

The Old Monk in a Theater Concert

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Old age is inevitable, we can only accept it, but resistance is the spice of life. I wanted to create a show that spoke of aging, body usury, but also the desire to continue to dance or dance again.¹
Josse de Pauw

There is no more room for ontological preciousness. Contemporary theater expands its presence in different territories and acquires the most diverse guises, thanks to formal rapprochement with the other arts, and by exploring new tensions between the theatrical means common to it and the incorporation of new technological devices. This is an artistic process strongly invested in by the Flemish experimental stage, whose creations enchant the public of different festivals and also arouse the interest of leading researchers. It was, among others, this northern Belgian stage that drew the attention of Hans-Thies Lehmann in the late nineties and became the object of analysis behind the German critic's study of the so-called "post-dramatic theater." More recently, a dossier of the journal *Théâtre/Public* No. 211, organized by Christian Biet and Josette Féral, gathered articles from Belgian and French scholars dedicated to the inventive and provocative stage called "the Flemish wave."

Although critical interest in Flemish productions has been growing in the last 15 years, experimental Flemish theater has been flourishing from the late '70s, with productions committed to the renewal of theater, dance and music, flirting heavily with performance. In this creative birthing, we in Brazil can already confirm the talent of artists such as Jan Lauwers (Needcompany), Jan Fabre (Troubleyn) and

¹ Interview with Wannes Gyselincx.

Anne Therese Keersmaecker (Rosas).

After more than three decades, the Flemish wave continues to surprise the audience, more recently with theatrical concerts designed by Josse De Pauw (1952), among which the piece *An Old Monk* stands out. This creation, renewing the relationship between theater, music, word and dance, comes from an artistic encounter between Pauw and the extraordinary pianist, Kris Defoort (1959), composer, improviser, and a member of several musical collectives - KD's Basement party; KD's Decade; d'Octurn; Dreamtime; Sound Plaza - and contributor to contemporary jazz groups. Defoort shares the conception of the show and also the stage with De Pauw. There are two other musicians, Nicolas Thys (bass) and Lander Gyselincx (drums). Although considered by critics as a leader of the musical vanguard, Defoort prefers to define himself in terms of today's music: traversed and penetrated by all kinds of music, especially classical music and jazz. His compositions therefore originate in a heterogeneous musical cosmos, which prevents, according to him, framing his creations in a specific musical style.

If, on the one hand, the partnership with Defoort is definitive for the implementation of *An Old Monk*, on the other hand, this artistic project is rooted in questions stemming from De Pauw's personal issues. Indeed, the show's title itself demonstrates this in its ambiguity. "Monk" is not only a reference to the American pianist and jazz musician Thelonious Monk (1917-1982), whose repertoire runs through the spectacle. "Monk" also refers to De Pauw himself, his old dream for a monastic life, a peaceful existence. *An Old Monk* also reflects a particular desire of De Pauw's to return to dance according to life's natural transformations. But before delving into this issue, we need to review, somewhat, the artistic career of this Flemish artist who is today considered one of the greatest creators of the contemporary European scene and who, for his lifetime achievement, won the prestigious Bernadette Abrate award, given by Belgian Francophone critics in 2012.

The will for experimentation and innovation is already well apparent at the beginning of Josse De Pauw's artistic career. Trained as an actor at the Royal Conservatory of Brussels in 1976, he refused to participate in large productions or join traditional theatrical institutions. He sought out a new theater, open and popular, where the relationship between the artists would not be hierarchical. Thus arose the Radeis International (1976-1984), founded in partnership with Dirk Pauwels

(now Victoria) and Pat Van Hemelrijck (now Alibi). Newspaper critics at the time characterized the group's staging as poetic, comic and essentially visual. A scene without words whose silence is only interrupted sometimes by whispered gibberish and screams. Hilarious characters, innocent actions, mime neutrality, a performance reminiscent of Tati, Keaton and Chaplin. A scenic game constructed amid a diversity of objects arranged haphazardly, seemingly assembled randomly. The absence of hierarchy within the relationship between group members also determined the scenic arrangement. Diving into a microcosm, the characters are ordinary men, anonymous subjects. No compromise with realism. Bread is green, eggs and coffee are red. An orange balloon represents the sun; the plastic floor is the beach and the sea. With no psychological construct and neutral facial expression, the interest lies in the composition of the figures.

