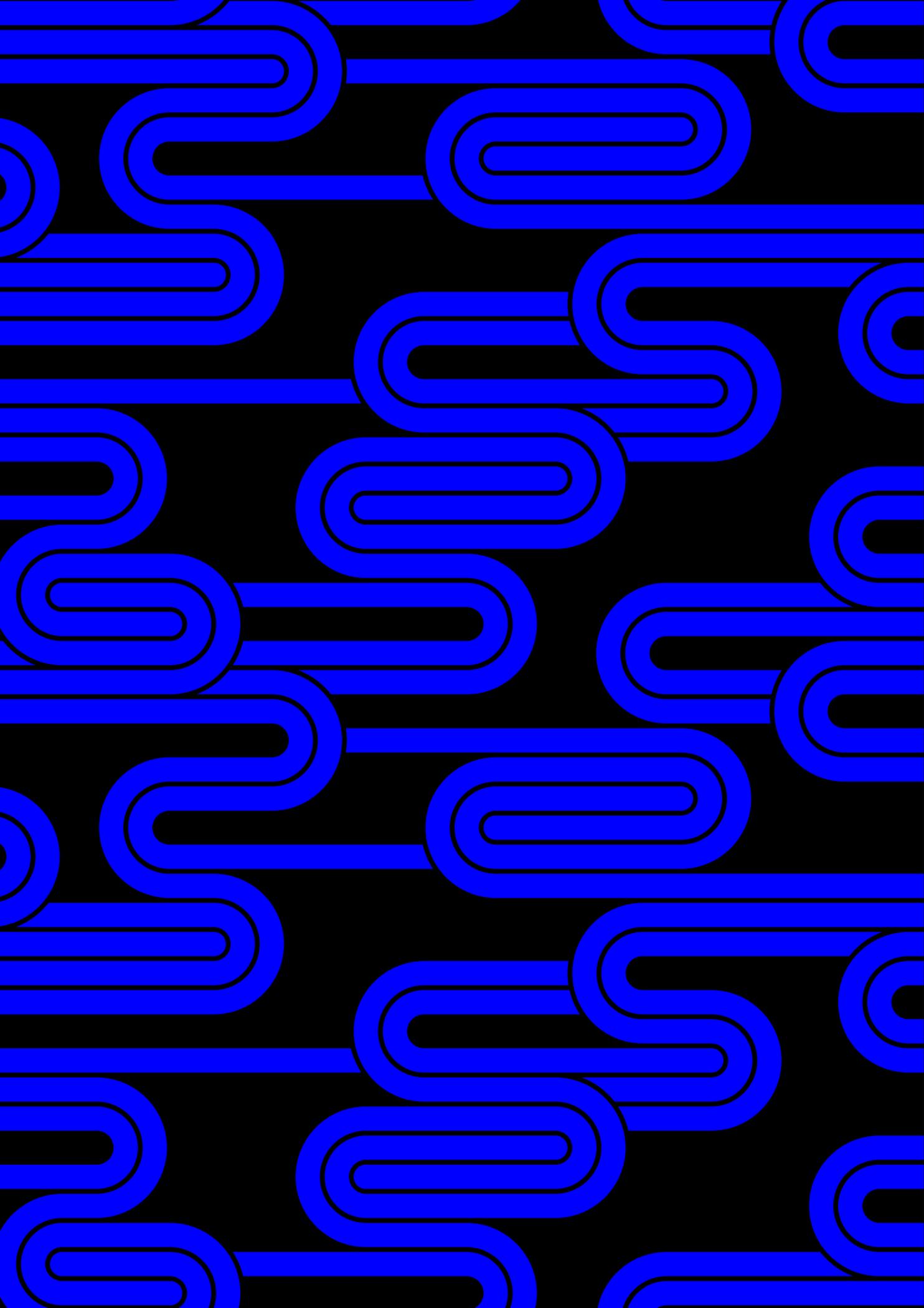


Taming the wild beast

an Interview with the Belgian
Theatre Collective FC Bergman

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‘Our performances are wild beasts that need to be tamed.’ Talking are actors, artists, and makers Stef Aerts, Joé Agemans, Thomas Verstraeten, and Marie Vinck, who make up the relatively young Belgian theatre collective FC Bergman. Indeed, their larger-than-life productions consist of ambitious scenographic installations in which visual voluptuousness gilts stories of ever struggling and stumbling human beings. In this interview, we ask them about their inspirations, their creative processes, and their work as a collective in an increasingly individualised theatre landscape.

