INTRODUCTION

Publishing a book about theatre invariably puts its authors in an awkward relationship to history. After all, theatre, as a live art, has a delicate relationship to time and history. It was Herbert Blau who once said that watching live performances is watching the actor dying on stage: the performing body is dying before our eyes. Sharing this moment creates a unique and moving confrontation with time. The lucid power of theatre, fleeting and ephemeral though it may be, is there in these moments of magic afforded by the communal (yet individual) experience of theatre as a live art. This very liveness, however, proves an obstacle when one tries to make the case for the historical value of theatrical performances. One has to deal with the traces that remain from having shared the liveness of the performance; the bits of recollections and dim affective resonances of what is often called ‘corporeal memory’. In this kaleidoscope of memory the past is ever changing.

How, then, are we to deal with these traces when we glance back at Jan Lauwers’ theatre work? Is there a way to grasp this body of work objectively, with a distanced look, a disaffected eye? Should we try to give a complete picture of the wide impact Jan Lauwers’ theatre has had upon audiences through the years and around the world? Even if this were possible (which seems unlikely given the specific nature of theatre), it would not be desirable. If theatre, as a live art, leaves behind a series of traces, remnants, and memories, why not map these out by attending to their own logic, instead of imposing a linear, historical account in chronological order? Why not acknowledge that it is not only performers who die on stage, but texts also? Why not search for the after-life of liveness and for the reflective space that surrounds this presence-turned-absence?

The aim of this publication is to roam this reflective space, which surrounds Jan Lauwers’ theatre work with Needcompany. By focusing on the work of Jan Lauwers and Needcompany — and not on the work of other artists associated with the company, such as that of the choreographer Grace Ellen
Barley, Needcompany’s co-founder — this publication tries to do justice to the wide diversity of tones and timbres in which these texts were voiced. We have taken a number of different approaches and placed them side by side in the book to remind the reader of the company’s own paratactic theatre aesthetics, and also to draw attention to the equivocal effects it has had on writers of different disciplines, of different times, of different places. In addition, we have brought together past appraisals of and contemporary views on Needcompany’s trajectory through recent theatre history. In other words, we have chosen to reprint here some of the best critical texts about Jan Lauwers’ work with Needcompany alongside a number of contributions written especially for this occasion. We have not tried to bring a unity of style to the wide diversity of tones and timbres. A smooth anthology-machinery, in which style is subsumed into the dominant form of generality and difference, is regarded with suspicion. This publication, on the contrary, brings together poetic effusions, reviews, philosophical reflections, and academic essays.

We have structured the book around five clusters, namely: histories, stories, images, resonances, and communities. This clustering provides an open system: it develops a particular assemblage of texts in relation to a concept that at the same time invites the reader to shift-shape to resonating texts from other, interrelated clusters. The clusters, therefore, provide open trajectories and not systematic boundaries. This explains why we have provided the reader with ‘theatre pointers’ next to the table of contents — they hold a sort of middle ground between a theatrogography and an index. They serve as a tool for the reader to trace his or her own pattern in dealing with the histories of Jan Lauwers’ theatre work.

The two photo series that flank the texts are an expression of our respect for the artist’s continued commitment to revitalizing and reshaping the medium of theatre. His endless internal drive to create is the condition sine qua non of theatre histories.

Histories
This first cluster tries to map the manifold ‘histories’ of Needcompany, each of them situated in their specific time and geographical context, and each of them affected by the personal viewpoints and memory (productive in its imperfection) of the authors writing them.

The opening article by Paul Demets is an investigation from a critic’s perspective, of how Lauwers develops the concepts of voyeurism, death, beauty, and desire in his work. These are so omnipresent that we are not surprised to learn that Jan Lauwers calls sex, violence and death his ‘Holy Trinity’. Written almost ten years ago, in 1998, Demets’ text describes in broad outline: the earliest period of Needcompany, from *Recht groot en het is niet eens waar (Already Hurt and No Yet War*) (1981) through the staging of the entire *Snakeeating Trilogy* (1998).

Jean-Marc Adolphe, a prominent theatre and dance critic in France, reminisces about his first encounters with Lauwers’ work; the productions of *De struikhoog / Bullebird* (1983) and *Incident* (1985). From the brief but intense hour he spent with *Incident*, Adolphe still retains the vivid corporeal memory of a discharge of energy that sparked, he says, his love for contemporary theatre. This subjective account goes hand in hand with a discussion of how the plays were received in France, and with an account of the theatrical climate in those days at the *Théâtre de la Batsilic* in Paris and at Bordeaux’s Sigma Festival. Trying to ‘label’ Lauwers’ theatre work, he comes up with the concept of ‘artist’s theatre’, “a theatre fully immersed in the dynamics of contemporary creation”.

Luk Van den Dries, a theatre scholar from Antwerp, also refreshes his memory of Needcompany and locates its origins in the Flemish theatrical climate of the eighties. He is aware that “in memory everything is moulded into a different shape”, and he does not shy away from the implications this has for his discussion. Van den Dries’ historical mould is the connection between theatre and the performance art genre. His piece
describes how the marks of performance art, so clearly present in the productions of Epigone Theater 24, are gradually covered over by the growing theatricality of Needcompany's early works.

The German theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann picks up on this point and describes Lauwers' work as a kind of "scenic poetry". German audiences owe a debt of gratitude to Tom Stemberg, who coproduced Needcompany's productions and regularly invited them to the Theater Am Turm in Frankfurt am Main. These productions were, for Lehmann, an essential source of inspiration, and instrumental in opening up the horizon for his concept of postdramatic theatre. In his contribution, he lingers on the concept of detachment to describe the 'style' of acting characteristic of Jan Lauwers' work. He puts Lauwers' performances in the perspective of a postepic theatre form in which Brechtian motives persist, albeit in a different form. Because Lauwers' vision is more sceptical than Brecht's, there is hardly any room in his work for a utopian idea, for the belief that art can change the world.

To New York audiences, Jan Lauwers and his Needcompany are best known for their 1999 production of Morning Song at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), a thriving urban arts centre that brings international performing arts and films to Brooklyn. Morning Song earned Lauwers an Obie Award, which acknowledges and encourages the best of Off Broadway and Off-Off Broadway. It put Needcompany on the New York theatre map and ensured Lauwers' return to BAM in 2001 with Needcompany's King Lear, and in 2004 with Isabella's Room. The American theatre scholar Marvin Harries remembers quite well how 'those Belgians' confounded the well-established theatre categories of New York's audiences. In his reading, Isabella's Room is a violent fairy tale of urban modernity: it offers a promise of happiness, but with disturbing postcolonial barbs.

Harries counters the promise of happiness with the one-liner, attributed to Einstein, "Happiness is for pigs"; Nicolas Truong, for his part, adapting Albert Camus' epigram, invites us to "imagine Einstein happy". This French philosopher and journalist sees Isabella's Room and The Lobster Shop as artistic exercises in being happy in spite of everything. There, according to Truong, resides the force majeure of tragic joy: "not hope, but despair, or rather, in this instance, the energy born from despair and distress".

Truong's discussion of Isabella's Room also calls our attention to Lauwers' specific attitude towards the text. Lauwers, Truong points out, uses narrative at a time "when the dominant aesthetic has repudiated it as naïve, a relic of art history, something tolerated only if upstaged by the artist's knowing wink to the spectator". But there is nothing naïve about Lauwers' use of text and narrative. Lauwers seems, as it were, determined to go against the grain of one of postmodernity's central doctrines that is fixated on Lyotard's theorizing about the disappearance of grand legitimating narratives that give meaning to human choices and events. Lauwers keeps on telling stories and using text, well aware that every theodicy has already shipwrecked.

Summary

Heiner Müller, 'founding father' of the theatre aesthetics that we now call 'postmodern' or 'postdramatic', once said that there was 'no new theatre without new plays'. In his search for new theatre forms, Jan Lauwers feels a similar urge to write his own stories, or at least to rewrite existing ones. Like many of Müller's dramatic texts, some of Lauwers' pieces draw heavily on existing literary sources. But, unlike Müller, these sources are hardly ever plays. Lauwers used a Hemingway short story in Invictus, and parts of Alberto Moravia's oeuvre can be found in Shakescape/Le Voyage (1994). In the dialogues of Shakescape/Le Désir we find bits and pieces of Launcelen's Malదowski, Huygens' Against Nature, and Oscar Wilde's Salome. For the theatre section of documenta X, the company did once present a stage reading of Albert Camus' Calígula (1997), and the piece Dead Dogs Don't Dance (2000) links up to James Joyce via wordplays and puns. There is, of course, one major exception. If Lauwers produces plays from the repertoire, they are invariably

In his text "Exercises in Regicide", the Flemish theatre scholar Klaas Tindemans investigates the relationship between Jan Lauwers and Shakespeare through a discussion of the relationship between dramaturgy and space in *Julius Caesar*, *Neecompany's Macbeth* and *Neecompany's King Lear*. Lauwers is, like Shakespeare, an ardent opponent of 'unity of location', a characteristic that aligns him with the concept of post-dramatic theatre quite well. Tindemans argues that in his productions Lauwers translates the power games that drive Shakespeare's plays into spatial relationships on the stage, where actors and dancers struggle to control the stage by choreographical and rhetorical means. In this spatial negotiation lies the political significance of Lauwers' Shakespeare productions: the theatrical space is "an empty space" that embodies "the essence of power" — and that essence is that power "cannot be seen or touched, only... encircled by dancing or oratorical movements."

