



# HUIS

## INTERVIEW WITH JOSSE DE PAUW & JAN KUIJKEN

**HUIS, which you are presenting at the Festival d'Avignon, is part of a genre people often call musical theatre. Do you agree with that label? Why did you want to associate music to dramatic forms?**

Josse De Pauw: I've never made a conscious choice to belong to a particular group or category. I've always been interested in music, whose language is different from that of literature. I envy musicians, who have this language that hasn't been dirtied by everyday life, that doesn't need to be re-explained, reinvented, like words do. The freedom and focus of musicians move me. When I'm on stage with them, I feel more awake. I get the feeling that I can just let the words do their job; I'm no longer focused on what they mean. The clarity and vital force musicians bring to a show is invaluable.

Jan Kuijken: Thinking about a project in which music is part of a larger whole, along with other disciplines, is something I find fascinating. I can never wait for the concrete work of rehearsals, of representations. I think working with the theatre creates a fundamental difference. I don't have any predetermined rules or laws, only the awareness that music needs to work within a larger whole. Theatre is by nature ephemeral, it happens here and now, you can't rewind it. In that setting, I prefer music to express direct emotions that can move even the people who don't know anything about music. I like to be efficient: my goal is to create what I want to make the audience feel in an efficient way, without too much parasite noise. This kind of show requires from us flexibility and empathy. I keep watching and listening. If a scene works better on its own, without any music, I never hesitate to leave it alone! I learnt to compose on my own, by doing. I usually work by intuition.

**You've worked together for several years. How did that come about? Did the idea of combining music and texts in your shows seem obvious right away?**

J.K.: We've known each other for a very long time. In the 1990s, we often ran into each other in the Brussels nightlife and really wanted to work together. Our first collaboration, in 2004, was *The Soul of Termites*.

J.D.P.: The first shows I took part in in the 1970s, with the Radeis collective—which, by the way, we presented in the courtyard of the Cloître des Célestins in 1980—were sometimes devoid of any word. What we did wasn't exactly mime, but we were part of what I would call "Belgian absurdism." We used to come up with outdoor interventions. It was a theatre of bodies, of music, and most of all of silence. We thought at the very beginning that street shows should have a certain velocity, that we needed to be noisy if we wanted to be heard. But soon we realised that we had to play very slowly to draw the attention of this ever-moving audience, and we understood that the city had a music of its own and that we had to play with it.

J.K.: What is unique about working with Josse is that we come up with a new method for each new show. For *HUIS*, our fourth show together, we have for the first time chosen two existing dramatic texts. Josse loves music, and he has something that's rare: trust. A collaboration like this one brings a lot of freedom, but also of responsibility.

**In *HUIS*, the musicians aren't on the stage. Does that have anything to do with the show's structure, which is made up of two different texts?**

J.D.P.: Jan wanted to compose a music that would be played by an orchestra, and for technical and financial reason, we couldn't get a formation that big on the stage. We had to record the music in a studio and eventually found how we were going to use it through cinema. In cinema, music often plays a narrative role, it serves to announce important moments and effects. I organised the direction around this constraint. But Jan will be there, since he will be mixing the music live for each show.

J.K.: It is true that we don't work the same way for both texts. For the first part, *The Strange Rider*, I wrote some music that's supposed to be played sometimes between the texts, and sometimes under them. The idea is for the actors to find their place on the music. By composing for a symphonic orchestra, we were able to work on more sweeping sounds. The fact that Michel de Ghelderode also wrote plays for puppets was a source of inspiration. Josse often talks about the idea of making something bigger until it becomes almost grotesque. Of course, writing the music of a movie that doesn't exist (yet) is a strange experience. We wonder how it will work exactly, what will happen. For the second text, *The Women at the Tomb*, I wrote blindly. By which I mean that I wrote bits and pieces, without knowing where they would be used, or if they would be used at all. We'll place the music under and around the performance of the actresses. We are thinking about having them sing as well, and are building a library of sound effects we may or may not end up using.