The four members and theatre scholars Hanne Roofthoof and Edith Cassiers meet at a time when, because of the SARS-Covid-19 pandemic, all the theatre houses are closed. Nonetheless, behind the closed doors of Toneelhuis, the Antwerp municipal theatre that FC Bergman is affiliated to, something is stirring on stage. FC Bergman presented their new performance, The Sheep Song, there a few days before this interview — not to a public audience, but rather to a handful of staff members. The performance is finished (insofar as a performance can ever be finished) and is ready to be shown to the public as soon as live shows become possible once more.

How did the ghost premiere of The Sheep Song go?

We have long thought that the audience doesn't matter that much to us. By premiering *The Sheep Song* in front of about five people in the theatre, we were suddenly struck by the impact of the lack of an audience. An audience creates the feeling of a collective experience. It is the happening, the tension of whether or not something is going to happen that you experience together. The near total absence of an audience created a very depressed feeling. You are confronted with the fact that you make a performance for the sake of communication. When there is no audience, that communication is left vacant — it's a dead thing. You want to communicate in the most direct way, not through chat rooms or other means of digital theatre. You want the gasps; you want the laughs. As much as you can create many things with film, you cannot have that.

In theory, you could communicate with an audience of just one person in a room but a small audience didn't work with *The Sheep Song*. Maybe our images are too big to show them to so few people. Maybe just 'ordinary' isn't good enough for our performance. Maybe our work requires a two-way dialogue. The narration and dialogue you have with the audience is a conversation you have with society. You want to interact with a society.

What does a creative process look like for you? Are there constants in such a creative process?

Our creative process is always different with each project, but there is a basic pattern. This pattern applies to the performances that do not originate from a text. The few performances that did originate from text, such as *JR* (2018), *Van den vos (About Reynard the Fox)*, (2013), and our opera *Les Pêcheurs de perles* (2018) were made differently.

Most of our (modest) oeuvre, however, is textless. We usually start from an idea, a few dramaturgical thoughts. At first this is not a conclusive dramaturgical idea, but rather an idea of what we want to talk about. Usually by then there is a book, an image, or an idea around which thoughts are formulated. We ask ourselves why this appeals to us and why we want to talk about it. A first idea for the form that the performance might take usually follows fairly quickly. This conceptual form will transform and evolve over the course of time and will set all the rest of the process in motion.

With *300 el x 50 el x 30 el* (2011), the initial idea was the biblical story of Noah's ark and a series of paintings by Belgian artist Michaël Borremans, who was much less well-known at the time. We wanted to create a performance around the myth of the Genesis Flood. Why and how, we didn't quite know at the time. However, as we talked it through, the form caught up with us. The form pushes the whole idea a lot further. Allowing the form to guide and even overtake us is the only constant you can detect in our creative process.

In the beginning with *Terminator Trilogie (Terminator Trilogy)*, (2012), there was only a title. We really liked the title and had the belief that we would do something in relation to the Terminator films. After all, Arnold Schwarzenegger has been an incredible figure. We discarded the idea of the films pretty quickly but kept the title. We asked ourselves: Why do we like that title so much? Why is Schwarzenegger such an icon? Pretty quickly, we had a few ideas for the form that brought with them new topics of conversation. The location played an important role. The piece is about emptiness, about depression, so we decided to perform it on a gigantic parking lot in the Antwerp harbor. There you have emptiness, but also a kind of defencelessness against the elements around you — which would become a common thread throughout the performance. The form is so emphatic, so all-pervading, that it drives the performance forward. We just have to follow.

We often describe our performances as wild beasts that need to be tamed. Every performance is a beast that we run after: a beast that actually wants to tell its own story, that sends us further and deeper into its belly.