The struggle of the performers on a diluted or — conversely — a saturated stage in *Neecompany's King Lear* also evokes a political stance which Christel Staelpaert, a theatre scholar from Ghent, grounds in the liberation from common sense and in the dismantling of the paradigm of representation. The performers recover their bodily space from the representative paradigm through the aesthetics of intensities released on stage.

According to the German theatre scholar Felix Sprang, Jan Lauwers negotiates aspects of narration by way of "a turn on the narrative turn". Sprang traces Aristotle's legacy in matters of narrative in light of this "turn on the narrative turn" in order to discuss the intricate relationship between (re)presentation and narration in Neecompany's early Shakespeare productions — *Julius Caesar, Antonius und Cleopatra, Neecompany's Macbeth* and *Isabella's Room*. He shows that Aristotle's description of dramatic action in terms of 'imitation' or '(re)presentation' is more complex than may seem at first sight. Against the background of Aristotle's expanded notion of mimesis, Jan Lauwers' critical responses to that notion not only open a space for reflection, they also allow for an impassioned expression of character, emotion, and action even in the absence of the chronological constraints of the narrative.

The theatre critic Audronis Liuga approaches the theatre work of Jan Lauwers from his distinctive Lithuanian theatre background. He foregrounds Lauwers' preoccupations with 'accidents', which he claims serve a double function in Lauwers' work: they are a means to narrate the action, and they are the basis for the development of a philosophical matrix, one in which the individual can realize his or herself in spite of the laws of the surrounding world. Liuga sees *Images of Affection, Isabella's Room, All is Vanity* and *The Lobster Shop* as deeply interrelated by their common concern with the theme of the fate of man. Accidental twists of fate get the story going at the same time that they liberate it from a classical dramaturgical narrative structure based on the principle of cause and effect.

The Slovenian theatre critic Primož Jesenko expands upon the possibilities of narration in a society of multiple truths. Jesenko puts the accidental twists of fate that Liuga points out into dialogue with Baudrillard's concept of "the absolute event". In doing so, he sketches a daring parallel between the effects that terrorism has at the global level, and the effects that the death of a son, in *The Lobster Shop*, has at the level of the family. Events such as these fly in the face of all testimonial truths, perspectives, or quotes; they produce a "postepic narration" that embraces not one, but many truths, without any fixed measure to decide which one of them is really true. Neecompany's postepic performance style is evident in the practice of reading on stage. The German theatre scholar Janine Hauthal argues that reading on stage is in fact a "performative tactic" in *Caligula*, the first part of a diptych
called. "No beauty for me there when human life is rare." In reading scenes, character is present rather than enacted. These scenes, beyond shattering the illusion of conventional theatre, in which stage direction is supposed to sound like spontaneous speech, provide a mental space in between actor and role-text that keeps the actor from ‘disappearing’ in the closed formation of an embodied character-subject. Given Lauwers’ reflexive approach to Caligula, speaking with an accent should be understood as a similar “performative tactic”. By putting an international cast on stage and making it so that members do not speak their mother tongue, Lauwers renders audible the materiality of their voice.

Lauwers’ linguistic innovations, on top of performing unexpected negotiations with aspects of narrations, are also remarkably radical. Lauwers mixes different languages, and he oftentimes denies actors the ease of speaking their mother tongue. But he does not stop there. He also makes the materiality of the word itself visible through his experimental use of superlative. After being treated to a ‘shocking’ experience by Needcompany’s King Lear, the American theatre scholar Marvin Carlson was moved to explore the conventional and experimental use of superlative in theatre, and to consider its potential contributions to the creating of theatrical meaning.

Images

“When Lear says ‘kill’, and you read the word kill on the LED screen, they are totally different phenomena. The word kill suddenly becomes an image”, says Jan Lauwers, speaking about Needcompany’s King Lear. This concern with rendering the word’s materiality visible is also integral to the sculpture. Lauwers mounted outside Brussels, in the fields at Grimbergen (2000). Lauwers’ sculpture echoes Los Angeles’ Hollywood sign created as an advertisement back in 1923, and is a comment on cheap entertainment. “Now Hollywood has taken over where Shakespeare left off. Steven Spielberg is the Shakespeare of his time. We have the Internet, we have video, we have all kinds of media. But we don’t know how to see real people any more. It’s as if they are behind glass. I think theatre is a method of teaching us how to see.”

More important, however, is the sentence used for the sculpture: “No beauty for me there where human life is rare.” The sentence is Lauwers’, and he has been carrying it around with him as a motto for years. He translated the sentence into eleventh-century Dutch: “Verre van der menschen dinghen en vant ic nethene schoenheide”. The sculpture does not spell out the sentence in its entirety; several letters are missing, making it even harder to read than it is already in its eleventh-century spelling.

We have several reasons for titling our book after this motto. Lauwers described the sculpture as the crystallization of everything he is doing, or has done and it is indeed a fact that the sentence has reared its head several times in the course of his career. We have already mentioned the diprých called No beauty for me there where human life is rare, composed of Caligula (1997) and Morning Song (1999). It captures Lauwers’ material approach to language and text, his search for beauty as the only weapon we have against violence, and it encapsulates the interconnectedness of the painter and the theatre maker.

Jan Lauwers, perhaps because he is a fine artist who eventually became involved with theatre, produces highly visual theatre. Images in his productions obtain an autonomous structuring quality, allowing for readings that go against the grain of the narrative. Lauwers’ visual art falls outside the scope of this publication, but the importance of the image in his theatre aesthetics goes without saying.

Rudi Laermans, written in 1992, begins with a description of *Pearls*, the opening sequence of *Snakesong*: "Le voyeur", in order to evoke a theatrical language that confronts the audience with its voyeuristic gaze. He calls Jan Lauwers a “capturer of glances”, and he wonders how one might “establish a different relationship between the viewing subject and the viewed image in the midst of the general voyeurism of the media entertainment society”.

The Flemish Jürgen Pieters, a literature scholar, argues that Lauwers’ work calls into question “a traditional mimetic conception by allowing images to clash with each other as well as with the ideas they supposedly represent”. The harmonious exercise of the senses is not the issue here. To get at the complexity of the disturbing game the images play in *The Snakesong Trilogy*, Pieters refers to the ‘figura’, as theorized by Lyotard, and to the ‘liminal’, as discussed by Georges Bataille. Lauwers’ ‘liminal’ images invite the spectator to experience the sublime at the same time that they demonstrate “that this very notion stems in part from the cruelty which (in its capacity as a work of art) the sublime is assumed to transcend”. The spectator is thrown back upon himself and, even more so, onto the limit within himself.

Frederik Le Roy develops these thoughts further. He wonders what power images have in a visual culture powered by hypercapitalism. What power do images have against images? His essay about *Images of Affectation* explores what happens when Pop (Art) meets trauma. This play was conceived to celebrate Needcompany’s fifteenth anniversary, and it is a veritable “memory machine”: the stage is haunted by images from previous Needcompany productions, and by references to pop culture and to Andy Warhol. This ‘quoting’ of images is neither a festive nor a nostalgic tribute. Instead, it evokes the delimiting effects of trauma. The introduction of pop elements and the intertextual play with Pop Art are not at all obvious: “they contain the streets of a broken subjectivity, allure and digestibility”.

The question — what power do images have against images? — brings us to the medium of video and film art. In 2002, Lauwers released his first feature film, *Goldfish Game*, a drama that follows the unusual cast of characters from *Morning Song*. But before that, Jan Lauwers already had a number of film and video projects to his name, including *From Alexandria* (1988), *Maugie* (1995) and *Sampled Images* (2000). Film work and theatre work are interconnected: in 2002, Lauwers created *C-Song*, a video film and installation that he later incorporated into *The Lobster Shop*.

Video images intersect the storyline of *The Lobster Shop*. The five films projected on a huge screen at the beginning, middle, and end of the play provide a break and a turning point. The Flemish philosopher Robrecht Vanderbecken describes *C-Song* as an autonomous ‘eye-catcher’ which, by dialogue with the performance, takes a sideways look at events that escaped the stage. In their dissonant effect, these video images are more than an allegory or a metaphor. They are instigators of a visual ritual that runs against the grain of the image.

