

Tension in Controversy

The Cabaret of Hans Teeuwen

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The stages on which he performs have grown over the years, but he can still make do with a couple of square metres. His last show featured a piano which was only used briefly for one song. There are no accompanying musicians. The decor is austere, if not lacking in imagination. His body, voice and facial expressions have to suffice, and so they do: his arms and legs resemble those of a ragdoll; even without a microphone his voice has an enormous range; his face is a landscape on which improbable vistas unfold.

Hans Teeuwen is a theatre wizard for whom the right term has yet to be coined. The term 'cabaret artist' does not do him justice, as the concept is still attached to a mixture of diverse stage genres such as narrative and poetic art or song, whereas with Hans Teeuwen these disciplines combine to form a completely unique theatrical grammar, far removed from existing theatre conventions, with controversial content and an absurdist style. Any attempt to copy him is doomed to failure: Teeuwen's cabaret is best described as 'typically Hans Teeuwen'.

He is a stage animal, an entertainer and natural comedian. Shortly after the start of his career, speaking about the ease with which he moves before his audience, however massive, the way he has so magically fused with his craft, he himself said, 'From the moment that I set foot on the stage, I was successful, because what I do is right. I'm at home there. The public sense that it's good, that I'm present. There are cabaret artists for whom it isn't right. They weren't born to it, but by working really hard they've managed to win a place. They fight their way to it. I've never had to learn that fight.'

Personal tragedies

Hans Teeuwen was born on 3 March 1967 in Budel, a small village near the border between the province of North Brabant and Belgium. After secondary school he attended drama academy in Eindhoven, but he soon decided to swap theory for practice. In 1991 he joined forces with guitarist Roland Smeenk to take part in the prestigious cabaret festival Cameretten. The duo won both the press and the audience prizes.



Hans Teeuwen
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The chemistry between Teeuwen and Smeenk was unprecedented. Seldom has a jury been so unanimously full of praise for a performance or the public so wildly enthusiastic. However, a collaborative future in cabaret came to a sudden end a year later, before *Heist* went on tour as an evening show, when the two were involved in a car accident in which the thirty-five-year-old Smeenk lost his life. It was a first personal tragedy in the life of Hans Teeuwen, a sudden, tragic violation of the special connection he had formed, not only with a cabaret partner, but also with a very close friend. A 2007 TV documentary about the duo makes it clear how much Teeuwen owes to Smeenk and how many years it took before he finally dared to enjoy his success as a solo artist.

That success started straight out from his first show, *Hard en Zielig* (Hard and Pitiful, 1994), with which he achieved a fast breakthrough to a large and steadfast audience. Ingredients which were to prove characteristic of his entire oeuvre can already be found in this show: when it comes to form, flitting between very diverse sketches, and in content, a lack of inhibition which sometimes astonishes the audience and makes them uncomfortable, especially where it comes down to recurring themes such as sex, violence and religion.



Hans Teeuwen & The Painkillers,
Popstukken



This dream debut was followed by *Met een Breierdeck* (With a Breierdeck, 1995), a show with an endless playlist. Teeuwen threw himself into his craft with so much energy that he paid the price with exhaustion and lack of inspiration. False rumours even did the rounds that he had ended up in a psychiatric clinic with suicidal tendencies. In actual fact Teeuwen was busy with a number of projects outside the world of cabaret, including film and radio work.

The year 2000 marked his return to the stage. In his third show, *Trui* (Sweater), more than previously, he sought out confrontation with the audience and practised with gusto what the Austrian author Peter Handke termed *Publikumsbeschimpfung*. In a provocative, ironic game he entered into a trial of strength with the viewer, persisting with it until the end of the show. Finally he spurned the customary applause, adding power to his refusal by addressing the audience with a rage which balanced on the edge between reality and pretence. At the end of his fourth show, *Dat dan weer wel* (On the Other Hand, 2001), he did precisely the opposite, refusing to leave the stage, causing the audience to continue whooping and clapping for minutes on end, eventually edging their way slowly out of the hall, still labouring under the anxious assumption that an encore might yet follow. After that, *Industry of Love* (2003), which would be Teeuwen's last show for the time being, became notorious for the scene in which he imagined himself in word and gesture sexually pleasuring the queen of the Netherlands. The sketch has come to belong to the collective memory of Dutch cabaret lovers, because the shock factor achieves a sense of embarrassment in even the most hardened viewer.

