

### **Eccentric, Venomous, Topical** Wunderbaum Theatre

On Sunday 21 November 2010 a small group of actors from Holland and Belgium performed *Looking for Paul* in the Redcat Theater in Los Angeles. The perspective in this production is set in the first instance by a female character from Rotterdam who finds herself confronted, against her will, by a work of art. To be precise, the woman's house stands right opposite the metre high Santa Claus, ["Gnome Buttplug", as it has been dubbed], by the American artist Paul McCarthy. She is of the opinion that this offensive work of art has seriously damaged her outlook and she travels to Los Angeles to meet McCarthy in person and wreak revenge.

Fiction and reality are beautifully intertwined here. The purchase of Santa Claus ten years ago by the municipality of Rotterdam did indeed cause quite a commotion and the work of art is still a topic of discussion today. Those for and against argue with each other about art in general and about the merit of this work in particular. At the very time that financial backing for art is a hot item and local and state subsidies are running into increasing difficulties, *Looking for Paul* meets the demand for engaged theatre that provides a commentary on the spirit of the age.

Their stay in Los Angeles also gave the actors from Wunderbaum the opportunity to do some research into the subsidy system in the United States. The discovery that the state of California hands out two million dollars a year to culture came as a shock to them. Wunderbaum alone receives that much in four years in the Netherlands. Up to now, that is, one should add, because in times of crisis the present government is certainly not inclined to subsidize art in general and theatre in particular as generously as before.

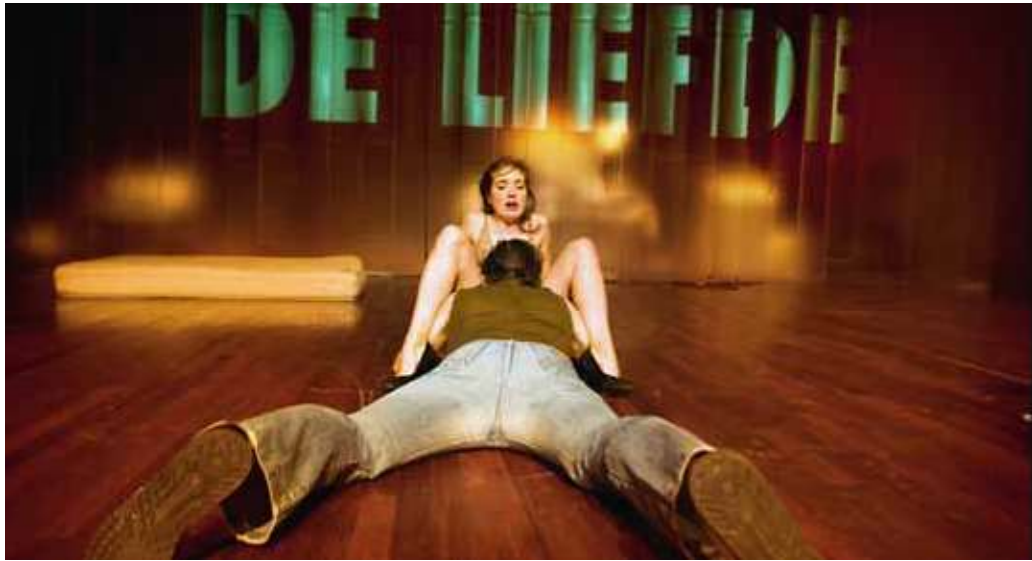
Discoveries like these were given a place in the production that ended with a twenty minute long tumultuous performance in the style of McCarthy, whom Wunderbaum greatly admire – in-

deed, McCarthy himself and his wife and daughter came to see the show. Documentary theatre that runs wild into chaotic slapstick and leaves the audience thunderstruck that is typical of Wunderbaum's work. Back in the Netherlands the group organized two theme-evenings on the topic of Paul McCarthy, with the showing of his video work, the performance of *Looking for Paul* and discussions afterwards on art and politics with different people involved in the field.

The name Wunderbaum is borrowed from a pine tree shaped air-freshener from Germany. Maybe it was the slogan, "Wunderbaum erfrischt die Luft in jeden Raum" [Wunderbaum freshens the air in every room], that gave the actors the idea of taking their name from the tree, because freshening the air and giving a new impulse to the theatre establishment is what the collective aims to do. Moreover, the Dutch word 'wonderboom' is the name for the castor oil plant (ricinus communis), an extremely poisonous plant, and Wunderbaum's productions are characterized by a certain degree of venom.

The exceptional talents of these actors who graduated from the theatre academy in Maastricht in 2001 were spotted by Johan Simons, probably the most important Dutch producer of the last decade. He took the group under the wing of his company ZT Hollandia, in Eindhoven, and when he moved to Belgium he took the actors with him as a sub-group of the prestigious NTGent where he was artistic director. Since 2009 Wunderbaum has been an independent company that produces shows under the supervision of the Rotterdam Schouwburg production house.

Apart from being extremely unusual and venomous – as *Looking for Paul* also demonstrates – Wunderbaum is highly engaged with what is going on in the world. The actors frequently research a sub-culture in modern society, they play reformed shopaholics (*Magna Plaza*, 2007), pseudo religious drifters (*Camp Jesus*, 2008), British football fans on a boozing trip (*Beer Tourist*, 2008) or the harassed inhabitants of a demolition area



Wunderbaum, *Our Pope*, 2011 © Fred Debrock.

(*Natives*, 2010). In order to get as close as possible to the realities of life, the group prefer to act on location. So Magna Plaza could be seen not only in various shopping centres in Europe, but also, in a censored version, on a city square in Teheran.

For the 2011-2012 season the group is staying close to base with two productions for small auditoriums: *Our Pope* and *Flow my tears*. No production shows what a powerful collective Wunderbaum is better than *Our Pope*, based on a dramatic text by author and journalist Arnon Grunberg. Grunberg wrote the text at the request of the Teatr Współczesny from Wrocław in Poland. After reading it, the artistic director decided to abandon the planned cooperation. In a rejection letter that left no room for misunderstanding – published in the programme for the Wunderbaum performance – she mercilessly exposed the shortcomings of this undramatic text. Subsequently Grunberg handed the text over to the Wunderbaum actors, who are wholehearted fans of his contrary work.

*Our Pope* is both a kaleidoscopic farce and an evening's worth of provocation, not so much on account of the scornful treatment of the Catholic clergy, but because the text – certainly not a well made play – places a huge burden on the players' talent and the public's leniency. The energy and verve with which the actors handle the

coarse clichés and silly associative jokes command deep respect. It is definitely the bewitching power of the actors rather than the dramatic force of the original text that earns applause.

*Flow my Tears*, which had its première in January 2012, is a co-production with De Veenfabriek, a company from Leiden that specializes in musical theatre. Only a single actress from Wunderbaum plays alongside the famous actor Jeroen Willems in the production. This performance is based on the music of the seventeenth-century composer John Downland, and in it two actors imagine they are Indians who have got lost in a world where music is the only thing that can still provide comfort.

Both *Our Pope* and *Flow my Tears* are a deviation from the successful path Wunderbaum has trodden so far – 'location' theatre, eccentric, sharp and never far removed from commentary on subcultures. It is good that the group is exploring new ways and trying to attract a new public, but at the same time there is already a gnawing nostalgia for the earlier productions that gave Wunderbaum an ineradicable place in the landscape of Dutch and Flemish theatre.

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*Translated by Sheila M. Dale*

[www.wunderbaum.nl](http://www.wunderbaum.nl)