The starting point for the piece by the German theatre and dance critic Arnd Wesemann are the photos that Maarten Van den Abeele took of Needcompany, photos that have stuck in his mind ever since he first saw them. For the book *The Lucidity of the Obscene* (1998), this photographer followed Jan Lauwers and his Needcompany through Europe for one hundred and twenty days. Van den Abeele, instead of photographing the theatre productions themselves, photographed all those things that one might catch in passing out of the corner of one’s eye. And this book of lost moments in hotel rooms and lobbies, or the road, behind the scenes, inspired Wesemann to write about the placelessness one experiences in the Europe of the mid-90s, in the productions of Needcompany, and in the figure of Jan Lauwers, the pre-eminent outsider.
Resonances

Laurens' postdramatic theatre raises the issue of the power of dance and music, insofar as these appeal to physicality, and to cognitive recognition. Dance and music are here on the same foot: our sensory perception of them is the experience of our inability of ever appropriating. The most joyful and at the same time the most tragic of experiences.

This was already the case with the second part of the diptych No beauty for me there where human life is rare, namely Morning Song, a play that "takes frequent detours, incorporating music and numerous dance interludes". The American theatre scholar Erika Rundle saw Morning Song on tour, as part of New York's Next Wave Festival. Her review, which appeared in Theater (2000), describes how "stage conversation merges into a rhythmic chant", and how music and dance at first glance promise to parallel the action, only to betray our expectations in the end. "There is more in Laurens' heaven than in dreams of a dramatic theory", Rundle writes.

In May 2000, at the request of William Forsythe, Laurens created, in co-production with the Ballett Frankfurt, a piece entitled DeadDogsDontDanceDamasDanceDiedD. In Laurens' words, dancers from Forsythe's Ballett Frankfurt were "confronted" with performers from Needcompany. In her review, which appeared in the 2000 issue of Dance Theatre Journal, Ann Nugent discusses the production from the perspective of a dancer. Although the connection to Joyce, the wordplay and the puns impressed Nugent, what really moved her was the idea that she calls the production's "sculptured dancing".

The notion that the dancers' bodies do something to your system is confirmed in the contribution by the Flemish theatre and dance critic Elke Van Campenhout. She describes dancers as living "in another dimension", and their actions as "independent from the narrative line". Laurens provides the answer to Yeats' famous question, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?", the dancers' bodies produce neither stories nor excuses. They produce only themselves, making the performance resonate across time and space.

Isabella's Room also resonates: in this room the vibrations of the narration continue in the dance and music, despite — or due to — their lack of direction, says Karel Vanhaesebrouck. He interprets the production as a multi-layered artistic appropriation of the musical. According to Vanhaesebrouck, what Laurens does in Isabella's Room is pair his own radical artistic language with this alleged paralysis of the performing arts. With Isabella's Room, Laurens cheerfully lets the eternal dichotomy between high and low implode. Still, we must not be deceived by this new mildness of tone, and a number of contributions to this book point out that this lightness is thorny, that melancholic and traumatic echoes can still be heard underneath the poppy songs.

Communities

The name of Laurens' company is suggestive of something he has repeatedly confirmed: he needs company in order to create. Laurens chooses the people he works with very carefully. He has to love them.

The longing for company is in fact a desire for rest and for community. And freedom is a movement not bound by the borders of (comm)unity. Laurens cherishes both, hence the paradoxes in his work. Flemish dramaturge Sigrid Bousset shows that the term 'Needlap', which Jan Laurens coined a few years ago, goes to the core of this dichotomy: "on the one hand there is the need for the laboratory (lab) — for experimentation, testing limits, etc. — and on the other there is the desire for a 'lap', the need for intimacy and protection". Seen from this perspective, Needcompany is not far removed from Andy Warhol's Factory, "where the relationship between group and individual was in constant motion".

Flemish dramaturge Erwin Jans suggests that Laurens' 'need' for 'company' extends even further, to the audience. In his view, Isabella's Room communicated with its audience with
evident generosity. What is the public other than a broken community, one that has lost its communal sense but goes on repeating a few of its elementary gestures? The live music and inviting group singing in Isabella’s Room hark back to mourning and funeral rituals that Western culture has long forgotten. Jan argues that the crisis of community is as much an issue in modern art as in modern politics. In developing his argument, he brings into play Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of the inoperative community, a community that does not achieve existence as such.

One might also say that Lauwers’ concern with community intersects with Emmanuel Levinas’ reflections on community and difference. In Otherwise than Being, Levinas inquires: “Does a face abide both in representation and in proximity? Is it community and difference? What meaning can community take on in difference without reducing difference?”

In The Unreasoned Community, Blanchot describes how, when another person dies, the “self” loses its familiar certainties and is irrevocably confronted with its own mortality and finitude. In her discussion of Isabella’s Room, Christel Stalpaert looks at the thin line between mourning and the loss of self in the state of melancholia. She argues that Lauwers does not aestheticize the confrontation with our transience and mortality. His theatre of recollection does not consist of coagulated memories or solid thought constructions. On the contrary, the spectator is confronted with the complex simultaneity of past, present, and future. Lauwers, by bringing the ethnographic objects on stage and giving them a theatrical role, emphasizes the temporal structure specific to theatre: he foregrounds theatrical time as pure present.

The French theatre scholar Georges Baru comes to attribute a similar function to the ethnographic objects displayed in Isabella’s Room by way of a more general discussion of the human urge to collect and keep things lest they should perish. Baru is himself the son of a collector, and hence acutely attuned to the double sense of fascination and exasperation produced by the passion for collecting. Seeing the play, Baru claims to have rediscovered the ambiguous relationship that exists between the collection on the one hand, and art, history, and the family on the other. Lauwers’ decision to put his father’s collection on stage is an act of generosity, in which he surrenders to a ritual that can free him from the hold the collection of the master of the household once had, but affectionately, gracefully.

The Belgian theatre scholar Nancy Debele weaves the pros and cons of Isabella’s care of the self and her denial of the world. In her opinion, the character imagined by Jan Lauwers, passing as she does from a convent to a lighthouse on an island to a room in Paris, is first and foremost a clustered individual. The room filled with African objects is a materialization of the world as the protagonist sees it. Is her view a colonial one, bringing a certain world — Africa — to an archival standstill? Or does Lauwers also reveal the myth’s flipside?

Can we call Lauwers’ theatre political? Katrien Vuytske Vanfleteren distinguishes between art that engages in politics and art that questions society. Examining Lauwers’ newsletters for clues to his political side, she focuses on three one-liners of Lauwers — ‘art is freedom’, ‘art is futile’ and ‘art is elitist’ — which form the basis for an extensive reflection on art’s place in society, with Lacan as theoretical guide.

It is no coincidence that several authors in this book call on their memory when writing about Jan Lauwers’ theatre work with Needcompany. That theatre is an ephemeral art” is probably one of the biggest clichés about this medium. Still, every repetition of this commonplace seems to express the impossible urge to take hold of this very transience. In many ways, this book is just such an impossible act. All of the texts published here are in their own way acts of memory — acts of re-membering, re-imaging, re-interpreting, or re-reading events now long gone. Our intention in these pages — durable, permanent, archival — has been to gather some of these acts of memory, but not, by any means, to halt them. ‘There are as many performances as there are spectators’: yet another one of those clichés about theatre, but one, we hope, equally applicable
to this book. In the end, these pages will disappear as well, they'll 'turn to dust', as we might have said in times now long past (today we would probably say they'll be 'chopped as pulp' and recycled into new books about who knows what). What will remain, we hope, will lie beyond these pages, in many acts of reading this one, or should we then say many book(s).

As Jan Lauwers once said in an interview, explaining his love for theatre: "I work hard with people and you play for people. There's tension, and when it's finished it's finished. Then and only then it exists."

CHRISTEL HALPAERT
FREDERIK LE ROY
JOSKED BOUSSET

GENT, FEBRUARY 2007
BEAUTY AS A WEAPON AGAINST
THE UNBEARABLE CRUELTY OF BEING
IN NEEDCOMPANY'S KING LEAR

Introduction

Ian Lauwers started rehearsals for Needcompany's King Lear in
the autumn of 1999, venturing after Julius Caesar (1990),
Antimon and Gephata (1992) and Needcompany's Macbeth
(1996), into yet another adaptation of Shakespeare. Staging
King Lear presents a number of challenges, not the least of
which is how to deal with its notorious oversized tragic power.
Over the centuries, King Lear has after all been labelled as "too
huge for the stage" and often thought unsuitable for theatrical
performance. The cruelties the characters suffer are so horrible
that even a seasoned director does not always succeed in staging
everything convincingly. Lauwers saw the 'hugeness' of King
Lear from a different angle. He was attracted to the risk of trag-
ic saturation because it gave him the opportunity to introduce
a new tension to the notions of 'beauty', 'cruelty' and 'tragedy'.