After this period of around ten years, Teeuwen acknowledged that an ‘incredible fatigue’, as he put it, had taken hold of him. He lacked the energy for a new show and a long tour, and proceeded to withdraw from the limelight to focus on making films. He wrote and directed various productions, including the TV film *Masterclass* (2005), a pseudo-documentary about an insane theatre guru, and he contributed to the scripts of two films by his friend Theo van Gogh, whose murder by a Muslim extremist on 2 November 2004 signified a second personal tragedy in his life. The death of Van Gogh was to have a lasting influence on Teeuwen’s subsequent career.

This turned out to be a temporary period of respite. Teeuwen would not be Teeuwen if he had permanently turned his back on the world of entertainment during this period. In 2006 he returned to the theatre, this time to everyone’s surprise not as a cabaret performer but as a jazz singer, joining a growing list of pop artists – Robbie Williams, Bryan Ferry, Rod Stewart – who dress in sharply tailored suits and put their talent to the test as crooners of the standard glamour repertoire. After a time, in addition to covers, Teeuwen increasingly sang songs he had written himself in English. Although he was endowed with a magnificent, sonorous voice and a strong theatrical feel for timing, Teeuwen (like the others) lacked the vocal quality of a figure like Frank Sinatra, whom he admired. By interspersing his performances with odd runs, comic asides and nods in the direction of famous cabaret texts he had written, he put into perspective the seriousness of a craft in which he was only an overconfident passer-by. A fantastic band and his grandiose charisma did the rest.

Adventures over the border

An aversion to tired-out conventions and hypocrisy, as well as grief and anger at the violent murder of his friend Theo van Gogh, have made Teeuwen a fanatical champion of the free word. Without a doubt his performance on 30 August 2007 in the programme *Bimbo’s en Boerka’s* (Bimbos and Burqas) belongs to the iconic Dutch TV moments of recent times. Here he was interviewed by the ‘Meiden van Halal’ (the Halal girls), three TV presenters from a conservative Moroccan background. Earlier that year Teeuwen had made a speech at the unveiling of a monument to Van Gogh and sung a song (‘Het vrije woord’, The Free Word) in which he unambiguously placed the ‘Meiden’ in a sexual context. A fierce discussion arose about the sensitivities of believers and non-believers, about freedom of expression and the right to cause offence. The statement from that interview most characteristic of Teeuwen as a cabaret artist is this: ‘I don’t just call people names, I make jokes, and sometimes those jokes are about things... because it’s precisely the subjects which are sensitive or controversial that are funny, or exciting. That’s where the tension is, and as a cabaret performer that’s precisely what you work with, otherwise you’d have to abolish the entire genre of cabaret or satire.’ It says a great deal about him and no less about his cabaret style: offence to him is a form of humour; Teeuwen seeks out the tension in controversy.

The English-speaking world became acquainted with Teeuwen in 2007, when he appeared at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival as part of an occasional group with the temporary name, the Amsterdam Underground Comedy Collec-

tive. The performance consisted of translated excerpts of previous shows. His fellow comedians enjoyed warm interest from the British press, but Teeuwen clearly stole the show. *The Guardian* labelled him 'the most thrilling find of the festival so far', characterising his performance as, 'Nonsense it is, but performed as if our lives depended on it.'