However, we shouldn't pretend that we had a clear method and vision from the beginning. There are many decisions that didn't come from a well-worn idea, but are taken intuitively. Our first performance, *De Rotsebreker* (2007), was actually a very political play that explored the life and work of Leopold II. Yet we didn't care about politics... We started with a list of images as a reaction against the acting course we were taking together. We saw an old ship and started working on what we could do with it. That was absolutely against what we had learnt at school (*the former 'Studio Herman Teirlinck', in Antwerp, eds.*) where all dramaturgy had to come from the text. All our earlier works had a text, but we hardly read it, let alone built a conclusive dramaturgy around it. We used the text as an excuse. We wanted to make something that came from the gut and was very visual. We only really started making theatre with *Voorproef op fragmenten van een nieuwe wereld (A preview on fragments of a new world, 2008)* — a one-time small performance that had a kind of dramaturgy and a form with the early Bergman stamp. For the first time, everything was driven by the visual dramaturgy.

The 'form' is characterised by large-scale scenographic installations, often bursting out of their seams. Both actor and spectator seem to drown in the visual exuberance and magnitude of your landscapes. This scenographic ambition often leads to projects on location. What drives this love for working on location? What role does the location play in your creative processes?

Location often gives direction to our performances. This was especially true in our earlier work. For example, with *Wandelen op de Champs-Élysées met een schildpad om de wereld beter te kunnen bekijken, maar het is moeilijk thee drinken op een ijsschots als iedereen dronken is (Walking down*

the Champs-Élysées with a tortoise to get a better view of the world, but it is hard to drink tea on an ice floe when everyone is drunk, 2009) we adjusted the performance to each location where we performed. The performance was completely adapted to the location where it was shown.

The creative process of *Het Land Nod (The Land of Nod, 2015)* began with a location. We wanted to create a production around a location and started looking for one. We fell in love with the Rubens' Gallery at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts (*in Antwerp, eds.*) — an enormous room that had to be built around the gigantic paintings of Pieter Paul Rubens and was then closed for renovations. We asked ourselves why we were so drawn to this immense room that almost looked like a ship, why we wanted to tell a story from this location. The ruined Rubens room gave us the idea that a space can have some kind of life of its own. And if a space can be a character, we can tell the life story of that space. That idea formed the basis of the whole performance *The Land of Nod*.

After the location project of *Terminator Trilogy*, we started bringing the location inside or building the locations ourselves. Sometimes exact copies of existing spaces, such as in *The Land of Nod*. When you entered this exact copy of the majestic Rubens' Gallery in an actual theatre, you were immediately transported to a new reality. For *Van den vos*, we created a new, imaginary space. For *ƒR*, we built a gigantic set that didn't fit inside the theatres. It was a so-called 'location project' but really we just looked for a location with enough space to place it.

The process of going from location scouting to building locations ourselves has been a very organic, and at the same time very profound, transformation in our work. We create places that you could get lost in. Our characters always have to compete with the spaces they end up in, large spaces in which they are terrifyingly small.