King Lear is generally interpreted as a tragedy about literal and
figurative blindness. Lear cannot, or chooses not to, see the
difference between the false flattery of Goneril and Regan and
Cordelia's sincerity. Gloucester is literally blinded because he
fails to distinguish between Edgar's sincerity and Edmund's dis-
semblance. What is tragic in Lear is that he uses his daughters' 
 oath of love as a measure by which to know 'the truth', and he
divides his kingdom on the basis of the wrong 'truth'. But what
is 'knowledge' of 'reality'? What is the 'truth'? What is 'the wrong
truth'? And also, what is 'truthful' and 'sincere' in the theatre,
where everything is illusion, and where only theatrical make-
believe guarantees the principle of mimesis and identifications?

Postmodernism has countered man's confidence in the possi-
bilities of knowing the truth with scepticism. Reality is not
assessable in terms of truth and falsity. For Gilles Deleuze, for
example, "philosophy does not consist in knowing and is not
inspired by truth". In his critique of the dogmatic model of
recognition and representation, he maintained a rigorous

1. A.J. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy: Language, in Horio, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth,
2. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, What is Philosophy? trans. Brian Massumi and
distinction between knowledge, understood as the recognition of truths, and thinking, understood as the creation of concepts. Truth must be regarded then as "solely the creation of thought". In this sense, it has become pretentious to think that reality can be represented and that we can actually make statements about its truth. The alternative image, of thought as creative, exceeds 'picture' images of the real and instead tackles the unrepresentable and a-presentative. It is a matter of invoking a rhizomatic view of reality, of encountering multiplicities and open-ended systems of multiple differential elements.

The tragedy of King Lear, in which 'knowledge' is constantly challenged by insubstantiality, lends itself to the deployment of such insights. Jan Lauwers agrees that this idea is an important element in his Shakespeare adaptations: "Shakespeare uses ambiguity as a basic idea: what you see is not what you see, what you hear is not what you hear". In the classic Ibsenist version, the fool and Cordelia make Lear aware of the fact that he fails to know 'the truth'. In Neocuriosity's King Lear, Lauwers triggers the audience to question the value of knowledge and 'common sense' in order to think creatively. Lauwers described Lear as someone imprisoned "in his own web of insubstantial appearance, and only those who are prepared to play along with the comedy he has staged may count on his goodness and generosity". Cordelia refuses to play this game of representation. Lauwers therefore stages her as a crack in the unity that 'common sense' provides, a concept of unity that characterizes not only Lear's universe, but also the 'universe' of traditional dramatic aesthetics.

What follows is not a summary of the pictures that go with the words. It is a fragmented account of the mental and physical journey I undertook as a spectator, a selection from the kaleidoscope of subjective theatrical experiences collected while watching Neocuriosity's King Lear. The central question here is: 'what does it mean? I want to ground my wonder in the question 'how does it work?'. How does this theatre-maker make such concepts as 'beauty', 'cruelty' and 'tragedy' operate in the Lauwers machinery? I would like to zoom in on moments in the play that have not only been burnt into my retina, but remain also corporeal memory. After all, in addition to the story of Lear, Neocuriosity's King Lear is also and above all a matter of aitheisis, of sensory communication. The spectator's cognitive faculties are beset by what Lehmann calls "an independent auditory semiotics", "a visual dramaturgy" and "the aura of physical presence". Instead of attempting to stitch these moments together into a narrative, I will linger over these moments of corporeal memory.

Lear and the Tragic Game of Representation
The monologue by the now mad Lear. Inhabiting the role of Lear, Tom Jansen makes a statey entrance on a diluted stage, his head adorned with a garland of flowers shaped to look like giant Indian feathers. As he delivers his monologue he steps on and off a small platform at the centre of the forestage. He addresses the audience frontally, as if he wished to gain their sympathy and pity. Lehmann aptly remarked that in post-dramatic theatre, actors inhabiting their role do not actually create the solid illusion of being fictional characters. Similarly, in Neocuriosity's King Lear, the asde, soliloquy or monologue does not completely fit the fictive reality of the play or narration. Accenuating the theatrical context, Jansen here exposes the game of representation. Identification, opposition, analogy and resemblance are revealed as the tools of representation the actor uses in order to appear as a recognizable king-hero. The first words of Lear's monologue — "I am king" — outline the representative rules of the game and its notion of identity. The words "I am king" form the foundation of the ontological proposition of the univocity of being, insofar as representation reduces manifold entities to a single sense unit.

According to Deleuze, classical representation was established under Aristotle, the Greek thinker whose main concern was with the recognition of the identical and not with the distinction of
the different. In classical dramatic aesthetics, grounded as it is in the representative model, difference vanishes into non-being. Jansen draws explicit attention to his use of the building blocks of classical dramatic aesthetics: cognitive recognition, and imitation or mimesis. The cracks in his role-playing, however, reveal how the actor reverts to invariables to form an identity that can be ‘recognizable’ as a king-hero, by way of a central core and in spite of all the differences from fictional reality. In other words, Lear’s monologue is presented as a vain attempt to bring to a stand still the continuous movement of difference.

Tom Jansen, who questions the limits of representation from within his role, uses theatrical magnification to demonstrate the suffocating principles of representation. Muriel Honnel and Dirk Roothoefd, who ‘inhabit’ the role of Cordelia and the fool respectively, venture on a sort of post-representative line of flight.

The Body Writing Semic Poetry

In Act V the storm scene and the final section coalesce into a chaotic, hallucinatory assault on the spectator’s senses. There is no doubt about the condensation or saturation of signs here. Dirk Roothoefd emerges as an ambiguous entity. Acting as property master on stage, he dictates which objects need to be present for the start of Act V: a table, a chair, another chair. Holding a script in his hand, he strikes the figure of the director; he screams the stage directions through a microphone, and calls out the names of the characters to the actors, who are weighed down by the soundscape and are not able to deliver their lines ‘properly’. Roothoefd shouts, waits, commands, directs, acts and puts up a fight against the saturated stage.

The auditory component bursts at the seams. The actors who have no lines to speak wage war; they blow the sound of pan shots into the microphone, shriek chilling cries expressive of the fear of death, and produce an amalgam of sounds that pierce the audience to the marrow. The actors who are speaking their lines do not use a microphone. They try to raise their voices over the hail of auditory bullets, over the chaos and sensory violence. They reel off their lines fast and in a floury, as if driven on by the saturated stage. In the end even the superstitious goes into overdrive.

The spectator’s experience is one of disorientation. The solid narrative ground slips away from beneath our feet. We no longer know what to think or in what direction our thoughts should go. In this scene, the script is no longer used as something to go by, as a guide taking everything in the right direction. Lauwers here uses what Erwin Jans calls a deliberate excess of language, something that explodes in an indefinable amalgam of sounds: “it seems as if language is constantly pushed to the limits, ... language somehow becomes ‘disband-ed’”. As a result of this surfeit of information, language fails at the task of the unambiguous communication of meaning; it is “as if language were taking revenge on the story (on our understanding of it as such)”.

In Act V, the paradigm of logocentric, linear-successive perception gives way to a multiple sensory experience, in which the narrative of Shakespeare’s play is no longer treated as the central and hierarchically supreme good. The spectator has to deal with multiple and ambiguous layers of the signifying material and has to let go of the familiar viewing experience of cognitive recognition.

As a result of the de-hierarchization of the narrative as the all-embracing bearer of meaning, an energetic or intensive connection unfolds between the bodies of Tom Jansen/Lear, Muriel Honnel/Cordelia and Dirk Roothoefd/the fool, quite separate from the narrative, linear-successive mechanism of the text. In his aesthetics of intensities, Gilles Deleuze unfolds an open-ended, post-representational mode of thinking, in which connections are not tied up into relations between fixed identities. This plane of immanence with energetic or intensive

connections signals the triumph of 'becoming' over 'being'. This aesthetics of intensities establishes "an energetic or intensive connection which develops relations of speed and rest ... the value of the affects to explain the state of the body in relation to surrounding bodies denies the representational value accorded to ideas. All production depends here on the contact and intermingling of different bodies." 11

A significant tension is created by Murid Hérault. She presents a point of rest, a counterpart to the saturated image, a local dilution of the signifying material, both in a visual and a rhythmic sense. She performs Cordelia's death scene amid the chaos and sensory turbulence. With exasperating slowness she repeatedly lets herself slide around a table. She repeats the same choreographic phrase again and again until her body tears itself away from any form of narrative foundation and becomes an autonomous cynosure of forces. Her movements are no longer regulated by a sensory-motor schema of action and reaction. She no longer represents a character that dies by the agency of another character. She no longer inhabits a character that reacts to a situation as part of a plot. She uncouples herself from the narrative and joins up with what Hans-Thilo Lehmann calls "a new kind of aesthetic alchemy" in a "theatre of scenography". Lehmann develops this concept with an eye on Mallarmé's scenic 'graphism'; the description of dance as 'écriture corporelle', as turning with the body:

A savoir que la danseuse n’est pas une femme qui danse, pour ses mots inexprimés qu’elle n’est pas femme, mais une métaphore en mouvement des aspects éminents de notre forme, grâce, coupe, flux, etc., et qu’elle ne danse pas, mais interprète, par la prodigieuse machine qu’elle, avec une écriture corporelle ce qu’il feint de paragraphe ou prose diaphragme autant que description, elle en réduction poème abrégé de tout apparat du discours. 12

Whereas in the scene mentioned above, Jansen emphatically inscribes Lear as a hero in the story of the King by means of the mechanism of identification, Hérault here "writes" the scene with her body. She does not "represent an individual human form but rather a multiple figuration of her body parts...