In describing the proposal of *Ik wist niet dat Engeland zo mooi* (I did not know that England was so beautiful, 1980), the critic Théodore Louis remembers:

They introduce themselves one by one in silence, on a stage cluttered with bags and disparate objects. The first remains still, not looking at anything in particular, the second comes in with a bouquet of flowers and starts to take the petals off, the third carries two bags and a fishing rod... (Louis, 1980 n.p.).

In an absolutely everyday universe, the actions are banal, devoid of any apparent purpose, the conversation with the objects is useless, as useless as any other murmur issued on the scene. The absurd logic metaphorically denounces human attempts to escape from facing the world. And the audience laughs, laughs at itself, because it recognized itself. The tragic comedy is established.

The Radeis' productions gain public and critical prestige, ending up crossing Belgium's borders. The group goes on international tours, where its productions are appreciated in different European countries and in the cities of Vancouver, Los Angeles, Caracas and Hong Kong. According to historians, Radeis is even the first Belgian group to conquer an international career without subsidy. Despite this success, the group dissolves eight years after its founding, with no disagreement between its members, only the common desire for change.

De Pauw then began a solo, but not solitary career. He had working partnerships

with many artists, individuals with diverse skills, actors, directors, musicians, visual artists, authors, developing projects associated with different organizations, theater groups, cultural centers, vocal collectives and orchestras, among which, in recent years, the LOD musical theater of Ghent, Muziektheater Transparant and Tonnelhuis Antwerp, KVS and Théâtre National in Brussels. De Pauw expands his extraordinary talent in different areas: theater, cinema and literature. Working in four languages - Dutch, French, English and German - he builds an acting career in theater as well as film. His curriculum at this time counts with over a hundred theatrical pieces and more than fifty films. As a stage actor, his performance has been appreciated on personal projects and also in important directors' creations, especially in productions directed by Guy Cassiers such as *Mephisto for ever* (2007), *Sous le Volcan* (2009), *Coeur tenebreux* (2011). His stage presence in *Mephisto for ever*, in the role of Gros (a fascist general), was so impressive that Fabiane Darge, special envoy of the French newspaper *Le Monde* at the Festival d'Avignon, likened his performance to that of Marlon Brando in the film *Apocalypse Now* (Darge, 2007 np).

For De Pauw, desire is the engine of all things, what motivates life as well as art. His great desire is to act. For him, work is not only a way of life, but the best way to live indeed. Life is complex, and thus art operates with according complexity. On stage, De Pauw invests in uncertainty, the ambiguity between me and him, actor and character in a active play conjugated by sincerity and distance, which allows him, he says, the freedom to be sometimes a spectator among other spectators, in order to get closer to them. In fact, he does not think it possible to separate the actor from the character:

The hardest thing for an actor is to understand the character that one is to interpret says a lot about oneself. An actor can only represent himself; every role he plays is a part of him. Nothing human is foreign to him, a reality that is sometimes hard to bear (De Pauw, 1996, np).

A physically corpulent actor, on stage De Pauw gives a measured performance, with few movements and contained gestures. In *La Version Claus* (2009), he remained immobile during almost the entire polyphonic monologue, composed of fragments of plays by Hugo Claus, as well as excerpts from the Belgian writer's

interviews. The specialized critics characterized De Pauw's acting by highlighting its lack of technical virtuosity, its simplicity and the near absence of role characterization (minimum body changes, refusal to use makeup and the frequent use of neutral suits as costumes). This economic construction of acting was once considered by some critics as the contemporary stage's acting style.

De Pauw's first film work was in *De stille oceaan* (1984), a film directed by Dutch director Digna Sinke. His talent turns up again on screen in *Crazy Love, Just Friends*, and *Everybody's Famous!* (Nominated for an Oscar as best foreign film 2001), *Hombres complicados* and many other films. Despite his success as a film actor, and the large number of film he has made, De Pauw confesses to have much greater affinity with the theater than with film. As he said:

As an actor, a person who loves representation can not be happy when someone shouts *Cut!*, in the middle of his speech. Even understanding it, it's not pleasant. (...) When I go up on stage, I feel that it belongs to me! (2010 np.).