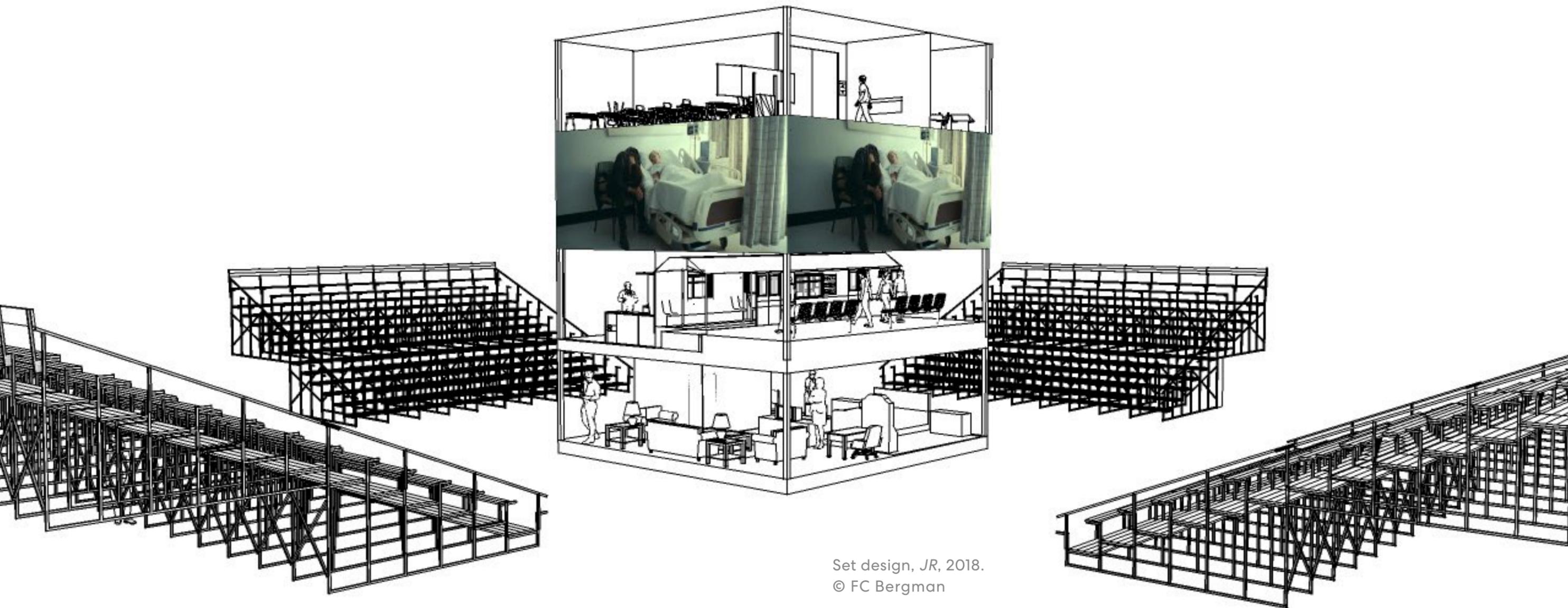


The Land of Nod, 2015
© Kurt van der Elst

Through the sheer size and complex construction of your monumental sets, the audience is invited to reflect on the boundaries of the stage, of the theatre hall, and thus of the theatrical arts in general. Is this theatre? How is this theatre? The (im)possibilities of the theatrical experience are augmented. Is this a conscious choice or does it flow organically from the form of your performances?

We always try to build our sets so that the audience automatically participates in the form and therefore in the narrative. Like the characters, the audience needs to find ways to relate to the sometimes-intimidating spaces. This became especially clear with the tower that we built for *JR*.

The basic idea of *JR* is that people lose themselves in an excess of communication, an excess of information. The audience found themselves in the same situation, as they were only able to see one side of the tower. They couldn't see from all sides at once. Thus, they received only a small piece of all the information that was there to see. We tried to create the same experience for the audience as for the characters, in an almost physical way. This is something we hope to make our main characters and audience share: a sense of being lost, a futile attempt to sustain and secure yourself in a too large space. Without becoming participatory theatre, the audience becomes part of the performance.



Set design, *JR*, 2018.
© FC Bergman

We look for a hyper-theatricality, for something that goes beyond the boundaries of theatre. This inevitably brings you to the point where you start accentuating those boundaries. We show that this is not enough, that things will have to go further. This is the attempt we make. In a way, we always try to break through the physical boundaries of theatre. Not for the sake of breaking through but to lead or guide the viewer's gaze as far as possible, as if there is always some part of the form that we have not reached or that we cannot show.

You want to create an infinite gaze but some staged performances create the impression that the spectator's gaze is actually confined. For example, in Van den vos, you could not look behind the glass wall and in 300 el x 50 el x 30 el you had no direct view into the houses but rather had to rely on the camera. What is the role of the camera in your performances?

With *Van den vos*, we blocked off the audience's view with a giant glass wall. However, behind it the scene continued. The end of the fern forest behind the glass could not be seen. Through the glass wall we jumped to pre-recorded video images that took us all the way to Scotland. The glass wall literally became a gateway that could lead to anywhere.