Griselda Stilmart 125 Beauty as a Report

of her form in figures that change from moment to moment" 13

Deleuze is convinced that common sense generates a limiting image of the self and the body. By contrast, creative, nomadic thinking surrenders to continuous metamorphoses, it constantly rises above any grounding of bodily images. In becoming, or devenir, the attention shifts from the ideal of statuesque 'being' to the materiality of the here and now, to the constant change. 14 Lear cherishes the teleological pursuit of the ideal and 'cause of that he remains stuck in the state of tragic 'being'. Cordelia, on the other hand, seeks the flow, the movement, of 'becoming'. It is as if, in her silence and her physicality, Hérault is writing the scene with the following words by Deleuze: "Stop! You're making me tired. Experiment, don't signify and interpret! Find your own places, territorialities, de territorializations, regimes, lines of flight." 15

Repetition as a Weapon of two Different Heros

In the 'struggle for survival' on stage, both Hérault/Cordelia and Jansen/Lear apply the strategy or weapon of repetition, but each on the basis of a different configuration and with a different effect. This, of course, makes them different sorts of heroes. Lear applies mimetic repetition in the Aristotelian sense of the word. His representation is founded on the principle of imitation and mimesis and is based on repetition understood as analogies and invariables. It is this repetition that Deleuze calls a tragic territorialization: "to proceed by resemblance ... would represent an obstacle or stoppage." 16

Cordelia, endlessly repeating the same choreographic phrase over and over again, applies the strategy of productive repetition. This is not "repetition of the Same, explained by the identity of the concept of representation"; it "includes difference, and includes itself in the alterity of the Idea, in the heterogeneity of an 'a-presentation'." 17 The repetition Lear employs is static because it is focused on the invariables in imitation; while Cordelia's is dynamic because of the differences in intensity that characterize her repetition. By means of the seemingly endless repetition of the same choreographic

phrase, our senses are sharpened and differences are brought to the fore.

The weapon of static repetition is wielded by the traditional dramatic hero. Cordelia, by contrast, is a warrior in Deleuze’s sense of the word. She expresses her resistance by proceeding to the unique zone of the line of flight and in this way marks off the border with that which is represented. This heroine is the army’s scout, the little everyday warrior who puts up her individual resistance with the aid of her own physicality and the sensory intensities that emanate from it. When, in a recent Theaterschrift, Lauwers says, with regard to his Shakespeare productions, that “the power of beauty is the only power you have against violence”, what he is referring to is the beauty of the labe and supple warrior who defends the molecularity of the intensities and the impermanence in order to escape the tragic molar ‘being’. Hérault/Cordelia has recovered her bodily space from the representative paradigm. These intensities in the supple warrior form the power of beauty. Beauty as a weapon against tragic ‘being’.

Nomadic Moving and Being Moved

The system of representation fixes the subject’s various faculties (imagination, reason, understanding, sensibility, memory, etc.) in a logocentric unit, unable to conceive of difference in itself. The model of recognition depends upon a harmonious accord among the faculties, determined by the dominant faculty of reason, father of the supposedly knowing Subject. But, according to Deleuze, the subject in question is in fact not logocentric: the faculties operate within a multiplicity, their composition constantly changing. It is only in unambiguous representation that the different faculties become streamlined and attuned. In reality, the ebb-and-flow nature of the observing subject does not correspond to classical dramatic aesthetics, whose ground is the unity of the thinking Subject.

Act V of Needcompany’s King Lear, barrages the faculties of imagination, reason, understanding, sensibility, memory, etc. with a constantly changing configuration. You do not always see what you hear; what you hear overpowers the narrative line; and what you experience cannot always be captured in logical thought. Derrida defined the sensory perception of music as the combination of feelings of deception and loss: in his enthrancement, the subject feels sorrow because he cannot grasp what entrains him. For this reason he defined music as the “experience itself of impossible appropriation. The most joyous and the most tragic.”

In Act V I underwent a similar sensory experience of intensities and tensions, which means that I was carried along without knowing why.

Lauwers counters cognitive recognition, and processes of dramatic identification that attends it, with an aesthetic of perceptibility: an open perception that is not and cannot be turned off. The étonné or expression of a postulated idea becomes the énoncé; pure possibility. It is up to the spectator whether he wants to open up his various faculties to the free circulation of affects, or appeal to the logocentric subject: of knowledge, which in any case falls short of its centralizing function. Entrancement or frustration. Insight too. Because the monolithic oneness of the subject turns out to be a construction: Recognition based on common sense is an uncomplicated set of comprehension which is, in frustration, exposed as a process of territorialization; “the reassuring familiarity of encounters with the known”. Deterritorialization processes make the spectator reflect on the unrepresentable: “the hesitant gestures that accompany our encounters with the unknown.”

When in Theaterschrift Jan Lauwers talks about his horrific discovery that “civilization has switched-off thinking”, he means also, of course, this last-mentioned form of thinking, this nomadic thinking besieged by all-encompassing ‘reason’ on one side and comfortable but not so innocent ‘common sense’ on the other.
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Dirk Rooftoof as the Fool as a Protagonist Narrator

In contrast to the tragic 'being' of Lear, Héroux/Cordelia and Rooftoof/Thé fool evolve into nomadic thinkers and precisely for this reason they are able to escape the tragic molar side of being. In fact, Rooftoof demonstrates his qualities and potential as a performer, and he is aware that he is an actor performing. After all, the physicality of the actor, the 'real' person of flesh and blood, is visible in the cracks of the character construction and of the hero's mask. The actor does not disappear behind a mask, but appears in the mask.

Viviane De Muynck, a highly esteemed Needcompany actress, cultivates a similar way of acting and, as herself says, employs a "living dramaturgy" that bespeaks a sort of duality in the acting. "Not: the actor who acts so well, that he loses himself totally in a fictitious character but the actor who remains present, who maintains control over what he is doing. I'm not so interested in the total absorption in a role because it's so air-tight. It is perfect, but closed. I find it more interesting to see someone's vulnerability, to see how he uses the material. ... So an interaction arises and you see someone who occasionally holds a mask in front of himself. Not to hide himself, but in order to clarify things."[21]

In Act V Rooftoof displays a similar vulnerability when, with his entire being, his 'struggles to survive' in the saturated stage. It is precisely because he struggles with the material, however, that he is saved from the disappearing trick of 'acting by entering thoroughly into a role'. On occasion, he, too, literally holds a mask in front of his face. On stage he puts on and takes off his fool's cap in order to step into and out of his 'role' of the fool, revealing with that gesture what classical systems of representation usually conceal. Rooftoof creates a distance between his lines, his position as an actor and his character(s). The result is the shattering of the compositional structures of the theatrical medium. Hans-Thies Lehmann would call this sort of actor a "postetic narrator".[22] In Deleuze's terms,

Crystal Stanislaw 129

Rooftoof/the fool/Kent accepts schizoanalysis and in this way escapes the tragic trap of closed systems. After all, the schizophrenic tolerates a lack of unity and is therefore closer to the idea that reality is a-presentable. He is sensitive to the complex interplay between molar processes that lead to unity or territorialization and molecular processes of differentiation that lead to deterritorialization.[23]

Rooftoof appears in his mask, Héroux in the folds of her skin. To use Lyotard's words, one might call it the polymorphous perversion of the skin: "a surface that does not form the boundary of an organic body, but with its folds and tissue transitions is both an inside and an outside at the same time". Just as in Rooftoof's hands the mask indicates an inside and an outside at the same time. After all, in schizoanalysis, the binary pairs of opposing concepts are dismantled.

In Needcompany's King Lear, "inside/outside, 'reality/illusion', 'beautiful/ugly', 'pleasure/pain' and so on are no longer hierarchically arranged in such a way that the first pole is allotted a higher value. What is more, the term 'pole' no longer applies because the two concepts display another relation. Rather than complying with the concept of dualistic opposition, the two terms are present, but do not lose themselves, in each other. When Lauwers says that the power of beauty is the only power we have against violence, he is also referring to the fact that in his productions "the power of the images transcends the question of beauty or ugliness. ... Beautiful is ugly and ugly is beautiful .... when the struggle is lost and won, it's winning and losing at the same time".[24] Even the tension between Lear and Cordelia should not be conceived as dualistic, but as a complex interplay between the molar and the molecular. So in Lauwers' case it is not only a matter of revising classical dramatic aesthetics and idealist representation. There is more.