The positive experiences of this adventure led just a year later to a return to the United Kingdom. Teeuwen performed in the Soho Theatre in London and at various festivals. During a performance at the Latitude Festival in Suffolk he was booed by some of the audience: the cabaret artist's style of humour appears to come across more harshly in Great Britain than in the Netherlands, and apparently politically, religiously and sexually 'incorrect' jokes will take some getting used to with audiences on the other side of the Channel. Another year on, at the Greenwich Comedy Festival in London, he again clashed with some of the audience. On this subject Teeuwen later said in an interview, 'Once I was really seriously booed, yes... In the early days it happened in the Netherlands too, you know, people walking out. It's just that here there's no tradition of expressing the sentiment verbally, they just leave. In England they want the artist to leave.'

At the end of 2010, Teeuwen announced that he was embarking on another cabaret tour. There was a rush for his new show, *Spiksplinter* (Spic and Span), but the press reactions were rather stingy to say the least. Many critics observed a lack of innovation: 'Hans Teeuwen is repeating himself,' was the general tone. For a cabaret artist just starting out, reviews might still be significant, but what the critics have to say about Teeuwen has long ceased to matter. His performances have become events for which the biggest halls in the Netherlands are insufficient, where technical aids such as broadcast microphones and mega-screens now form part of the necessary entourage.

Variety versus causality

Tickets for his most recent solo show, *Echte rancune* (Real Rancour, 2016), sold out in no time. Again the critics were divided, although reviews here were dominated by admiration for the craftsmanship Teeuwen displayed, particularly in the first half of the performance. The discussion in the prominent daily newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* concludes, 'amoral, confrontational theatre, terrifically cleverly acted and extremely spirited. In Teeuwen's seventh solo show he reveals himself once again as belonging to a genre, a world and a class of his own.'

In October 2016, Teeuwen performed an adapted version of his latest show in London under the title *Real Rancour*. Press and public at the Soho Theatre were more enthusiastic than ever. The review in *The Guardian* described Teeuwen as follows: 'His wild-eyed commitment, aggressively odd behaviour, and his oblique, vaguely malevolent facial expressions all work to scramble significance, and demagnetise whatever moral compass you thought you'd brought with you to the theatre.' After London he went on tour through a number of cities in England and in November he spent an entire month at the Leicester Square Theatre.

Once again in *Echte rancune* Teeuwen ridicules viewers, for instance when he criticises their lack of loyalty during his recent forays into music. Apparently audiences want to see the joker and are less interested in the singer, he observes with affected bitterness. While such gibes are still said with a cheerful, ironic undertone, at other moments there is a definite sense of unease, because with Teeuwen it is sometimes far from clear where the satire ends and seriousness begins.

Cabaret was once the privilege of a left-wing vanguard, but Teeuwen's arrival in particular appears to have broken through that tradition. A progressive viewer might labour under the naive impression that he is surrounded by kindred spirits, but Teeuwen does not allow himself to be pigeonholed and as soon as he makes a statement a rather further to the right of the spectrum, such progressive types can feel extremely lonely in a packed auditorium. I must admit it has happened to me once or twice, especially when I have heard roaring laughter around me and exuberant encouragement for what to me seemed terribly 'wrong' statements. Teeuwen, as stated above, is unfathomable and from sketch to sketch the artist's opinion can shoot off in completely different directions.

Teeuwen's performances follow a tight rhythm, but there is hardly a hint of a consistent train of thought or causality to the content. When he finally seems to be on his way to a point, he effectively picks up a pair of scissors and snips it off with a nefarious grin. This fragmentary style makes Teeuwen, more than



his fellow performers, an ideal YouTube artist. Countless Dutch viewers – and now British audiences too – know Hans Teeuwen from attending one or more of his shows or through TV broadcasts and DVD recordings, but that consumption takes place more than ever through the video site YouTube, a factor which should not be underestimated in the consumption of cabaret in our time.

Particularly for young people, for whom digital media form an inexhaustible source of learning, and even more of entertainment, who barely derive any knowledge of cabaret from attending shows, which is exorbitantly expensive, or from DVDs or TV broadcasts, which take far too long and always happen at the wrong moment. Flicking between YouTube clips is the new way of being entertained and Hans Teeuwen's cabaret certainly eminently lends itself to this style of watching.

