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GEERDT MAGIELS

Translated by Anna Asbury

Theatre

At the Heart of Society

***The Nation* by Het Nationale Theater**

Over the last two or three years theatre makers in the Low Countries have become increasingly involved in the cultural diversity debate. In their different ways, they take seriously their mission of manifesting 'the abstract and brief chronicles of the time', as Hamlet qualifies the travelling actors who come to shake up the Danish court. In 2017 Het Nationale Theater in The Hague came out with the urgently current production *The Nation*, a five-hour marathon conceived, written and directed by the multi-talented Eric de Vroedt (b. 1972).

The Nation, billed as "a topical theatre thriller about the frenzy of Dutch multicultural society", begins with an apparently everyday anecdote about the search for an eleven-year-old boy named Ismaël, who has disappeared without a trace after a short visit to a police station in The Hague. The search is woven into a tense web of intrigues and whole and half-truths, repeatedly inviting onlookers to revise their assumptions. In design and style, *The Nation* unfolds as a television serial on stage: image techniques, cliff-hangers and other methods from the Netflix box of tricks serve the topical story which De Vroedt aims to tell.

The innovative aspect of *The Nation* lies particularly in the surprising way in which the world of

the stage is combined with that of modern media. From the first instant Ismaël's disappearance provides the requisite suspense and holds the viewers' attention through six episodes. All those episodes start live on stage, with a short filmed sequel on colossal screens, where credits for the characters and theatre staff are projected on vast, dynamic panoramas of The Hague. Action resumes on stage, until once again the screens support, if not annex, the dramatic course of events. This varied structure provides the viewer with an unprecedented experience, treading a middle ground between conventional theatre and binge watching on the couch, taking in a favourite series from beginning to end in a single sitting.

In terms of content this offers the public a surprising perspective on the banality of traditional norms and values. The globalised world of the twenty-first century is a complex construct, and *The Nation* confrontationally exposes both the dubious motives which determine the power of big business and the ridiculous hypocrisy at the foundation of what we think of as political correctness. It is precisely these elements which disrupt relationships and get in the way of peaceful solutions in a heterogeneously composed society: that is the lesson the production teaches us. As the audience, we get to know a multitude of characters, from a malicious, corrupt project developer at one end of the spectrum to an unbearable salon socialist at the other, who converts to Islam and starts wearing a headscarf out of solidarity with the Muslim community.

If this modern morality play conjures up any emotion, then it is first and foremost indignation. According to a standard pattern of expectation, theatre with political content appears to conform to the philosophy of a left-wing avant-garde, but *The Nation* breaks through that thinking in the directions it takes, the affiliations it exhibits and the principles it reveals, showing us society in its complete – often surprising, disruptive – multifacetedness. 'Good' and 'bad' are effectively redefined. The duplicity of the main characters, both to the left and the right of the middle in varying distances, pulls the audience mercilessly from that kind of personal bubble.

The Nation is built around a cast of top actors, a mixture of players with a considerable record of



Photo Sanne Peper

service and young, promising talent successfully following in the footsteps of the old guard. But even this distinguished tableau cannot conceal some rough edges towards the end of the production. De Vroedt appears not to have entirely succeeded in weaving the ingredients of the intrigue he has built up into a coherent whole, the initial episodes having left quite some loose ends. In the end the public is somewhat disappointed by the rather abstract apotheosis, although the final part offers several interesting plot twists.

But aside from the odd critical note it can be said that enough remains standing to make *The Nation* an event of the kind one only sees once every few years. Eric de Vroedt, since 2018 the new artistic director of Het Nationale Theater, together with his team of actors and staff has created an unparalleled tour de force. Following on from an already respectable production series at Het Nationale Theater, thanks to De Vroedt, *The Nation* is a production which does not lean on the great repertoire of the past, but which adds an original, monumental classic to the theatre canon. A contemporary, if not hypermodern and hyper-topical creation which begins from an apparently minor incident in a disadvantaged district of The Hague, but which eventually shines a light on the complex global world we live in.

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1 The first three parts of *The Nation* are available in full on YouTube.

Episode 1: www.youtube.com/watch?v=6a_8LrP_YEY&t=940s

Episode 2: www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3xR_6xQzwY

Episode 3 www.youtube.com/watch?v=us4rmh9rFRc

A brief 'encore' is also available on YouTube:

Episode 7: www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7nu7TbY_2g

Visual Arts

Adriaen Brouwer Returns Home

Ask the average art-lover to name the most important seventeenth-century Flemish artists and it's quite likely that they will think of Rubens, Van Dyck and Jordaens. Adriaen Brouwer will rarely figure in the list, even though he undoubtedly belongs there. His contemporaries admired his work. Rubens, who was an inveterate collector, had no less than seventeen works by Brouwer. Rembrandt too had a sketchbook and several of his drawings. Van Dyck painted the master's portrait.

Very little is known with any certainty about Adriaen Brouwer. He was probably born in the Flemish town of Oudenaarde in about 1605-1606. He soon left his birthplace and moved to the Northern Netherlands via Antwerp. In 1625 he lived in Amsterdam and in 1626 in Haarlem, where he joined a local chamber of rhetoric. His name also appears in a deed concerning the sale of paintings. Some sources state that in that city Brouwer was apprenticed to Frans Hals or his younger brother Dirck. But there is no proof of this apart from a few similarities of style.

In 1631 Brouwer returned to Antwerp and joined the Guild of St Luke. His name often appeared in municipal documents, usually in connection with his debts. He also spent some time in prison. When he was released, he moved in with the well-known engraver Paulus Pontius, who worked for Rubens, Van Dyck, Jordaens and other artists. In the same period Brouwer also joined the chamber of rhetoric called *De Violieren*.

Adriaen Brouwer died in 1638, aged barely thirty-two. In spite of his short career, he established a solid reputation and his paintings were much in demand. This popularity only increased after his death. This is apparent from, among other things, the large number of copies and forgeries that were made of his work. Nowadays his paintings are to be found in the collections of several major museums. The largest collection is that of the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, which has nineteen works.

Brouwer was a genre painter. Such painters were very popular as from the sixteenth century thanks to Pieter Bruegel the Elder. In genre paint-