

## **The revolution of the experience**

**‘The older generation of directors’, young director Lotte van den Berg told me in an interview, ‘would like us to kick them out of their theatres and rebel against them. But we don’t. Maybe that is the revolution of our generation. Their question why there is no talent to direct for the big theatres comes from this same desire the older generation has.’**

It was May 2006. Four months later, Ivo van Hove, artistic director of Toneelgroep Amsterdam, the biggest company in the Netherlands, opened the new season with a speech in which he suggested exactly that. He said: ‘We all feel there is a problem. There are too few influential directors for the big playhouses.’ In the same speech Van Hove criticized the abundance of small theatre groups in the Netherlands which play in the smaller venues and which give the Dutch theatre landscape its immense diversity. He pleaded for a stronger role for the big theatre groups within the theatre landscape, for example in the education of young directors.

## **Blackbox and repertoire**

In his speech Van Hove made the incorrect assumption that it is the goal of every young director to end up with a big company so he can direct in the big playhouses and that young directors only work in the smaller venues due to lack of opportunities. This misconception, which showed a complete denial of the important artistic and aesthetic changes the last couple of years, can shed an interesting light on the differences between an older generation and the new generation of directors which is emerging at the horizon and in some cases is exceptionally successful within the Netherlands and also internationally. It is a generation with a totally different view on the aesthetics and the function of theatre and which is not, as Van Hove wrongfully expects, impatiently waiting to storm the big companies.

Since the seventies, when the Dutch government decided to subsidize not only the bourgeois companies which played repertoire for a broad audience, but also the more experimental forms of theatre, there are two, only loosely related theatrical circuits in the Netherlands. On the one hand there is a great diversity of small, more experimental theatre groups, which tour the smaller black box theatres. These groups represent a host of artistic languages: movement theatre, object theatre, music theatre, experimental repertoire theatre and so on. On the other hand there is a handful of large city companies that make productions for the big playhouses. These productions are often repertoire theatre, directed by the older generation to which Van Hove belongs. Many of this generation to which also known names as Johan Simons, Gerardjan Rijnders and Theu Boermans belong, started out in the small circuit in the seventies and eighties. These directors then made a transfer to the bigger companies, taking their newly found aesthetics with them, and in doing so breaking open the rather

traditional repertoire theatre in the bigger companies and venues. There they stayed, making big productions, based on known repertoire, which carry the inheritance of the artistic and social revolutions of the sixties and seventies: Johan Simons is searching for the relationship between the individual, society and morale, Ivo van Hove wants to dissect social institutions like marriage and politics. Rijnders has always searched for radical new forms to tell old stories in. Theu Boermans searches for the contemporary relevance of classical repertoire. And, as Lotte van den Berg suggests, they expect the younger generation to do the same thing and also that they will be kicked out of the theatres the way their generation kicked out the old fashioned artistic directors in the eighties. But maybe the emerging generation doesn't want to, because they have other ideas about the function of theatre and the aesthetics that are needed to fulfil this function. As Van den Berg puts it: 'I stage my performances on that location that is most suitable to say the things I want to say. There is a suggestion that the big playhouses are the final phase of an artistic development, the endgoal. But the venue is only the means. It is form. (...) Maybe it is a conscious choice of talented young directors not to work at the big playhouses.'

### **To (re)construct reality**

It is, indeed, a conscious choice. The most interesting artistic developments of the younger generation in the last decade, took place outside of the big venues. Even outside of the small venues. They were found during the summerfestivals, like Oerol (on the island of Terschelling) and Festival a/d Werf (Utrecht) most of which present theatre on outside locations. In the last years audiences found themselves in abandoned warehouses, on city squares, floating on lakes and on the beach. It is a conscious choice of an emerging generation to choose a specific location suited to give the audience that experience the directors want them to have. This choice is closely related to the view this generation has on the function of theatre. Different from the generation of Van Hove, these directors grew up in a world in which every bit of information is literally one mouse click or one television screen away. Film, television and Internet are better suited to comment on the globalizing world or to (re)construct reality than theatre is. The reality of film is sometimes more real than reality itself. Therefore, instead of trying to dissect social mechanisms, using a fictitious world on stage, these directors want to go back to the essence of theatre. To something television, internet and film lack: the live meeting of audience and performer in the here and now. In doing so, these directors want to create a time and space to concentrate on details and experiences that in our busy lives are normally are ignored. They feel that theatre is the best form to do that, because it involves togetherness and concentration like no other art form does. In their performances these directors concentrate on things like the movement of a body, the feeling of being part of a bigger whole, how a space can feel. They want to let the audience experience, rather than tell them something. Most of their performances therefore lack a rational meaning. They are what they are. In *Wervel (Whirl)*, a performance by Boukje

