



## ONE SONG HISTORY(IES) OF THEATRE IV

### INTERVIEW WITH MIET WARLOP

You're the fourth artist to try your hand at telling us about your *History(ies) of Theatre*.

**Miet Warlop:** The NTGent gave me the "mission" of telling my history of theatre, after Milo Rau, Faustin Linyekula, and Angélica Liddell. This project is like a long conversation that would move from one artist to another. The answers each of us brings are extremely diverse and personal. And it generates a whole spectrum of leads and possibilities to explore, but also of very large breaks and divides. Within those histories of theatre, we talk about how certain events that upended our personal lives percolate into our work as artists. It's never entirely possible to know what will appear when you start working on a play. In my particular case, my work always begins with a visual approach. I put a particular emphasis on objects, on the absurd, on humour and laughter. Even though I'm the one behind this creative process, and at certain points in our lives it's hard to separate the art from the artist, my goal is not to speak only of me. It seems obvious that our reflections and desires during the time of creation will likely be transformed. We can never be certain of what we're creating, of what we'll feel before, during, and after, even less so of how others will react... My first play, *De Sportband / Afgetrainde Klanken*, created in 2005, was a requiem for my brother. It brought together sports and music. The practice of sport as the supreme culmination of movement and music as the pinnacle of sounds and noises. The efforts of the performers on stage were an illustration of existence, the waves of energy launched by our collective and individual breathing... until inevitable exhaustion. Pain and grief were so overwhelmingly present that I felt the need to create a requiem, but today, it's a more peaceful memory. Watching the play can even be a source of joy. In *HISTORY(IES) OF THE THEATRE IV: ONE SONG*, I'm exploring the idea that my artistic practice is cyclical, that it is an ongoing process, a living research that becomes itself a character. This world I've built and which is still being built is a character in and of itself. It can look back on past events, with or without nostalgia, or even ponder that very past. I like it when the traces of the past are visible in the work in the present. That's why the metaphor used in *De Sportband* as a requiem for my brother can be read as a palimpsest in *ONE SONG*. Between those two moments in my life as an artist, there are twenty years of artistic practice and personal experiences. Those years are of course present in this play, which appears as the repetition of cycles, of a certain history of theatre...

#### **ONE SONG tells of a transformation through repetition...**

*ONE SONG* is the repetition of a single song. The play calls on a long circular movement, a movement that can be seen in all of my plays at different levels. It's a metaphorical play about all the things I want to celebrate: life, artistic practice, meetings and encounters, the collective. But even if it's my personal history of theatre, I want to tell it through a history of the collective. With *ONE SONG*, I want to show a group out of which no one rises alone. All the roles are shared fairly. It's also one of the reasons for which I'm not singing. I'm putting myself inside the group, almost undifferentiated from the others. My work these past few years has been about this collective effort to share. In moments of joy but also in moments of hardship. Using humour and image association, I try to materialise those emotions so as to "abstractise" them. *ONE SONG* is about all that at once: repetition and circularity, collective spirit, diversity, humour and exhaustion. It's a transmission of joy, of warmth, of a common pleasure that is shared in the moment of effort.

### **Can you expand on the notion of effort, present and visible on stage?**

Although the play uses stadium bleachers as its background, I didn't want to work with athletes. The musicians, for instance, show an athlete's virtuosity... I'm more interested in the sensibility of the performers than in their virtuosity. I invite them to experiment on stage, to introduce a shift in their practice. The idea is to provide a true effort together. But that effort has more to do with the senses than with technicality. And so the violinist finds herself on a beam, like a gymnast. She tries to find a new balance in a situation that takes her out of her comfort zone. What I'm trying to question is our deep need to express ourselves and to communicate. It's a metaphor: the uncertainty we often face is a (un)balancing act between our will to understand and our desire to be understood.

### **You're also telling a certain story of the collective.**

The play is set in a sports club where a group is setting up their instruments for a concert. Just like in a gymnasium, there are mats on the floor, and a small platform that plays the role of social sculpture. On one side, the seated audience yells its joy but also its disapproval, and facing them, the musicians perform their show. Among the members of this small audience stands a sportscaster who analyses this match/concert. Several groups are thus brought together. *ONE SONG* tells how energy passes from one to the other and how. You have a group of five musicians who are creating, playing, and singing their song while also providing a physical performance; there's the cheerleader who gives her energy to support the musicians and the sportscaster, but whom no one encourages in return. She gives everything and receives nothing. The people in the bleachers are voyeurs who drive the athletes/artists to go beyond their limits, sometimes to the breaking point, and are never satisfied. They are like puppeteers dictating the effort to provide and the risks to take, who go so far as to experience moments of intense negativity and manic depression, sometimes to the point of violence, against those they claim to support. The sportscaster becomes a spokesman for all that we think but cannot say. The torments of human desire are shown as if they had been anatomically dissected. The stage of *ONE SONG* is like a miniature society, where all the acts and desires that govern the principles of the collective can be exorcised, even ritualised. What I want is for the energy that explodes on stage to transcend the border between the stage and the room and for the exorcising character of the repetition of a gesture or a feeling to be projected onto and shared among the spectators.

### **This concert is made up of a single song, which is deconstructed from all possible angles.**

When asked to produce my history of theatre, my answer can only find its source in that requiem begun in 2005. That play has become "eternal" in my artistic practice. I'm always coming back to it, reassessing it, transforming it. Past work meets future work in the present of *ONE SONG*. The moment in which music became a part of my so-far visual work was groundbreaking for me. Before that, my works had no sonic dimension at all, and all of a sudden I allowed myself to do away with silence. I work on words as if they were a sculpture. Their existence isn't only horizontal, like a speech from a character to the audience; they're part of a song and take on a third dimension, at once vertical and circular. I'm working on the way words vibrate and resonate. *ONE SONG* is a race against time which sees us ceaselessly repeating a song composed for the occasion by Maarten Van Cauwenberghe. On stage, it's all about going on and on and on, even if it means reaching a point of physical and moral exhaustion and risking failure. The idea is to try again and again, to begin again differently each time. Just like in life. Given that I've taken the time to question my own artistic practice, I of course have my own personal point of view, but I'm also taking into account the different ways in which we're all linked together. I like to explore "my" history of theatre by contrasting it with that which came before me. My projects do not exist in a vacuum, they're part of a chain reaction. I explore lines of thought and action that offset each other, and I add new images to keep everything moving. I'd say that I'm always exploring my existential solitude, and I celebrate the presence of the other just like I mourn their absence. All of that collectively, with the performers and the audience. Always.

Interview conducted by Moïra Dalant