The most popular acts have been viewed tens of thousands – sometimes hundreds of thousands – of times. A sketch about world religions from *Dat dan weer wel* now has almost 1.5 million hits and there are even excerpts dating back to the period in which Teeuwen still performed with Roland Smeenk. Teeuwen's constant availability on YouTube also explains his undiminished popularity as a cabaret artist, while in real time he follows sidelines as a singer or cineaste.

In this context, it is striking that in the autumn of 2017 Teeuwen set up his own online platform with recordings of all his theatre productions. In return for signing up to *Hans Teeuwen World*, fans gain access to videos of his programmes with a new clip each week, special live broadcasts, and for example, priority booking for shows.



Hans Teeuwen and Roland Smeenk

In service to the free word

Echte rancune is more austere than all Teeuwen's previous shows. His message is the focus, and variety elements involving hand puppets, mouth acrobatics and piano medleys remain absent, while what Teeuwen does, says and sings more than ever serves a single purpose: the proclamation of the free word. He is profoundly convinced that it must be possible to say and show everything, and he follows through on that too, explicitly and authentically, not with the resolute intention of antagonising people, although that can happen at any moment.

Fellow craftsmen with a similar status produce content with greater power or less abstraction than Teeuwen's. The oeuvre of Freek de Jonge, now the grand old man of Dutch cabaret, contains a hefty dose of morality and sometimes tends towards the issuing of practical tips for a better life. The rather younger Youp van 't Hek sinks his teeth into a society which enjoys greater prosperity than ever before, but which at the same time increasingly wallows in dissatisfaction. Teeuwen's contemporary and relative match Theo Maassen merrily rebels against everything that irritates him along the spectrum of self-importance and arrogance.

Engagement with cabaret has slowly but surely come to be a thing of the past, in part due to innovations in the 1970s for which Freek de Jonge was in fact one of the pioneers. Thanks to De Jonge, Van 't Hek, Maassen and other Dutch celebrities from the entertainment world, the public is now beginning to expect a more activist attitude from cabaret performers. Those who look to the art form as a moral guide will not be disappointed. Two years ago, Freek de Jonge leapt into the breach for the residents of the northern province of Groningen who in recent decades have suffered earthquakes as a result of gas extraction in the region; Herman Finkers, a celebrated cabaret artist from the eastern region of Twente, started a broad protest against the reopening of a military airport for civil aviation; Dolf Jansen has worked for more than ten years as an ambassador for Oxfam Novib, and there are plenty more examples. It goes without saying that such cabaret performers eagerly participate in talk shows and other TV programmes on the side to give their activism an extra boost.

Anyone who follows Teeuwen's work knows that he will never be conscripted into a cultural or social institution which strives for a particular goal on the periphery of his art. You will not encounter him as an activist who attaches himself to the fate of compatriots in distressing circumstances, nor is he the man to put on a New Year's Eve show, which in the Netherlands is the highest platform available in the media world for any cabaret artist. Such a show requires a retrospective look at the social and political developments of the past year, precisely the kind of terrain on which Teeuwen does not wish to embark. In such a show the cabaret artist is challenged to take a stance, but thus far no one knows what Teeuwen actually stands for or what he thinks, as a cabaret performer or as a public figure. This masked position has come to be his trademark. He does not hold any points of view with which he might please one or other half of the population, only revealing himself to be a fundamentalist when it comes to the free word. His defence of freedom of expression is deeply rooted and tolerates no concessions whatsoever.

The rare moments when Hans Teeuwen nevertheless appears in a talk show take place when that free word is at issue. Sadly, this is still in question in a time when the public debate is struck dumb by the mutual denunciation of left and right and by the ever-sharper oppositions between the values of east and west. Where necessary Teeuwen enters the debate on that subject, as he has shown on various occasions, undoubtedly with the memory of his good friend Theo van Gogh in his heart. ■