**You talk of cinema. Will there be other references in the direction?**

J.D.P.: Yes, especially in the lighting, by Enrico Bagnoli, who's worked a lot with Guy Cassiers. Lights and music

should create the world in which the action will take place, before the actors take charge of the text. Then we'll alternate between scenes I want to be cinematographic and moments of pure theatricality. But there will be no video, no film. Greta Goiris, who is in charge of the costumes, will look to ancient pictorial representations for inspiration, without forgetting that we're playing today. I don't want it to look as if we'd picked a specific time period, because what matters is the actors' bodies. The lighting and costumes should make us feel the great age of those bodies, without falling into exhibitionism. I want this to be a poor and simple theatre, with theatrical means. The theatre I love is a theatre of actors, of companies. I love the brotherhood that arises from working together.

**HUIS is a show made up of two parts, two plays by Michel de Ghelderode: *The Strange Rider* and *The Women at the Tomb*. Why did you choose this author who has been somewhat forgotten, especially in France, and why did you choose to work on two plays at once?**

J.D.P.: As a Fleming, I like Michel de Ghelderode's writing, in French, because it can easily be translated to Flemish. His world and his language, with its archaic words, its no-nonsense toughness, allow me to immediately relate to his work. I also like his interest in puppets. He defined himself as a French-speaking Flemish writer. The Flanders he loved was a mythical place. The two plays we chose have a common theme: death, and the fact that their characters are trapped in a closed space in which they're hiding. "Huis" means "house" in Flemish, "door" in French. In *The Strange Rider*, six old men are gathered in a room, waiting for a rider they all understand to be death. At first full of swagger, they progressively grow more and more anxious until they realise that the rider has come for a child and that they can celebrate. I think the child here stands for Jesus, as is so often the case in Michel de Ghelderode's plays. As for the second play, which I partially rewrote, it only features women. They gather around the Virgin Mary the day after the crucifixion and speak about their relationship with Jesus. To use a modern word, I think Jesus is an idol for those women. He speaks differently from others, he is handsome... We must feel their enthusiasm, their admiration. All the dreams they projected onto him shatter on the cross. This discussion/competition ends with everyone falling asleep. Between the two plays, there will be a sort of sound and light show, which I called "Golgotha," after the hill on which Christ died. What unites those two plays is the indifference of people who talk a lot, who have opinions on everything but who, in the end, don't do anything out of fear and distress. This analysis, which applies to Europe today, I can try to dramatise it because I am not otherwise politically engaged as a man of theatre, and because the world of Michel de Ghelderode allows me to talk about today through the theatre. But I don't want to become entangled in direct political engagements, with their political language. My only engagement, as an artist as well, is the fact that I'm Belgian, standing outside of linguistic and territorial conflict. I play in both French and Flemish, in Flanders, in Wallonia, and in Brussels. I know some may not like that, but I'm Belgian.

***The Strange Rider* is a play for actors, *The Women at the Tomb* for actresses...**

J.D.P.: *The Strange Rider* will be played by six actors. I'll play the watchman, and I've found the other actors in amateur companies, of which there are many in Belgium. I chose them for their presence on stage, because Michel de Ghelderode's text doesn't rely on psychology. He wrote it as a sort of "sketch" in his body of work, a joke. I would really like for the translation of the text to give to hear different Flemish patois, which are numerous in Flanders. We'll have to find a language whose musicality is in harmony with Jan's music. *The Women at the Tomb* will be played by nine professional actresses of varying ages, who will also have to sing. I asked Jan to write songs for those actresses' voices, for human voices, not for lyric singers. But the men of the first part are still there, like potential threats to those hidden women. What I want is for there to be parts that are said and parts that are sung, but for them to be able to coexist at the same time. For instance, a dialogue between two actresses wouldn't prevent the others from continuing to sing. Maybe it would sound like lamentations.

**Is there a strong Catholic influence on those two plays?**

J.D.P.: I think that, like me, Michel de Ghelderode had an ambivalent relationship to Catholicism. On the one hand he was raised in a religion that tells all those beautiful biblical stories; on the other the faith and practices that come with it are sort of dissolving. But those biblical characters, Martha, Mary, Veronica, Magdalena, are mostly empty of meaning today, we can give them the meaning we want. That is what I did by rewriting parts of the play, with the permission of Michel de Ghelderode's heirs.

Interview conducted by Jean-François Perrier.