He believes that his film participations were motivated less by scripts and much more by great friendships with directors such as Dominique Deruddere and Marc-Henri Wajnberg. At any rate, he says that filmmaking is difficult for him. However, he directed three films, among which he prefers *Übung*, precisely because it's a movie designed to integrate a theatrical production.

De Pauw is a man of the theater in the broadest sense. He participates in projects led by director friends, but also realizes his own productions, in which he accumulates functions as actor, director as well as author. Shortly after Radeis dissolved, he produced *Usurpation* (1985), a performance in which he shared the stage with actress Mieke Verdin and musicians Peter Vermeersch and Danny Van Hoeck, to denounce existing oppressive power relations between the sexes. The actor who until then had avoided the word, not only spoke before the public, but become, on that spot, author of the text. Belgian theater experts point out De Pauw as being the first actor to create his own text in the country. In *Usurpation*, the words spoken on stage enter into a close relationship with the music, a preview to future artistic experimentation.

Born in a country that has been multicultural since its origin, De Pauw takes up this

mixture of diverse cultures and principles to compose his artistic identity. Also in his personal life. He fell in love with and married a Japanese dancer, Fumyo Ikeda, founder of the dance company Rosas along with Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker. For De Pauw, nothing is more boring than purity. Artistically voracious, he conceives works marked by different disciplinary intersections. The desire to multiply - to compose a scene marked by abundance and diversity of elements - overcomes the fear of being chaotic or any intention to be impeccable. The important thing is freedom of creation and this involves risk. The spirit of freedom, the search for an art born of chaos, not order, in fact runs through the practice of many Flemish artists today, seducing both the public and critics. An attitude, that both for De Pauw as for Alain Platel, is only possible because in Flanders there doesn't exist the weight of a cultural past such as that which inhibits the English regarding Shakespeare's, the French with Molière, Norwegians with Ibsen and the Swedish with Strindberg. The scenic impact of *Übung* (a school exercise), which was performed from 2001 to 2004 in various parts of the world, gave much more international recognition of De Pauw as a director. Conceived by the group Victoria (Ghent), the show is applauded but also generates misunderstandings. Gathering together teenage actors, and directed to issues of sexuality, *Übung* has been criticized, especially in England. The proposal, however, was not to make children's theater talking about sex, but theater with children that addressed adults. De Pauw brings to the stage child actors in order to critically unravel the behavior of adults. In the plot, a bourgeois couple receives friends for the weekend that begins with hugs, recipe exchanges and other amenities. As the evening advances, abetted by too much alcohol, relationships gain dramatic contours, reminiscent of what happens in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The weaknesses, fears and repressed desires of the adults are exposed and they get to kicking, hitting, and screaming like children.

In formalizing the staging of *Übung*, De Pauw invests in the intermediary tension between theater and cinema, anticipating the procedure of film dubbed by actors on stage, most recently employed by Elizabeth Lecompte and Yan Duyvendac. A silent film in black and white appears on a large screen, occupying the entire back of the stage, with the actions of the protagonists represented by adult actors. In front of the screen, six young actors (11-14 years old), dressed as the characters, are dubbing the film, giving voice to the adult actors and repeating their gestures

and movements in complete sync with what occurs in the projected images. In the game caught between the reality of the scene and the impression of reality of the film image, the bodies of the characters acquire then a double thickness, child-adult. The natural estrangement aroused by the difference between the body of the child and that of the adult, meeting in representation of the same figure, unmask the adult world. If, on the one hand, infantile reactions emerge in adult behavior, on the other hand, it appears as a result of an imitative process that starts in childhood.

