular villains of international theatre – left me in despair, even ashamed. When she even lost that gibberish and was driven silently towards her miserable death, the horror was complete. A hideous, wordless silence which I hated from the bottom of my heart.

Ten Dorlog was my second university, as I wrote above. In *Sprakeloos* I had to learn that lesson again, this time at a bitter university of pain, rage and frustration at so much pointless suffering, so much macabre irony. Never have I found a book so hard to write.

But never have I wanted to write a book so much. As an indictment and screeching curse against the inevitability of the decline which awaits us all. Our suffering and our impotence when we stand eye to eye with it. Above all, however, it had to be a homage. To my mother, of course, but also to the greatest gift I received from her. Her language. My mother tongue.

The intimacy of her deterioration was something I could not shy away from. I needed to bear sharp and honest witness to it, giving a humble yet unveiled account. But the book could only end with a son who, as a writer, still sung of triumph. That of language. *Her* language, and mine, in which I – stubborn and demanding, against all decline – make another vow, to her and to myself, only to believe in *one* thing. The power of language, the fire of literature, on paper and on stage.

Sprakeloos, translated by Paul Vincent as *Speechless*, ends as follows: 'The nurse looks at me again for a moment, in doubt. Then she does her work anyway. She inserts two fingers of one hand carefully between the lower and upper jaw of the patient and wedges them open. With the forefinger of her other hand, she frees, from the place from where the language came that I learnt, just a couple of bits of mucus and wipes them off on a tissue. And then and there I swore to myself that from now on I have one vocation, one aim, one godforsaken self-chosen duty, because I can't do much else, haven't learnt anything else and don't believe in anything else. That I, when I see the chance, will combat the silence with my voice, will try to out-argue silence with my speech, will try to attack all the available paper in the world with my language. Let that be my rebellion, my revolt, against mucus, against rattling. Let me do this at least as a mutiny. Let there no longer be a second, a page, a book, that does not speak in a hundred thousand tongues, that does not testify to vocabulary. Never again silent, always writing, never again speechless.

Begin.' ■