

TRUCKSTOP

A mother who manages a trucker bar, her delicate daughter, and a young lost soul of a truck driver: such are the three characters of *Truckstop*, who all seem to be struggling to escape a world of mud. The work of Dutch playwright Lot Vekemans, *Truckstop* is an intimate and claustrophobic play, as well as desperately relevant. The consequences of globalisation, the worries caused by our capitalist system, the dehumanising effect of work are all part of the subtext. Stuck in their lives as much as in their heads, the protagonists reveal themselves little by little, piece by piece. For if *Truckstop* is the hyperrealist crossroads of the free market, this anonymous and unattractive zone that nonetheless inspires powerful fantasies, it is also a place where it is hard to be heard, to exist in a “continuous” state. With no clear timeline and no literal sense to be found, the play is a puzzle that, through both form and content, holds both characters and audience in its thrall, but it is also a police procedural that Arnaud Meunier has chosen to tell as a tragedy in reverse. Just like the youth to which he wants to speak, every character is lost within his or her own quest for an ideal. “I like the gap that exists between what we’re hoping for and what actually happens. This great riddle of adolescence, torn between one’s expectations and anxieties at what one will become.”

ARNAUD MEUNIER

In 2011, Arnaud Meunier became director of the Comédie de Saint-Étienne and its École supérieure d’art dramatique, putting both artistic creation and the transmission of knowledge at the forefront of his project: dialogue between different aesthetics and different generations, new forms of scenic writing, the discovery of new authors, the presence of artists year round, the opening of the space of the theatre to the public are its main axes. After graduating from college with a degree in political science, Arnaud Meunier founded the Compagnie de la Mauvaise Graine in 1997. First noticed at the Festival d’Avignon in 1998, they were offered a residency at the Forum de Blanc-Mesnil, in Seine-Saint-Denis, thanks to the support of the Théâtre Gérard Philipe and its director, Stanislas Nordey. A lover of contemporary theatre, Arnaud Meunier has directed plays by Eddy Pallaro, Michel Vinaver, Oriza Hirata, or Stefano Massini. Lehman Trilogy, written by Massini, received the Grand prix du Syndicat de la critique in 2014, after being nominated for a Molière. In 2015, he directed Bernard-Marie Koltès’s *Return to the Desert*. He has also worked for the opera, has a director and dramatist. In January 2017, he will direct Stefano Massini’s latest play, *CreCenUnSolDéu (I Believe in One God Alone)*.

LOT VEKEMANS

Lot Vekemans studied social geography at the University of Utrecht, before attending the writing school ‘t Colofon, in Amsterdam. Since 1997, she has written plays for both children and adults. In 2005, she received the Van der Vries award (awarded every three years to the best play written in that time period) for *Truckstop* and *Zus Van (Sister Of)*. Both plays were published in French by Éditions espaces 34, under the titles *Truckstop* and *Soeur de*. In 2010, *Gif (Poison)* was awarded the Taalunie Toneelschrijfprijs in the Netherlands, before being translated into French. Arnaud Meunier talks about his encounter with the Dutch playwright, whose texts feel realer than real, as self-evident.

INTERVIEW WITH ARNAUD MEUNIER

Most of the plays you've directed were written by contemporary authors. Do you think that says a lot about your theatre?

Arnaud Meunier: Over the past 18 years, I have only directed two classics, and mostly directed texts by living writers. It's a question of personal tastes; I find contemporary writing to be a space of innovation. There's still this outdated idea that textual creation and non-textual creation are to be opposed, when writing is a space of dramatic innovation as well. Federico Garcia Lorca once said that theatre should reflect the preoccupations of society at large: I agree with that wholeheartedly. The classics can't directly comment on the financial crisis, on the refugee crisis... I think we have to leave behind those great, universal themes, and it seems obvious to me that today's theatre will be tomorrow's classics. Koltès is a great example. That's the project I've been defending for the past five years, as director of the Comédie de Saint-Etienne; we produce the most shows by living writers among all French theatres. My role as a director is to give the text to hear as clearly as possible, because it is through texts, and thanks to the poets, that emotion arises. That's what happens with Lot Vekemans. A couple of coincidences led me to her *Truckstop*. Something about the text grabbed me right away. The three actors who perform it were obvious choices to me.

Your version of *Truckstop* is intended for a teenage audience. Do you think that implies a different directorial style?

I identify with Olivier Py's desire for the Festival d'Avignon to be about popular theatre, to offer shows aimed at young audiences. There's always been a reflection about new audiences in France: youths, college students, etc. And if we're talking about creation, I think it's important that we start building a real repertoire of plays aimed at teenagers, and more specifically those in secondary school, because it is a period that is, by essence, more complicated. Of course, one can show teenagers any kind of play, but it is clear that certain themes and questions speak to them more strongly – the question of death, for instance. Teenagers need to be challenged, on an emotional level. It's a time in one's life to shape one's opinion, to find one's *raison d'être*. I didn't change the way I work when directing *Truckstop*; the play itself is this powerful material I need. The dramaturgy is unconventional, fragmented. At first, you don't necessarily understand what's going on, and then the scenes start to add up and come together; it takes shape little by little, like a puzzle. There's a lamp that breaks at the beginning of the play, that's the idea. I think it's the kind of narrative conceit that attracts teenagers. It reminds me of the movies of Mexican director Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu, who weaves together different narrative strands. Lot Vekemans's writing is at once cinematic and theatrical. She leaves nothing to chance: things happen at once in real time and in a "fragmented," discontinuous time.