De Pauw's talent as a writer, revealed in *Usurpation*, and reappearing in the texts of his plays, also is manifested in texts he writes by invitation for director friends. De Pauw wrote the scripts for plays such as *Zetelkat* (Luxemburgvzw), *Des Varkens Mijmerij* (Zuidelijk Toneel Hollandia), *Wortel van Glas* (Het Paleis) *In teedrinkster* (Needcompany), *Dédé le taxi* (Theater Antigone) and *Sulla en mus* (Victoria). At a meeting with directors Guy Cassier and Luk Perceval, De Pauw developed an adaptation for theater of the novel *Heart of Darkness* (J. Conrad), *Under the Volcano* (M. Lowry) and *Disgrace* (J.M. Coetzee). Part of his dramaturgy is published in *Werk* (Work, 2000) and *Nog* (Still, 2004), collections of texts, memories, reflections, and even travel notes, works that have received literary awards. After great success in Flanders, De Pauw has published more recently in French *Le Temps d'être* (The Time to Be, 2011), a novel in which autobiographical facts and fictional situations mingle and whose narrative appears intercut with naive words (but no less wise for being) that his daughter, Hanna, said as a child, memories of a loving and sensitive father.

A music lover, De Pauw likes to play the saxophone. However, he claims not to be a musician. For him, musical practice contributes to the art of the actor and the creation of the writer. The concentration required by the instrument is the same as the concentration indispensable for acting. The freedom of the composer to articulate notes, leads the author into play with words, fleeing from language blocks. Thus, music systematically monitors De Pauw's creative process.

Research on new types of links between text and music, as outlined in *Usurpation*, deepens in the performance of *Weg* (1998), produced in collaboration with composer Peter Vermeersch, a former Radeis partner. As announced by its title, in Dutch, "path" and "departure," *Weg* evokes geographical travels but also life jour-

neys, the farewells, abandonments, the absences left. In *Weg*, the text and the music wage an unusual theatrical alliance, a true symbiosis between the musicality of the composition and that of the enunciated word (rhythm, timbre, intonation). In order to construct a scene where the boundaries between the arts are dissolved, a new acting style would seem necessary. Exploring different vocal registers, making use of Flemish and Dutch dialects, De Pauw begins, here, to develop a unique way to deliver a text on stage, characterized as a "between," between speech and song.

Despite *Weg's* success, De Pauw wanted to go further into the interrelationship and play between text and music. He therefore decides to totally abandon narrative. For *Larf* (2000), he sought out even more fragmented texts, charged with musicality. The new production reaffirmed his partnership with Vermeersch, who brought sixteen musicians from his band The Flat Earth Society with him, in addition to blues singer Roland Van Campenhout. An audible vortex is constructed, within which three actors operate: De Pauw himself, Tom Jansen and Dirk Roofthoof. The life of Larfken, the larva child, is performed in an intimate dialogue interweaving music with narrative, words addressed to the public and even the sound of parents babbling to the child (*Larve, larve, larvon mignon. Veux-tu devenir un papillon?/ larva, larva, little larva, do you want to become a butterfly?*). Surprising and moving, *Weg* and *Larf* garner the highest distinction of the Flemish performing arts for De Pauw, the Océ Podium Prize. These two productions initiate De Pauw's trajectory of musical theater creations or, as he prefers to call them, "theatrical concerts," creations largely responsible for his international notoriety.

Today, De Pauw is a member of the LOD Muziektheater, center for opera production and musical theater in the city of Ghent, where composers Kris Defoort, Daan Janssens, Jan Kuijken, Vasco Mendonça, Dominique Pauwels and Thomas Smetryns, as well as the director Inne Goris also work. The space also welcomes projects from visiting artists, such as Patrick Corillon, Buysser Pieter, Denis Marleau, Fabrice Murgia, François Sarhan. Under the auspices of LOD, De Pauw has engaged in important musical partnerships, producing three theatrical concerts with cellist and pianist Jan Kuijken. The first is *Die siel van die mier* (The soul of termites). Sharing the stage with two musicians behind a long table, De Pauw performs an entomological conference on the social functioning of termites, presenting scien-

