



AN OLD MONK

INTERVIEW WITH JOSSE DE PAUW AND KRIS DEFOORT

How did this show come about?

Josse De Pauw: It started when I was diagnosed with diabetes, which made me realise I was getting old. To heal, I felt that I needed to do something artistic based on this new situation. Since Kris Defoort and I share an admiration for Thelonious Monk, and that we liked the pun on his last name, we decided to build our show on this double meaning. Thelonious Monk for the music, the old, lonely monk for the text... I started writing very quickly, we had one work session with Kris, and immediately the words and notes seemed to be in harmony.

Kris Defoort, you're a musician and composer. If you don't seem to belong to any specific movement, you seem to have a strong attachment to "words."

Kris Defoort: Yes, I love literature. I read a lot, and words are often a source of inspiration when I write music. I just finished a piece for orchestra, which was commissioned by the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam; it was really hard, since I didn't have a text to help me. Up until now, musical theatre was for me a way to tell a story with music that wouldn't be just illustrative. I'm free; I'm a jazz musician, an improviser. I'm interested in all kinds of music, the music of today, the trends of today, but I don't belong to any specific school. I'm very curious by nature, so when I hear something that intrigues me, musically speaking, I look for the score and analyse it. I don't read music theory, though. What inspires me is sounds, I incorporate all those different influences into my own world. The fact that I didn't study composition in a conservatory but was self-taught instead is probably a source of great freedom.

For *An Old Monk*, did you look to Thelonious Monk's themes for inspiration?

K.D.: Yes, and those familiar with them will be able to recognise them. Of course, they've been modified, transformed. And since we improvise every night, we add our own compositions. Two other musicians accompany us. Lander Gyselinck is a drummer, Nicolas Thys plays bass; they very quickly entered this world of words and notes. During rehearsals, their propositions helped build the show.

J.D.P.: And if the text doesn't change based on the music, it is said differently every time. It has to enter the music, not always at the same time, not always in the same way. After each show we talk about what happened on stage. We make changes based on what we felt on stage, on the accuracy of this or that shared moment, or on the discomfort we might have felt at some other point. The four of us have developed a common language together, a language that makes me a musician. I think it's the freedom that jazz brings that allows this harmony that doesn't flatten personalities, but instead enriches them when they come into contact with one another. We improvise together, and I'm flattered that the musicians now consider me as one of them. The group is always a support for the soloist, be he musician or actor.

K.D.: On stage, we listen to Josse De Pauw, and we have to react very quickly, to keep together the harmonic frame of the show which tells us where we're going. That being said, we can sometimes slow down a little to be in symbiosis with the actor and with the rhythm of the text.

In your show, the actor does more than just recite the text, he's also a dancer, a body almost always in movement. Is the text fixed? Are your movements?

J.D.P.: The work of the body is improvisation. But since we've been playing the show for a while, we've developed our own body language. There's a fixed path, with places on the stage where I have to be, but once there I'm free to do whatever I want. And I love dancing. There's a joy to moving to music. There's a joy to losing the meaning of a text and just throwing the words onto the music. That being said, when I'm sitting, or when I go towards the audience, the text has all my attention.

K.D.: What brings us together is also this taste for imperfection, for improvisation, which brings life to the show.

J.D.P.: But if I wrote the text for me, I've always refused to publish it. I think that to read that text in a book would be a little like reading the words of those pop songs that sound so enchanting when we listen to them and seem sometimes a little insipid when we read the lyrics.

K.D.: The texts were written to be put to music. It's the only context in which they exist.

J.D.P.: This is why I speak of dramatic concerts.

There's a very clear relationship between your feelings and the character; the music sometimes seem to make him tired, sometimes to give him energy.

J.D.P.: I feel all of that, in a very strong way. I don't pretend to be tired, I don't pretend to feel fine. I'm not trying to express feelings, but to live them on the stage. The music moves me from one stage to the next. That's why I wait



a little before entering the stage at the beginning of the show. What comes first is the musical improvisation, different from one night to the next, which I listen to from behind a curtain and which determines how I'll enter the stage, and what my first dance will be like. I like the idea that the audience can see my feet moving before they see me.

K.D.: It's true that we don't make Josse De Pauw's work easy. We take risks, and so does he. We're demanding towards him, just like he is towards us.

Your character says "I" just as much as "he." Are those on equal footing? Isn't one more powerful than the other?

J.D.P.: I've always loved playing with this uncertainty, with "I" and "he." I have the freedom to be an actor and/or a storyteller, which lets me go very far with this character, to play with the idea of distance, to be at once very sincere and to look at that sincerity from the outside. It allows me sometimes to be just another member of the audience, to get closer to them. It's the case with the photographs of me that are projected on stage. They were shot by a friend of mine, Bache Jaspers, long before we even thought of *An Old Monk*, for a show that never happened. They are therefore disconnected from the show and are *a priori* not connected to the text I wrote. Yet they tell the story of my life. They're me and they talk about my body, naked, aging. But I didn't want them to be a source of nostalgia, so we had painter Benoît van Innis work on them. I can also serve as a guide for the audience when it comes to how they perceive those photographs, since I can comment them live. It's the same thing with the show's title: it's me and it's not me. It came to me when I saw my friends turn fifty. Some just stopped evolving, imagining, creating, while others began to grow anxious at the thought of death. But I believe death is one of the engines of life. You need to resist it with humour, a humour I try to share with the audience; it's actually the first time I've played with the audience like that, that I've talked to them, asked them for help. Usually I hate that, but jazz encouraged me to establish this relationship, this very strong form of physical communication, just like Thelonious Monk used to do. Humour brings levity to what could otherwise seem overbearing. I like feeling the audience slowly enter this world and become a partner. What most surprised me was how the show could touch young audiences when it is, if not about old age, at least about the way time flows.

K.D.: Sometimes the audience will be reserved, not laugh much, and the show will become melancholy. Sometimes they will be more demonstrative and it will become lighter, more luminous. Yet the text is the same.

You quote Thelonious Monk: "Don't play what the public want, play what you want and let the public pick up on what you doing." Could this be your motto?

J.D.P.: It is my motto, because I think artists all too often underestimate the intelligence of the public. I've only ever done shows I wanted to do. *An Old Monk* is the perfect example. It wasn't a sure thing, this kind of music isn't obvious, it was hard to make it heard.

Interview conducted by Jean-François Perrier.

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