The otherwise familiar coordinates of Western philosophy — the distinctions between inside and outside, subject and object, image and idea, picture and referent and so on — are constantly shifting and no longer offer the spectator anything

to hold on to. In Neeckes' *King Lear*, reason does not triumph as the ordering principle of Truth, Goodness and Beauty. The Cartesian framework that came to dominate philosophical thinking in the seventeenth century proves an inadequate tool to the understanding of Lauwers' universe. The question is no longer 'to be or not to be', but 'how to move when everything is moving'.
AS ROUNDABOUT PATHS TO DEATH
Melancholia, Desire and History in Isabella's Room

Dietzel Stapelert

What strikes me about recollection is not the fact that it reproduces the past, but that it feeds the present. Paul Valéry

In Western society, death is not part of life. Dying is the inevitable and necessary end to everything that lives, but while we are alive we avoid the thought of death as much as possible. When we are confronted with the death of a loved one, we experience it as a terrible ordeal. In The Unconscious Community, Blanchot describes how, when another person removes himself by dying, the 'self' loses its familiar certainties and is irrevocably confronted with its own mortality and finitude. Hegel thought confronting one's own death was the most challenging human ordeal, but not so Blanchot. That was for him witnessing the death of a loved one:

What, then, calls me into question most radically? Not my relation to myself as finite or as the consciousness of being before death or for death, but my presence for another who abandons himself definitively to take upon oneself another's death as the only death that concerns me, this is what puts me beside myself, this is the only separation that can open me, in its very impossibility, to the openness of a community.

Death is a violation that is accompanied by intense emotions: feelings of fear, rage, sorrow, mourning and melancholia. Although mourning and melancholia are both caused by the desire to return to the situation as it was before this loss, Freud still insists on a significant distinction between the two in his essay On Mourning and Melancholia (1917). In mourning, the void is experienced as poor and empty because of the loss of a loved person; in melancholia, the ego suffers an extraordinary diminution in self-regard, an impoverishment on a grand scale. Melancholic regression is caused by an identification of the ego with the lost object. In other words, the loss of the object is transformed into an ego-loss. Derrida makes a similar

distinction inFordwhen he describes the problematic border between mourning as incorporation (the preservation of the image of the deceased as an insassimilable Fremdkörper) and introjection (the assimilation of the image of the deceased), “Does it not at the same time blur the very line it draws between introjection and incorporation, through an essential and irreducible ambiguity?”

Isabella’s Room (2004) is dedicated to Felix Lauwers, Jan Lauwers’ father, who died in 2002. It is a powerful play about art and life as roundabout paths to death. Isabella’s life story seems at first to be immersed in melancholia. After all, as a child Isabella grew up with the idea that her father was a ‘Desert Prince’ who vanished during an expedition. That is what her foster parents Anna and Arthur told her. Absence is the vanished father, and Isabella’s longings are for the desert, the ‘Desert Prince’ and Africa.

Arthur and Anna, the only people in Isabella’s immediate surroundings, are especially susceptible to a melancholic emptying and loss of the ego. The course of their lives is unavoidably reminiscent of Blanchot’s concept of mourir sans fin. This is the state of suffering, the senseless and painful waiting for death, and is Blanchot’s response to Hegel’s belief that there is sense and finality to death. Isabella collects that Anna, her foster mother, was possessed by a ghoul that struck her with fear. The melancholia brought about by her past meant she was already dead before she died. “There were so many secrets in Anna’s heart that it burst.”

After Anna’s death, Arthur too surrenders to the crushing state of melancholia and to a mourir sans fin. The great sorrow and boundless agony of the eternal ‘now’ changed Arthur’s daily toast into a glass of bitterness. “He succumbed to his guilt and stumbled through life like a howling wolf.” In the course of the play Isabella’s lover Alexander suffers the same fate and becomes a sick old man. “It was just a postponed death”, Isabella sighs. Lauwers here sketches a compelling image of people who experience life as endlessly waiting for the deliverance of death.

Arthur eventually puts an end to his unbearable existence and leaps into the sea. When he leaves Isabella he gives her a photo of a bearded man with a Paris address written on the back, and a letter she may only read upon his death. Isabella’s quest for her vanished and probably dead father does not take her to the desert, her ‘Desert Prince’, or Africa, though, but to a room in Paris full of anthropological and ethnological objects.

Crucified versus Shift-shaped Memories

The objects Isabella finds in her room in Paris are extremely varied and originate in various ages and places. They are extraordinarily heterogeneous. As she touches and gives names to the individual objects, localizing them in time or space — labelling them, one might say — Isabella enters into dialogue with them. She indicates a small bronze weight used as money by the Ashanti to buy salt from their enemies, an Ushapiti — a guardian of the dead, the walking stick used by Stanley’s companion, a Central African nail fetish with glass eyes (Bakongo tribe), a bronze third-dynasty libation jug, a shaman’s rubbing board, a third-dynasty mummmified falcon, ..., and five bronze Roman letters with which one can spell the word P.E.L.L.X. From this point onwards Isabella calls her ‘Desert Prince’ Felix.

During the performance, these exotic objects from ancient Egypt and remote parts of Africa are displayed on stage. The precious objects permeate Isabella’s daily life with a deep sense of humour devoid of all biting irony, with an innocent naturalness. She uses the libation jug as a salt cellar and the whale’s heavy penis stands behind the door, in case of burglars. She hangs her keys on a nail in the African nail fetish. Isabella is after all “a very pragmatic woman who only considers beauty to be really of any meaning when it is also useful”.

These ethnographic objects on stage in fact belonged to Felix Lauwers, Jan’s father, who left them to his wife and children upon his death. He collected these things in the course of his life objects which in one way or another touched or hurt him,
‘ordinary’ objects from ‘foreign’ cultures. He could not do anything with these objects, other than display them, but he could not bring himself to throw them away either, as that would be tantamount to throwing away a tangible part of his memories. The objects displayed stand for people’s urge to collect and keep things lest they should perish. In his dramaturgical notes, Erwin Jans describes them as ‘objects that were separated from their cultural context by the view of a different age — a colonial age that saw these things as exotic. They are objects in which a certain world — Africa — has come to a standstill, petrified, being stored away, made into a museum object and a fetish’.

Lauwers’ does not just bring these museum pieces on stage, he gives them a part, he lets them tell their (his)story to the audience via their dialogue with Isabella’s words and stories. The result is a polyphony of images and stories that summon up a wide range of forgotten voices and invisible memories. Their random arrangement means the objects and sculptures tell both their own story and that of their ‘collective’ fate. Their voices call out to the spectator in a polyphonic chorus.

Isabella’s comments invite the spectator to travel around the various objects and to pick out their individual voices. He can see them as part of a collection, the work of a single person who travelled the world (on one level the imaginary ‘Desert Prince’, on another Jan Lauwers’ father) collecting them, or as objects in their own right. He thereby shift-shapes between biographical and historical anecdotes. The polyphonic chorus of objects echoes the complex simultaneity of present, past and future and the relativity of space.

But there is more going on here. The stories attached to the objects reach far back in time, and they bring up the relativity of the duration of a human life. Across all the centuries of their lifespan, these ethnographic objects have only briefly belonged to Isabella’s father-collector (and to Felix Lauwers), as they now belong briefly to Isabella (and to Jan Lauwers). In other words, this ‘brief history’ is of no significance compared to the history of these objects.

in motion, navigating the in-between space of the various stories. Lauwers guards against the monolithic pretence of a single story's truth. He retains the freedom of irreducible difference.

Isabella loves life. And men. By the age of twenty-five, she has already had twenty-seven men and she is determined never to tie herself down to just one man. At the age of sixty-nine Isabella has had seventy-six lovers — "Wonderful experiences, each in their own way!" — and she launches into a relationship with Frank, the sixteen-year-old son of Mira, her daughter. This does not mean, however, that Isabella's lifestyle degenerates into obscenities or vulgar excesses. She does not boast about her lovers nor does she portray them as conquests. She always speaks of all her lovers with respect and tenderness. The lovers themselves echo this. For example, Alexander remembers Isabella's passion for life as an antidote to the nihilistic doom-mongering of his generation: "I liked staying with Isabella. I wasn't allowed to live with her but we saw each other every day. She sincerely loved the world and I hated it. I hated it because none of it added up anymore. They just did what they liked and I felt nothing but exasperation, and Isabella was the only one who could make me forget. ... Her passion for life was a pure unbearable beauty ... The only weapon against the dictatorship of the lie". This same passion for life prompts Isabella to start a relationship with the young Frank: "It is pure beauty. Now at least I understand what beauty is. I don't want any bitterness. I want to live. ... Frank completely revived me. His just for life made me understand my past even better".