In *300 el x 50 el x 30 el* the stage is similarly bordered by an enormous forest. In this way, we enclose the village and the audience. At the end of the performance, one of the main characters literally walks out of the theatre and the camera follows him as far as possible until the signal cuts off and disappears. You will never know how far the character has gotten.

Neither the forest in *300 el x 50 el x 30 el* nor the fern forest in *Van den vos* have an ending. The camera makes the space become much larger. We try to enlarge the theatrical space — in all directions. We go into corners, crannies, and sides. We film where the audience's gaze cannot reach. We make the audience see to infinity. When we use a camera, it is

to show something that the audience cannot see by themselves. Our use of the camera is first and foremost poetical, and thus not merely guiding.

The use of a camera always serves our theatrical intention. The camera can be a narrator or a dramaturgical element. For example, in *300 el x 50 el x 30 el*, the camera represents the passing of time, the suffocating impasse that people find themselves in, the circling movement of life. The audience knows that the camera is always coming back. Eventually, the camera starts circling madly on its rail and the men pushing the camera desperately and feverishly try to follow. There is a system overload. In *Van den vos*, the camera hangs during the entire performance from the neck of the main character to symbolise a kind of conscience. An external gaze that he can't shake off. He sees himself through the inescapable lens of the camera.

Of course, our use of the camera is partially guiding, which is a function that we use to cheerfully 'cheat'. We give the impression that the audience has to put the performance together themselves. That is not quite the case. We do ultimately decide what you should definitely see and not miss. This is a secondary function of the camera. In *JR*, the audience is unable to see three of the four sides of the tower. The audience there is totally dependent on the camera that shows the most important scenes on whatever floor.

When did the camera enter your performances?

This guided perspective applies primarily to the camera performances. All in all, we have more performances without a camera than with one. We started using a camera in 2011 with *300 el x 50 el x 30 el*. Not because we necessarily needed it, but because we were very eager to work with a camera. It wasn't a very well thought out dramaturgical idea. We were at the beginning of our career, there was a lot of Scandinavian



Van den vos, 2013
Performers: Bent Simons, Marie Vinck, Dirk Roofthoof
© Kurt van der Elst

cinema at the time that we found inspiring, and we were often working as actors in film and television ourselves. The choice to use a camera in *300 el x 50 el x 30 el* was very much linked to the format of the piece. The audience can only see the front of the houses that make up the set; the camera gives a view from the back of the houses. We really only want to use the camera when it is necessary to tell a story. With *Van den vos* and *JR*, the choice for a camera came from the material: we came quickly to the conclusion that in order to get under the characters' skin, we really needed a camera. There is deliberately not a camera in every performance. For every performance with a camera there is a performance without a camera. In recent years, this may be a little less strict but we try to stick to it; we are still theatre makers and not filmmakers.

The cinematic medium is nevertheless present in your performances in many ways. Your acting style has been regularly described as cinematic and you often take inspiration from films. How would you define your relationship to film? Where would you place the gap between film and theatre?

Narrative is an important factor in the distinction between film and theatre. In cinema, there is only one point of view. You are sucked towards that one close-up or towards that one thing that the director decides you must see. We always want to create a certain openness of observation. As an audience member of *JR*, you need to decide whether you focus your attention on the projected film scenes or on the 'live' scenes that unfold on your side of the tower. That makes theatre so unique: as an audience member, you can decide for yourself whether to wander off into a detail. The live scenes, on one hand, and filmed live scenes, on the other hand, exist next to each other and interact. No spectator will see the same performance. Everyone can watch actively and will not get sucked into anything. Everyone has to choose whether they will follow the film or wander off. Watching the performance becomes thus performative as well. That's where we distinguish ourselves very much from cinema. If we were to

break the narrative of film and still make a film, we would end up with a kind of video art. While this is also interesting, that's something that our work leans less towards. We try to circumvent the laws of film in one way or another because we are still making something other than film.

