



# THE SHEEP SONG

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## INTERVIEW WITH FC BERGMAN

## STEF AERTS AND THOMAS VERSTRAETEN

**The first question that comes to mind about your show is, why a sheep? Both as a multifaceted main character and as a hybrid creature.**

**Stef Aerts:** We've used the figure of the sheep in our previous shows. In *300 el x 50 el x 30 el*, there was a sheep in a very symbolic scene, and there was originally a sheep in *The Land of Nod*, which we presented at the Festival d'Avignon in 2016, but we ended up cutting those passages. But we still wanted to work on those beautiful scenes. The sheep is a powerful religious symbol, it's a human being that's been "lost," it recalls the Biblical parable. Religion and Christianity are important sources in our creative process, so it made sense for us to turn this sheep into the main character of a show about the essence of humanity.

**Thomas Verstraeten:** We started with an innocent animal, without past or background. What's interesting here is that it's the most innocent creature which decides to step out of line and become more than what it is.

**Stef Aerts:** We don't really delve into the biological aspect of the animal, it's more of an archetypal and symbolic image. For the first few minutes of the show, it's an animal, but it quickly loses those characteristics to become a hybrid, part-animal, part-human form. It's the result onstage of both cutting-edge technology—the sheep is an animatronics figure, a robotic creature—and of a performance by Jonas Vermeulen, an extremely talented actor and dancer. His physical performance is a real *tour de force*. He manages to breathe life into this very heavy and cumbersome mechanical costume. Thomas and I animate the head of the sheep remotely, but all the gestures and movements that show emotions are the work of this amazing actor.

**What hides behind the hero's desire to become human?**

**Stef Aerts:** We quickly realized that what mattered was not to understand how and why the sheep had begun his quest, or where his desire to change came from. We don't explain why he wants to become human. It just happens. The main topic of the play is how he approaches the learning process, and the decisions he makes.

**Thomas Verstraeten:** Yes, the quest itself is the subject, not where it begins or where it ends. After a while, the sheep loses control of his adventure, of who or what he encounters on the way. That's how journeys work. After a while, you're not sure why you left to begin with...

**Stef Aerts:** The sheep's *odyssey* is a long process he follows, but which he doesn't understand. It happens to all of us. At some point in our lives, we have to let go of dogmatic principles to be able to make our own decisions and create our own moral codes. This leads to a freedom that can seem scary, if there are no rules to limit or guide us. The more knowledge we acquire, the more complex it becomes to make decisions, the more choices become difficult because they have more consequences for ourselves and the world around us. The void can then seem immeasurable.

**Thomas Verstraeten:** It's a meditation about maturity and change. Transformation can be something we started, but it also represents things around us changing. At first, the sheep takes the initiative, but then he is overwhelmed by those changes. What interested us was the clash of those two forces, as well as our own paradoxical relationship to the idea of transformation: we can change some things, but there are so many forces against which we are powerless...

**Stef Aerts:** Life is always evolving, it's a fundamental mechanism. Our sheep seems to have forgotten it when the play starts, or maybe he isn't aware of it. He changes things that he maybe shouldn't, goes through transformations too important for him. He pushes his life beyond its limits.

**For this show, you drew inspiration from medieval artistic genres, which are highly codified. What did you keep of their narrative, aesthetic, and scenic styles?**

**Thomas Verstraeten:** Folk tales about animals are a very interesting literary genre, with a long tradition. Their authors used animals to talk about people and thus create a distance. Those tales, like Jean de La Fontaine's, are about morality and ethics. We wanted to work within this genre to see if we can still make use of those narrative devices today. We already had some experience with the genre since we'd created in 2013 *Le Roman de Renart*, a human version with modern costumes of a tale about animals. Here, it was the opposite, we started with a human story around which we imagined an animal tale.

**Stef Aerts:** Animal tales try to explore what it means to be human, to live according to rules. It's a subject about which Christianity has a very clear and precise opinion. Those medieval stories, although they had their use, were naïve and Manichean illustrations of Christian morality. They're very explicit, strict, and dogmatic stories. We asked ourselves if this stiff and simple way of thinking about ethics and morals is still relevant today. That question is at the heart of the performance. The narrative can be summed up in one sentence, it's the story of a sheep who wants to become human, a paradox if we see the sheep as a personification of humanity. It's actually a deep meditation about the desire to be even more human. We also chose the genre of the tale because those stories have two dimensions. In Western art history, medieval figurative art was originally in two dimensions. All characters were depicted on a single plane, on a flat surface, without any perspective of idea of depth.

**Thomas Verstraeten:** Perspective came later in art, which is also true of theatre, which used to be in two dimensions as well. In mystery plays (like the *Mystère de la Passion de Valenciennes*), all sets and locations were next to each other, visible at once, even as the scenes unfolded. We wanted to use those late-medieval formal artistic and dramatic characteristics to highlight our sheep's learning process, which is similar to that of animal tales.

**Stef Aerts:** As in a comic book, the journey is shown in two dimensions. The transition from the end of the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and the rise of gothic art represented a huge learning process. Through science and a closer reading of the Bible, people acquired a better understanding of depth and perspective, both literally- and figuratively-speaking. The Flemish Primitives, like Van Eyck or Hans Memling, used early forms of perspective. Those images were a huge influence on us. We created a very simple narrative throughline, so that the story could be the starting point of a *revue* of images, of *tableaux* and reflections. It's a succession of encounters, figures, and objects, like the processions of strange and deformed creatures you'll find in the work of Brueghel or Hieronymus Bosch.

**In your shows without dialogue, it is those powerful images that carry the narrative. Is it because they can say more than words?**

**Stef Aerts:** We like to create shows without any words, because it leaves more room for the audience to interpret them. The spectators can make them theirs and participate by projecting their own stories onto it.

**Thomas Verstraeten:** The plot is very simple and known in advance, so spectators just have to enter the world we're showing them. It also gives us a great freedom of creation.

**Stef Aerts:** We try to use images, references, and symbols with a deep anchorage in our culture and that of Western civilization over the past two centuries. It allows our audience to understand and appreciate them without having to dig too deep into the dramaturgy. We're hoping to be able to show the play to an audience. I'm sure that if there is a darkness to it, a feeling of smothering, it's because we wrote it during lockdown, which was a very strange and disconcerting moment for creation.

**Thomas Verstraeten:** It's true that it is one of our darkest shows, a reflection of the times we're living... We tried to add a bit more light and levity, but we also really need an audience to carry it.

Interview conducted by Malika Baaziz in February 2021 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cleach

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