Schweigman (see the interview), Schweigman stands in the middle of a circle that is formed by the audience. Then she starts to turn, like in a Derwish dance, and keeps whirling for a long time. The continuous circular motion in itself means nothing, but it is a hallucinating experience for the audience and little variations, like moving an arm or fingers, have, as one critic wrote, 'the impact of an earthquake.' The form of the circle, the fact that the audience are asked to wear something like a monks habit, the smell of incense that fills the room, creates a religious experience, that seems to celebrate only the wonder of the human body and the wonder of the circle, but at the same time means nothing more than what the spectator makes of it. In *Niemandland* by Dries Verhoeven, the individual audience member follows an immigrant into a part of the city where a lot of immigrants live. On a headset the audience is hearing the voice of an actor giving a host of (sometimes) contradictory stories about who this guide can be. The performance sheds a light on the diversity of identities immigrants carry with them, although they're often seen as a homogenous group. On the other hand it makes a 'stranger' of the audience member, walking through a part of the city he would normally avoid, wearing a big white headset.

### **Here-and-now**

Directors like Dries Verhoeven, Lotte van den Berg and Boukje Schweigman all seek a new relationship with their audience. They have different ways of doing so, but the subjective experience of the audience member and the interest for details in daily life that would otherwise be missed, are almost always the central focus point. That is also the motive for taking the audience out of the theatre. In a darkened auditorium the audience can be passive spectators, instead of actively experiencing this meeting between the performer and themselves.

The emergence of these directors and the aesthetics they use are not a sudden development. They are a consequence of different artistic influences that are found in the smaller venues, which are closely related to the smaller scale and intimacy of these venues. One of these influences can be traced back to groups like Discordia, Dood Paard and 't Barre Land. These groups work from the principle that because theatre can't come close to reality, it shouldn't attempt to, especially when playing in a small venue, three feet away from your audience. Therefore the artificial situation of this gathering of audience and actors who try to construct a fictitious reality is constantly stressed. For example: Dutch and Flemish actors often have an ironic relation with their roles. They will continually step out of their roles and comment on them. This view on theatre has had a tremendous influence on how a younger generation of directors look at theatre: as a poor substitute for reality, but a great way to bring actors and audience together in the same here-and-now.

Another influence comes from the School for Movement Theatre, which is part of the Amsterdam Theatreschool. Founded in the nineteen-seventies based on the principles of Etienne Decroux, actors are trained for the movement theatre or mime (which is radically different from pantomime), a genre

that is typically Dutch. These actors learn not to play a psychological role, but to give meaning by movement in space. They learn to be conscious of the here-and-now of the theatre space and the creation of meaning by inserting a human body into that space. These actors don't act, they are present. It will not come as a surprise that a lot of young directors, who are looking for an experience in the here-and-now are interested in the specific qualities of these actors. Boukje Schweigman studied at the School herself and Lotte van den Berg and Jetse Batelaan mostly work with movement actors, placing the School in the middle of artistic developments, rather than at the fringe, where it found itself for many years before.

### **Under your skin**

Of course not all young directors adhere to the same aesthetics and smaller venues as those described above. There are also directors which explicitly choose to work in the big play houses and who direct (modern) repertoire. These talented directors are slowly getting the opportunity by the big companies to make their productions. It is only after the speech of Van Hove, and after they were forced by the government and its new funding system that big companies asked young directors to work for them. And even now these opportunities are scarce. One of the emerging directors who took this opportunity is Suzanne Kennedy, who made a big impression with her directions of *Hedda Gabler* and Enda Walsh's *The new electric ballroom*. Although Kennedy, different from some of her young colleagues, chooses to use theatre texts, her aesthetics are closely related to the rest of her generation: the theatrical situation is never denied, and the experience is often more important than to create a realistic fictional world on stage. By using an intense way of acting, actors who speak directly at the audience and subtle soundscapes, she finds a way to let the texts and characters crawl under your skin. She lets you experience the text and its characters, rather than they are explained rationally.

The emergence of a new Dutch generation of directors, is also the emergence of new aesthetics. These are closely related those of the older generations in the small venues, but used with a different motive in mind. They want to actively engage the audience with their performances by stressing the unique quality of theatre as an art form: liveness. If Van Hove wants to see talented directors, he should come outside of his theatre and look around. They're there, showing that there's more to theatre than big shows and repertoire. And that is their revolution.

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