Do you use this cinematic language to direct this play set in a closed space, between immobility and tiny, unpredictable events, between (hyper)realism and this weird version of reality?

That's exactly what's at stake here: we have to create a powerful and realistic space which is neither formal nor cold, while establishing a distance. The narrative choices lead to some mystery, to something not quite normal. With scenographer Nicolas Marie, we've used the work of Hans Op de Beek as an inspiration; his gray plastic installations that look almost like concrete, in which he puts unadorned people. The space has to be realistic: you have to show this trucker bar, but also this "two-inch gap," as Japanese writer Oriza Hirata would put it. That space is a backdrop against which you can tell this detective story; the audience is kept on the edge of their seats because they're intrigued by what's happening onstage. It is first and foremost a theatre of words, in which a story is told by the characters. That's what I love in the theatre, be it Pasolini's, or Vinaver's, or Stefano Massini's: this celebration of words, of the power of words. To find out how different writers from all over the world will make theirs a story is particularly fascinating.

Would you say that Lot Vekemans's writing makes you see the world differently? That that different vision is due not only to her nationality and culture, but also to her time?

I like it when the theatre finds the intersection between politics and poetics. Political theatre, when it is didactic, bores me. I belong to the post-Brechtian generation of directors; it's a generation defined by its relationship to complexity. We're the children of the recession, of the first oil crisis, questioning a world that has become considerably more complex. The aim of the theatre is no longer to free the masses but to make the individual question his relationship to the collective. That's where the power of the theatre resides. What's particularly beautiful in *Truckstop* is the backdrop of the play, at the crossroads of globalisation. The play tells us of the daily work of truckers who drive their cargo all over the world, of the way their habits have changed. But it's also implicitly about how globalisation dehumanises relationships between people. That's where Lot Vekemans gives her characters a place of hope, a space they can use as a springboard to imagine a better future. It's a detective story, a fantasy, but the play is really about the gap between what we hope for and what actually happens. It's one of the main themes of adolescence: those expectations and anxieties about what we'll become. Those three characters are weak in very human ways, you can easily identify with them. They dream of a better world, of escaping the banality of their lives. The young ones are looking for an ideal, while the mother tries to make the real better in a concrete way. This sort of negative space – a trucker bar on the side of the road – inspires powerful fantasies. It's a European play; the writer is Dutch, it's set in the heart of Europe. The chickens are bred in Germany, the vegetables grown in Portugal, they're all going to Belgium... Truck drivers from all over Europe cross paths here, at the Truckstop, but they never really meet. The play alludes to the fierce competition that hurts mom-and-pop stores; Europe is first and foremost a market, and the quality of life is going down, the work of normal people devalued. We question our relationship to work, and the way it's becoming less and less human. This quest for ideal comes crashing down when confronted with the reality of a world that's getting ever more violent, atomised, individualistic. The ancient Greeks would talk of fatality.

There are two forms of writing in *Truckstop*: one is direct and takes the form of dialogues – the action – and the other that of a distanced narration, in which the characters reflect on what they're living as they're living it. How did you work on this doubled speech?

Truckstop is a space for metaphysics, an existentialist location. The ability to live and reflect on an event all at once is a narrative conceit that teenagers often find fascinating. It's about who you are and who you'd want to be. I think it makes the story both more emotional and more powerful. My work draws its strength from the uncertainties of reality, those moments where something spins out of control. The play is a closed-room mystery and a detective story: something happened, and we try to understand what exactly, how, and why. We're intrigued. Without being at the forefront, this idea of mystery is key if you want to understand the way the story unfolds. There are different levels of interpretation. The direction and the way we deal with the space of the play allow for a lot of suspense, without limiting the audience's imagination. The scenography anchors the story in a realistic, standardised location, while playing with that underlying and fascinating strangeness.

As a theatregoer, I like to be allowed to travel on my own within a proposition, so I make sure that the direction doesn't double down on the text too strongly. I like a playful style, to have the audience have fun piecing hints together, to surprise them with different possible interpretations. The question of pleasure is essential, whatever its source.

AND...

YOUNG AUDIENCE SHOWS

Straight to the Heart by Thierry Thieû Niang, from July 15 to 17 at 16:00 at the église des Célestins, and from July 21 to 23 at 19:00 at the Collection Lambert *Of imagination* by Clara Le Picard, from July 19 to 23, at 11:00 and 15:00, Chapelle des Pénitents blancs

WORKSHOPS OF THOUGHT

Performing arts : what place for youth ? With in particular Arnaud Meunier, July 14 at 15:00, Louis Pasteur campus of the University

CINEMATOGRAPHIC TERRITORIES

Films for younger audiences and animation workshops
Utopia-Manutention from July 6 to 24

THE YOUNG SPECTATOR'S GUIDE AND VISITS FOR THE FAMILIES

Booking +33 (0)4 90 14 14 14 / visitejeunesse@festival-avignon.com

TOUR DATES OF *TRUCKSTOP* AFTER THE FESTIVAL

- February 7 to 11, 2017 at the Comédie de Saint-Étienne Centre dramatique national
- March 8 to 10 at Théâtre Nouvelle Génération, Centre dramatique national de Lyon
- March 14 to 17, at the Comédie de Béthune Centre dramatique national Nord - Pas de Calais - Picardie
- May 4 to 6 at the Préau Centre dramatique Normandie de Vire

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