Isabella is not a castrating woman. Her blindness keeps her from meeting the voyeuristic male gaze with a castrating look that would lead it up a blind alley. Lauwers calls the castrating look "the blind-spot in the male gaze — a point where Le Voyage, Le Pouvoir and Le Dieu (the three parts of The Snakesong Trilogy) are turned against themselves and implode". With Isabella, Lauwers utters the Gordian knot of voyeurism and violence, sickness and death, guilt and perversion. After all, it is precisely within this paradigm of the gaze that Freud developed his concepts of scopophilia and castration.

Isabella's blindness calls into question the tyranny of the eye in Freud's psychoanalysis. His theory of castration anxiety, for example, is heavily based on the visual. The female sex is linked to the dread of there being nothing to see. "Her sexual organ represents the horror of nothing to see. ... A 'hole' in its scopophilic lens." But the fact that there is nothing to see does not necessarily mean that there is nothing whatsoever — in the sense of Freud's concept of lack, with absence and female desire resulting from this lack.

Isabella is blind, but she does not experience this as a deficiency, as a much-missed entry to the paradigm of the gaze, as a missed opportunity to dismantle the voyeuristic eye. On the contrary. The paradigm of the gaze is experienced as limiting and as imposing boundaries. By eluding this paradigm, Isabella unfolds the power of tactile apprehension. She exchanges the detached, appropriating gaze for the nearness of tactile perception. She prefers the touching to the taking, the wondering to the understanding. Tactile apprehension is, as Luce Irigaray put it, like a caressing gesture that respects the other as other. It is a non-hierarchical touching that does not 'consume' or dominate. The caress does not grab or fix (anything), but allows the flow; it does not project or objectify, but experiences. It is about touching and being touched at the same time, constantly shift-shaping from passivity to activity, from 'self' to 'other'". Tactile apprehension, as a form of perception, is not limited to the physical, but extends also to thought. After all, a tactile encounter involves both body and mind. Further, as an attitude to life, tactile apprehension also has an ethical dimension. It means an encounter in wonder in which a judgement is constantly postponed. It is a non-conclusive thinking.

This caution and gentleness in feeling and thinking is not a sign of cowardice. Isabella is aware of the sense of receptivity, openness and generosity it takes to encounter in wonder. 8

say that judgement is constantly postponed, does not mean that
Isabella cannot have her own opinion or that she constantly
adapts her opinion to someone else’s. But her position, her
opinion, is not judgmental—it does not condemn.

Humility in Reflection

Isabella shows similar generosity towards her own past. When,
as an old woman, she counts her lovers, her blessings and her
sorrows, she does so with no hard feelings. She gives an unem-
bellished account of the sufferings she has been through. She
is resigned, but not indifferent. If she has endured, it was not
through cowardice, through fear of life. Regarding the fact that
at the age of sixty-nine she has still not been to Africa because
something always came up (war, poverty, Alexander’s illness,
how), she says, resignedly, “You can’t have everything under
control. Things happen the way they do”. This attitude does
not reveal any form of defeatism, but humility as an art of being.
Learning to live with sorrow and failure requires humility. For
it is easier to channel sorrow into rage than to accept that you
are not all-powerful.

Instead of introducing a kind of nihilistic doom-mongering as
an antidote to the suffocating idealistic concept of unity,
Lauwers brings in the humble acceptance of life as an antidote
to the dictatorship of the lie. Isabella has been through a lot.
She speaks with the voice of experience but does not show off
about it. She is not proud of the suffering she has lived through,
but she is not about to indulge in any false modesty. She tells the
facts as she thinks they happened, even when they put her in a
less than positive light. Isabella has an indestructible love of life
that has no need of idealism to embellish it. This enables
Isabella to avoid the sorrow, mourning and melancholy that
plagues so many in their old age, even though she has already
lost her parents and many lovers.

Jan Lauwers admits that he has throughout his oeuvre worked
on the expression and assimilation of intense sorrow. In Neid

10. Room, Needcompany’s first play, you see a woman crying
very hard while you hear a lamento by Mozart. The opening
scene in Le Voyageur, the first part of the The Shakespear Trilogy, shows
a woman whose sorrow is so intense she can no longer cry. She
has used up all her tears. In Isabella’s Room Isabella does not
cry, but here even the intense sorrow has gone. “When Anna
died, I felt no sorrow... When Arthur died, I didn’t feel any
loss. When I read the letter, I did not go berserk. When
Alexander went mad, I understood it easily... No deep inner
feelings. No emotional coquetry.”

Alba Verne

Perhaps the solution to the dead-end of melancholia lies in a
lasting dialogue with the dead. It is as if Lauwers has trans-
formed the negative connotation of Blanchot’s mourir sans fin
into a positive one. Isabella tells the story of her life, but she is
accompanied by Anna, Arthur, Alexander and Frank who, after
their deaths, remain on stage and continue to speak their lines
when cued by her stories. In fact, Blanchot’s mourir sans fin
means not only the state of suffering, the pointless and painful
waiting for death, but also the impossibility of dying, the fear that
the deceased loved one lives on as a traumatic shade in the world
left behind. In Isabella’s Room, this irresolvable state between
life and death does not culminate in Blanchot’s fear of an unbearable
trauma. On the contrary, Isabella’s Room draws on a creative dia-
logue with the dead. Lauwers gives his own interpretation to the
words of Heiner Müller: “Man muß die Toten ausgraben, wieder
und wieder, denn nur aus ihnen kann man Zukunft beziehen.
Naturphilosophie ist Liebe zur Zukunft. Man muß die Anwesenheit
der Toten als Dialogpartner oder Dialogstifter akzeptieren—
Zukunft entsteht allein aus dem Dialog mit den Toten.” Müller, convinced that history and politics in the end boil down to mech-
nisms of repression, insisted that “art, instead of being complicit
in the repression of death, is in fact rooted in communication
with the dead. Thus the future could only begin in dialogue with
the deceased.” It is this attitude to life that allows Happy Song—
Laughing Song to sound convinced and convincing:

15 (special issue on Memory). See also Heiner Müller “Dialog mit den Toten,” in Grundriss
Jenner J., Literarische und Gegenwart, ed., Uwe Schröder and Roman Zierer, Frankfurt
am Main, Verlag der Auszeit, (1990) 1996, p. 64.
14. Peter Krapp, Out In, Aesthetics of Cultural Memory, Minneapolis, University of
So let's have a quiet party
with the dead ones
the dear little ones
most of all the graves
let's share our dreams with
long gone memories
swallow a load of strange things
we've got to tell once

and now it stops
but there is no ending
like I said
there we go again...

Art and Life as Roundabout Paths to Death

Isabella loves life, and death is an inevitable part of it. She sides with Freud's view that death indeed plays a part in life, no matter how hard we may try to repress this notion into the unconscious. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), Freud demonstrates that life comes into being fully equipped with death instincts. Indeed, in one way or another, Freud even finds the thought of unavoidable death comforting. After all, he does not interpret death as the destruction of life, but as the aim of life itself — “everything living dies for internal reasons.”

Isabella's Room seems to suggest that this does not conflict with Freud's theory of the human instinct for self-preservation. By assuming that dying does not mean a subjection to an alien power, but an acceptance of the laws of life itself, death becomes life’s aim rather than its destruction. Much as the idea of fate may seem to conflict with man’s urge for survival, that is not actually the case. If death is the aim of life itself, then the death instinct and the life instinct are not opposites, but the first is part of the second. According to Freud, the function and importance of the instincts of self-preservation is “to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death, and to ward off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself”.

If we interpret death as the aim of life, then memory is no longer bound to repeating the past — and thus exposing itself to all the risks of melancholia — but free to fuel the present, and art especially. Thus, art becomes a form of beauty to counter the dictatorship of the lie. This is a constant in Lauwers’ work, but what is new in Isabella’s Room is that laughter has now formed an alliance with critical thinking. Not the vulgar and noncommittal guffaw, but the tolerant and generous smile. It is clear that Lauwers has turned decisively towards the sunny side of life. In Isabella’s Room, Lauwers joins the actors on stage in his white suit. He introduces the performance and strikes a disarming relationship with the audience. It is therefore no surprise that the subtitle of the play is “laugh and be gentle to the unknown.”

It is as if Isabella’s attitude to life has become Lauwers’ new philosophy of life. He even has a name for it: Budhanton, “a contraction of Buddha’s circle of peace and the invulnerability of Antony, the Roman general who was one day in utter distress, drinking his own urine in the icy cold of the Alps, and the next day making love to the most beautiful woman in the world on a golden bed. And who never regretted his deeds.”

Budhanton gives new meaning to religious and historical remnants without lapsing into a new concept of unity. “It is Lauwers’ way out of the Christian morality of crime and punishment, which lost its ultimate legitimacy after the death of God. Budhanton: a mixture of a religion without a god and a pre-Christian consciousness.”

