

NOT ALL WHO WANDER ARE LOST

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Benjamin Verdonck is a wizard of the theatre of objects, which he reinvents with humour and tenderness with each new show. Inspired today by painter Kasimir Malevich and sculptor Alexander Calder, he becomes a puppeteer and, armed with nothing but strings, manipulates small cardboard triangles. Those forms appear, collide into and flee each other, creating a meticulous, simple, and fragile choreography. Each small piece of cardboard becomes an actor in its own right, a partner with whom the audience bonds. Emotion springs from those inanimate objects, whose only purpose seems utilitarian. They become playful and teasing, unruly and rebellious. We fear for them whenever they attempt a dangerous stunt, we laugh at their petty rivalries, we let go to enter a theatrical temporality in which the rationality of everyday life gives way to a unique logic, the logic of animated objects that dare us to dream. Time becomes different, calm and reassuring, filled with fantasy. We are amazed by Benjamin Verdonck's beautiful and perfectionist craft, and can better understand what hides behind the title of his show: "Not all who wander are lost."

Show premiered on 2 May, 2014, at Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels (Belgium).

BENJAMIN VERDONCK

After graduating from the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp with a degree in acting, Benjamin Verdonck develops a very personal body of work that brings together different forms of performing arts. Theatre of text, dance, musical theatre, theatre of objects, performances in theatre venues or in the public space, artistic installations, etc. This in turns allows his outlook on the world to be at once gentle and forceful, often critical but always deeply human. He goes from stage to stage, from the smallest spaces to the largest, presenting shows in which politics play a large part, but always preferring questions to indoctrination. His "weapons:" poetry and humour. A partner of the Toneelhuis in Antwerp and the KVS in Brussels, he has worked with Ivo van Hove, Johan Simons, and Arne Sierens, before working on creations taking place in the public area, such as *Hirondelle/Dooi Vogeltje/The Great Swallow*, for which he spent seven days in a nest on the façade of the Brussels administrative Centre, thirty-two meters above ground, from which he shouted at passersby. At the Festival d'Avignon, he took part in *Nine Finger*, with Alain Platel and Fumiyo Ikeda, and presented *Wewilllvestorm*.

INTERVIEW WITH BENJAMIN VERDONCK

Performance, theatre of objects, puppets... Your theatre combines different forms of representation. What was your initial desire?

Benjamin Verdonck: For a very long time I have wanted to create a show I could carry around in a box. It was a boyhood dream, born of an encounter with the Calder circus, with its tiny characters; what I like about Alexander Calder is that there is always a playful dimension to his work, even as an adult he has kept this childish side. He is always looking for something. I believe in the subversive side of games and invention. The first model I built was a one-square-metre square, within which I came up with movements. I brought it along to some friends' to play a miniature show. I then made it bigger, since I wanted to play in front of about sixty people. I also wanted to build something abstract, so that the audience would enter a dimension without any relationship to the world outside the theatre, without anything to do with their own personal stories. Malevich is another one of my influences. Small triangles are the simplest of abstract figures, and I didn't want there to be any reference to actual objects. Those are first and foremost figures created by three lines which, thanks to their triangular form, can move.

Are you the one manipulating them?

I make them move from stage left to stage right and back thanks to a system of threads I pull on to create a choreography. I consider that my objects "dance." My small theatre is minimalist, it's about as big as a table, but it also has a fly system, and a backstage area.

Why use cardboard?

Because it is a very simple material, with its own energy. I don't pay much attention to what you might call the quality of a material, and I always choose them based on what I expect when I start working with them: their strength, sometimes their flexibility, their mobility, the ease with which I can move them, the poetry of its movements. Cardboard is easy to use, I could cut it up easily and try many different things one after the other. It's also a "poor" material, which children use easily. I like the idea of this poor material being transcended by the work I do with it, by the illusion it helps me create. And it's also a "fragile" material, one I treat with the utmost care, because I take care of all my performers. They have special boxes reserved for them that protect them from two main threats: the hazards of transportation, and variations in temperature, to which they are very sensitive. It requires me to pay close attention, to be extra vigilant, because we have already done many shows together; I have to check before each show that they are in top form so as to avoid accidents. I really like this very mindful and meticulous relationship I have to build with my objects. It's a game between us. I like having to pay close attention to them, especially when I'm working with objects that aren't considered rare or expensive, but simple and "poor." The wood that makes up my small puppet theatre is also not high-quality wood, and almost untreated.