The big difference, of course, is that theatre is *live*. It is important for us that you can see at all times that our performances are happening live, that you can see how they are being made. You don't have to believe it if you don't want to. For us, this is an important choice. It makes the whole thing theatrical. With a movie, the audience has to believe what you're doing, or you'll get in trouble. With theatre, it's interesting that you seemingly give the audience a choice: they don't have to believe you. Most of the time, fortunately, they do and we get the audience all the way along. However, by showing the creation of the performance, that choice seems to remain open.

Handling the camera feels *meta*. As a maker, you decide what you show. We're not professional camera people but cinematography is not what this is about. It's more about an energy, paying attention to things and wanting to show those.

An intriguing friction within your work is how, on the one hand, the seemingly technically and productionally impossible is presented whilst, on the other hand, you actively reveal how it is made possible. The unthinkable is promised and then created in the moment, in front of the audience's eyes.

We find the creation of a film, especially on film sets, an endearing process. You see far too many people dancing around a small action, like a group of scientists trying to dissect a small beetle. In *JR*, you could see camerapeople who were very close to the action. In the small rooms in the tower you could see a few actors, yet often more than half the space was occupied by two camerapeople. The camerapeople wedged themselves between the intimacy of the actors.



Behind the scenes, *JR*, 2018

Performers: Thomas Verstraeten, Stef Aerts, Kes Bakker, Marie Vinck, Geert Van Rampelberg, Imke Mol

© Kurt van der Elst

The creation of a film carries with it a great failure: kind of dragging on with far too many resources to capture the essence of something very fragile. You know that this will not succeed, that you will never get to the core. Perhaps this is also how we work with our performances. It is not by chance that the camera is so visibly present in our performances. As an audience, you are allowed to see that it's us who are creating and constructing the images. Even without a camera, our performances are always a bunch of people standing around something very small and trying to grasp the essence of it, knowing that they will not succeed. That connects all our performances.

On the other hand, before and after a performance you are very careful with the information that you give away. Insight into the creative process or sources of inspiration is scarce. Is this a conscious choice?

This comes from a desire to create open works of art, much to the annoyance of communication and PR services. The more information you give to people, the more they come to see the performance from a certain point of view and that's always a shame. As an audience member, you want to be surprised. As an artist, you want to give the responsibility to the audience to read what they want to read. It's incredibly important not to take people by the hand. We want to emancipate the viewer, treat them as sovereign beings. We have made something and worked hard on it but now it is up to the viewer to do something with it, without becoming non-committal. We think it's important that people can decide for themselves what they do with our work, without saying that it doesn't matter what they read in it.

For years, there has been a naive desire to make something that goes straight to the heart, something that needs very little rational or intellectual filters in order to be understood. We want to communicate with the audience in a very direct way. However, that becomes difficult when,

before the performance, you are given a booklet with dramaturgical texts that you have to read. You have to read something when you just want to wait for the performance to start. Then, when you have read it, you start referring back to those texts during the entire performance. Conversely, it's even worse when you get a leaflet afterwards with all the references that were in the performance. You are, as it were, confronted with your own stupidity as an audience member in contrast to the cleverness of the performance.

You start from an idea and arrive at a form. That form will dictate everything, even inspire content. What follows next? How do you go from there?

That's the next step. [Pointing to a mood board full of images as big as the wall] We let ourselves be inspired as broadly as possible. We set some lines but we try not to use too many filters. It is a very intuitive phase.

In that respect, *300 el x 50 el x 30 el* was very interesting. That performance was made over the course of one month, so we didn't have time for filters. It's the only production that we didn't make a mood board for. We had to open ourselves entirely to inspiration and say yes to every idea. Ironically, *300 el x 50 el x 30 el* is one of the most solid performances we have ever made; it is very well put together. The show was nevertheless made without a plan: it was made up and written down in a sort of direct line, built and performed while we were making it up on the fly. All the steps happened at once and were intertwined. Oddly enough, that worked very well.

Now, our creative process follows a certain structure: first there is an idea, then we come up with the form, next we collect pictures, we come up with scenes, create a sequence for those scenes, and finally start rehearsing those scenes. In the beginning, this was certainly not the case. The steps were intertwined for a very long time: for *Walking down*

the Champs-Élysées..., *300 el x 50 el x 30 el*, and *Terminator Trilogy*. With the *The Land of Nod*, we worked on the scenario until the very last day.