Song for Budhanton

Budhanton is akin to Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, who says: “I should believe only in a God who understood how to dance. ... Now I am nimble, now I fly, now I see myself below myself, now a God dances within me.” These might equally well have been Arthur’s words, who, before he found himself in a wretched state of mortis non fin, danced with Budhanton in him. He got up at five o’clock, climbed up the lighthouse, leapt into the sea, swam a kilometre in the surf, came ashore up the iron ladder and wrote a new poem in pencil while stand-

ing upright.” Both Zarathustra and Budhanton dance as a form of creation, based on a steadfast acceptance of life. “To create is to enlighten, to unburden life, to invent new possibilities for life. The creator is... a dancer.”

In fact, singing and dancing together plays a very important role in Isabella’s Room. According to Lauwers it is “one of the finest things you can do.” It is no coincidence, then, that he asked the performers “to sing to the audience with a smile.” Isabella’s Room is a reassessment of theatre as a ritual where people come together to sing. It’s no accident that Budhanton is partly inspired by an oriental divinity, Buddha. After all, unlike Eastern culture, Western culture is impoverished in the sense that it has become alienated from group singing. Nietzsche lamented the fact that the West had lost the ritual aspect of music as a result of its belief in progress. In “Greek Musical Drama” (1870), the first of Nietzsche’s Two Public Lectures on Greek Tragedy, he describes how language emancipated itself from music and relentlessly asserted its own logic: This signalled the end of tragedy. Tragedy suffered from the ascent of the word. Lauwers shares Nietzsche’s sadness that logos triumphed over pantheism and music. He does not want to put music above the word, but to release it from the logos-centric grip of language.

“Music as a supplement to language: music renders many things, and even entire states of stimulation, that language cannot represent.” In the group singing of Isabella’s Room, the words assume a sort of physical sensitivity and prompt one to be moved in order to move in Nietzsche’s sense — in order to feel the stirrings of thought; that is an action that requires the greatest possible emotional intensity and creative thinking.

It is in this context that we should see Lauwers’ ambiguous attitude towards language. The linguistic paradigm which supports logocentric structures and systems of power and knowledge produces tacit apprehension from becoming operative. Language correlates the ideal of cognitive recognition and ‘common sense’. Gilles Deleuze defined recognition

"On Art and Life"...

is the harmonious exercise of our faculties, united at the expense of the fundamental encounter in creative thinking and sense experience. A number of Lauwers’ plays explore the ways in which language can be a barrier, and not a facilitator, in the encounter between individuals. In Needcompany’s King Lear, for example, not only were several languages spoken (at the same time), but in Act V the supertitling went into overdrive. The text in this scene stops functioning as a coordinating authority. There is a deliberate surfact of language, something that explodes in an indescribable amalgam of sounds: “it seems as if language is constantly pushed to the limits... language somehow becomes ‘disembodied’... as if language were being taken to the story (on our understanding of it as such)?”

Some remnants of the critique levelled at the linguistic paradigm remain in Isabella’s Room. For example, the limits of language are indicated when Isabella speaks ironically about how she studied Swahili in her early years in the hope of being able to decipher every trail that might lead to her Desert Palace. However, the knowledge of the language she ultimately gains does not allow her to understand the objects to the full. But in previous Needcompany productions, language collided violently with its own limits. Lauwers appears to have become more generous towards language too: the singing in Isabella’s Room raises language above that limit for an instant, says Erwin Jans.

Lauwers seems to have accepted that there is nothing wrong with telling stories. On the contrary, Lyotard condemned the Master Narratives to ruin, but that does not mean that the questions that prompted these narratives were also eliminated. Lauwers deals with the questions of life by attaching to them as many stories as possible, stories whose diversity does not hint at difference. “There can never be enough stories written or told, because stories contribute to the way people deal with reality and try to give meaning to it.” Every story runs the risk of becoming hostage to the concept of unity but,
fortunately, some stories overcome that risk. "A story can be a
prison, and the only way out of this prison is another story."

How Lauwers’ literary sources have shifted over the years is of
interest here. "When I think about communication with the
audience now, I think more of Márquez, whereas in the past
my model was Joyce." When Isabella recalls the Thirties and
remembers James Joyce reading from his own work in the
bookshop where she got to know her lover Alexander, she
speaks quite plainly and even goes in for some demystification.

The way Márquez tries to communicate popular tales to a
broad public in A Hundred Years of Solitude is of course different
from the complexity of James Joyce’s Ulysses. Joyce
takes the reader to the age of reason with his high degree of
complexity and inaccessibility. Concept-based thinking — in
which common sense serves a consummation of ideas without
reflection — must change into creative thinking if the reader
wishes to clear a path for himself through this complexity.

Lauwers has also made use of language in this mode in the
past. Language overwhelmed the spectators with all its
complexity and multiplicity; the audience felt the normally
comfortable narrative foundations vanishing under their feet,
and they had no choice but to let themselves be carried along
by other faculties — sensory faculties primarily — if they were
to grasp anything of the performance.

Lauwers now tackles it differently, with Márquez as his new
'model'. Márquez possesses the ritual dimension of language,
in which fantastic stories link the exotic and the tragic. A
Hundred Years of Solitude is a family chronicle that links the
numerous generations of Buendías with each other and with

their town of Macondo. Bernkof called it "a dream book by a
brilliant storyteller". In this dream book — in fact just like
Isabella’s Room — the scraps from a century of history make
costal appearances as they pass by: uprisings, corruption scan-
dals, natural disasters and relentless wars traverse the South
American continent and the many generations of Buendías.

Just like the Buendías’ forefather, who reached an almost
superhuman age, Isabella has reached a ripe old age by the
time we meet her and hear her tell her stories. Her life spans
almost the entire twentieth century, and in her tales we hear
about the First and Second World Wars, Hiroshima, colonialism,
the development of modern art with Joyce, Picasso and
Hadsenbeck, the voyages to the moon, David Bowie’s Ziggy
Stardust, the famine in Ethiopia, etc.

But we must note that neither Márquez’s A Hundred Years of
Solitude nor Isabella’s Room is historical, if by that we under-
stand a depiction of true or fabricated historical events.
They are only historical, if we mean by that Walter Benjamin’s
dialectical method in which history “presents itself as the art of
experiencing the present as making world, a world to which
that dream we name the past refers in truth. To pass through
and carry out what has been in remembering the dream”.

Here, quite removed from what is normally meant by
‘progress’, Benjamin looks for kaleidoscopic distortions and
displays of ephemeral, fluid images that strike us like “light-
ning flashes”, knowledge that “shoots the moment in the
heart”, always in flux, always asking on new meaning, forever
deferring its closure. This method “liberates the enormous
energies of history that are bound up in the ‘once upon a
time’ of classical historiography”. The result is not loose
fragmentation, though, but an open structure of montage
which openly displays a complex network of cross-referencing
in which a plane of immanence is interlinked with scraps.

Isabella is the wide-eyed, dream interpreter of history who
brings the spectator to the threshold of the present, to the
point of historical awakening.

25 Walter Benjamin, The Arcades
Project, trans., Howard Eiland,
et. al., Cambridge (Mass.):
Belknap Press of Harvard
[NC.5]
26 Walter Benjamin, op.cit.,
p. 457 [N2], p. 459 [N1a], p. 463.
[NC.4]
As such, Isabella's Room may perhaps also come close to Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. According to Van Duijkeren, the blind Homer composed the Iliad out of what he had observed with his sight and dreamed in his blindness to form — at least — a double vision. Old and roaming once again, robbed by death of his wife and daughter, he composed the Odyssey from a double longing: the one for the future, the other for the period of our youth.\textsuperscript{a} The parallels with the blind Isabella are clear. Just like Homer's gase, her eyes stare blindly but broadly over everything that is visible, to eternity. It makes no difference whether an anecdote takes place on Olympus, where no human eye has ever been, or between the walls of a house in an occupied city, at a time when everyone's eyes are doubly sharp.

To Homer, everything he imagines is equally close. Isabella similarly confuses the distinction between actual and virtual. She remembers not for the sake of an authentic retrieval of the past, but for the sake of the ultimate triumph of difference.

When she has finished telling her stories, Isabella renounces her claims on all the ethnographic objects with the following words: "all these objects. It's all sham and illusion... the illusion of immortality. The longing for eternity". But the man who was born out of a lie, her 'Desert Prince', will always remain. "He is the only thing that still exists, my Desert Prince. Even without my camera I can see him perfectly clearly. Felix. P.E.L.I.X. and that means 'happiness' in a dead language. Sham and illusion." Language is embedded in power relations, but if you take away someone's name, or rob them of their language, they no longer exist. After all, "a name is like a given word: it will not be used in vain, it will survive me. My name is inalienable, just like the language I have acquired through play and which I use to give shape to things".\textsuperscript{b} To make P.E.L.I.X. the image of life is thus the most generous tribute Jan Laurens could have paid to this dead father.