tific data on the insects through projected images. Little by little, the exhibition is interrupted by personal memories of having lived in the Congo, accompanied by musical intervention. The scientific conference turns into a concert where music and text are articulated in seemingly disorganized manner and the close relationship between the operation of the insects and the human soul appears. In *Les Pendus* (The Hanged, 2010), five actors hung up over an orchestra sing in Latin and declaim texts in Flemish, representing freethinkers lynched by the world's indifference. Also in collaboration with Kuijken, *Huis* (House, 2013) is an adaptation of two short texts by the Flemish author Michel Ghelderode (1898-1962). In a nursing home in Flanders, apprehensive elderly confess to one another while they wait for the visit of a strange gentleman, whose arrival is announced by the sound of chimes. A woman's desperate cry erupts, announcing a fatality: death strikes a child. Relieved, the elderly continue with their party, singing, laughing and dancing. At Mary's home in Jerusalem, the Savior's widows, Mary Magdalene, Martha and Veronica, gather after the crucifixion. Disputing Jesus' love, they thus reveal the rivalries and pettiness of biblical figures. The Catholic imaginary is called into question. This starkly bared scenic bereavement is compensated by symphonic music, composed specifically for the production. Music plays a key role in building the dramatic atmospheres, always accompanying, as in an opera, the actions, words, songs and dances of the actors.

Kris Defoort also partners with De Pauw in LOD, collaborating with him on *An Old Monk* (2011), another theatrical concert, bringing together music, text, dance and projections. All this to speak of life's movements. Time passes and the body gives signs of weakening. It is necessary to resign yourself to it, but you cannot stop. Everything that stops is dead. We must react, because desires do not cool down. Affected by diabetes, Josse De Pauw reacts conceiving *An Old Monk*. As ever, life and art come together with this artist. The body's limits are exposed in words, intertwined with music, but also in dance, a dance that reveals the passage of time: because the body is no longer young, like the one whose images projected on the scene foreshadow vestiges of its past. But it's not about nostalgia! Josse De Pauw addresses the audience, laughs at himself, having fun. Humor triumphs over pain, relieving the burden of harsh images evoked by the words "thrombosis" and "incontinence." You have to dance, there is still life. The actor delivers his text in a

deep voice, in a unique manner developed in their theatrical concerts, half spoken half sung. And with his huge physique, he dances. Regarding this scene, De Pauw declares that there are three movements in relation to dance in the course of one's lifetime. Youth is a time for searching, of seeking to essay "some dance steps. It is a few dance steps. The body embracing the dream body." In adulthood, the time is taken prisoner by commitment and then, you "do not dance anymore, or very little. Vain attempts to become a monk. The great aspiration, is in silence and solitude..." Old age comes in surreptitiously. And "coming from somewhere, the desire to dance takes over again. Curious to know whether the enjoyment of life continues to hide in dance. The old monk does some dance steps. Still."² De Pauw's dancing is clumsy, but it does not matter. After all, perfection was never was the goal, and now even less so. The quest here is another, that of the encounter with life.

De Pauw loves to dance, gets lost in the dance, that familiar and usual game of his childhood. But to dance you need music! The process of creating, Kris Defoort reports, started by experimenting with his compositions and also free improvisations; then took another turn. The memory of Thelonious Monk's music began to emerge: the density, multiple levels, tonality, and non-melodramatic melancholy of the American jazz musician was perfect for the project. But Monk is not present in the show only for his music, but also as an inspiration to scenic play, for his extraordinary ability to improvise. In fact, a show that seeks life must submit to the rule of its unpredictability. And so, like Monk, the actor and musicians improvise. Text, dance and music are linked together in freedom. De Pauw played with the words. The text does not change, but it intertwines with the music differently in each presentation. The words meet the music at different moments and in different ways in each performance. Kris Defoort and his partners, Lander and Nic, while providing a set of Monk's compositions, reinvent the groove, improvise melodic counterpoints. "What brings us together is the love of imperfection, the improvisation that makes the performance live" (Avignon, 2014 s.p.), Defoort says. Thus, the performance that begins each night with a different musical improvisation is developed as the other listens, by means of a sensitive dialogue between the four partners. The performance stems from a process moved by the soul and by the

² Excerpts from the text, *An Old Monk*.

desire to compose, together, a dancing environment.

Finally, no fear, please. *An Old Monk* is not only about aging, the body wearing out, death. The possibility of re-creation, reinvention is reaffirmed throughout, even in the projected images, photos of De Pauw's aging naked body, artistically reworked by the painter Benoît van Innis. The show invites resistance, imagination, creativity. It unsettles, but strengthens the desire to live. Now, let us dance with Josse De Pauw!

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