Do you feel like those small cardboard triangles are your partners, the way other actors with whom you would share a stage could be?

I can tell the difference between an actual actor and my small pieces of cardboard, so of course the relationship isn't the same. However, we have played a lot together, so to me they are almost alive, I know them. And from time to time, they play pranks on me, rebel against my commands... When I think they are good, when they dance well, I'm proud of them. To be clearer, I would say that within the score I wrote, and to which I want to adhere faithfully every day, the way a good musician would, there can be small variations. I can refine a movement, slow things down or speed them up a little, change things to fix small mistakes I made in the conception and become aware of during the show.

Could we then say that you are as much a puppeteer as a choreographer, a craftsman as much as an artist?

In that I give life to small inanimate triangles, sure. But what really motivates me is to propose a game that I then share with the audience. I sometimes feel that the audience worries about the same things I do when I'm manipulating my triangles. They get nervous for the same reasons: "Let's hope this fragile little piece of cardboard doesn't waver..." What I do is attempt things, try things out, do exercises; I offer a metaphor for what I believe an artist's work should be, with its inherent risks, but also a desire to go further. And before that, before entering the stage, when I'm making my objects, I'm a craftsman. I like to show people how I work as I'm working. I don't hide, I stay in plain sight, everyone in the audience can understand how I work, what techniques I use. I think that contributes to creating emotion in the audience.

And in your relationship to time and to precision, did you work for a long time on the preparation of this show?

It took a long time. Coming up with how to make the objects move didn't take long, but the actual movements took a while to define. Since I had decided on a number of constraints—a very small stage, fragile pieces of cardboard that would be manipulated with thread—it took a while to solve the problems they posed. In fact, I wrote a real choreographic score, almost following a mathematical principle. And so as not to rely on a crutch of any kind, I decided not to use any actual music; there isn't any rhythm to the show save for the movements of the triangles. I think the audience is surprised at first by this absence of sound, then slowly they enter this silent world. There is nothing to distract us, except perhaps the tweeting of birds or the sound threads make as they slide. An entire world is created out of those faint noises, and it helps the audience focus. This is reinforced by the fact that there aren't that many of us in that room to begin with. I know that beyond a hundred people, it becomes harder for the audience to focus on my particular brand of minimalism.

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Interview conducted by Jean-François Perrier / Translation Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

AND...

YOUNG AUDIENCES AT THE PÉNITENTS BLANCS

- *Riquet* by Laurent Brethome, from 4 to 8 July
- *Dark Circus* by STEREOPTIK, from 19 to 23 July

CINEMATOGRAPHIC TERRITORIES

- Screenings for younger audiences, 7-25 July at 10:30 am / Utopia-Manutention
- Workshops: first steps in cinema animation (7-12 years old) from 8 to 23 July at 02:00 pm, Conservatoire du Grand Avignon

YOUTH GUIDE

The Youth Guide offers a list of all the artistic and cultural events aimed at children and teenagers: shows, encounters, screenings and workshops for the youngest. It is available at the Cloître Saint-Louis, on the website and at the main venues of the Festival.

TOUR DATES OF *NOTALLHOWANDERARELOST* AFTER THE FESTIVAL D'AVIGNON

- 26 and 27 August 2015: Mladi Levi Festival, Ljubljana (Slovenia)
- from 13 to 17 October: KVS, Brussels (Belgium)
- 2 February 2016: Theater aan het Vrijthof, AINSI, Maastricht (Netherlands)

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