However, during *Van den vos*, we tried to maintain more of a structure, as we were working with external partners and due to the increasing size of the production. The first time a method really seeped into our preparation was with *JR* — a production so big that we needed this structure. But we only became aware of that method during *The Sheep Song*. By consciously implementing this methodology, we were able to create a performance in a very short amount of time. By going through each phase one by one, we became very productive, making it possible to create an ambitious performance within tight time constraints imposed by Corona.

Does such a fixed working method lead to a fixed role division within the collective?

Always an annoying question... *(silence)*

We have come to know each other better and better over the years and have come to trust each other's strengths and weaknesses. That's how our collaboration happens organically. Trust is very important. What is also important is that towards the end, no opinions matter any more. It is the performance itself that dictates what is best. We place ourselves at the service of that performance.

If we have to indicate a division of roles, we can say that Stef is very involved with the form, Thomas is more involved with the dramaturgy and concepts, and Joé has a very technical eye. We work very much together on the visual phase and the development of scenarios. Stef and Marie are very good at directing actors. Lighting is something that Joé and Stef work hard on. Managing large groups, such as extras, is up to Thomas and Marie. Thomas also deals with finances and dossiers or writing texts.

This division of roles has grown organically over the years. If someone encroaches on someone else's territory, it's fine, we'll work it out.

Generally speaking, a theatre director is still expected to exist. There is a belief that to harmonise all the elements of a performance, you need an outside eye. And yet, as a collective, you manage to bring ambitious projects together into one unified body of work.

We are fortunate that we all need each other. In the end, there is always a division of roles, which is often the same. However, shortly before the final stage — what you would call the final direction — there we are again as a collective, very much the four of us together. The final decisions, what people consider directing, is always a collective process. Likewise, coming up with something new is collective for us as well. It's a fun phase, to gather images that go on to become scenes and are placed in a certain order. These two phases are the processes that happen most collectively: coming together for the gathering of images to create a first draft of the performance and then again in the last weeks before the premiere.

Our projects are so large, there is always so much work to do: performing, directing, and building sets... There is so much for everyone to do. Due to the size of such projects, we don't get in each other's way. There is something for everyone to relate to, everyone has his or her own specialty to dive into.

Until recently, until JR more precisely, the phases of the creative process were often intertwined. You talk about an organic creative process, you describe your way of working as 'intuitive'. The medium of opera, in contrast, is by definition not organic or intuitive.

They had warned us about this beforehand. A cliché exists about opera that the concept must be ready one and a half years in advance.



The Sheep Song, moodboard, 2020
© Lynn Van Oijstaeijen

That turned out to be true, but the concept for *JR* had to be ready two years in advance. In a way, the concept for *JR* was much more tightly plotted, the creation was much more complex than that of *Les Pêcheurs de perles*. If you create such large productions that you need other people to collaborate, you need planning.

We learned this the hard way. There was still a lot of chaos with *Van den vos* and *The Land of Nod*. Luckily, Toneelhuis supported us — courageously, desperately — and fortunately it ended well. During the rehearsal process for the opera, so much was done for us. However, the singers in front of you still need direction. Of course, opera is different compared to when you are in your own power, for your own projects where you create the scenario, all the images, camera, and video...

Since *The Land of Nod* we started to work more methodically, simply because we needed to. This might have been also the moment when we started having children. Until *The Land of Nod*, a large part of the performance was made in a café or while hanging out. Since we started having children, our work process has become more delimited and more transparent for everyone.

So, we were prepared for an opera production. Commissioned work also requires much more preparation. Tomorrow, for example, we have to pitch a project that is scheduled for the summer of 2022. The questions always come a very long time in advance. From now on, we are going to do a lot of commissioned work. There have been several interesting questions, which we would like to respond to. Our calendars are already full with FC Bergman plans until 2025.

You are a collective of makers, but also a collective of actors. When does it start being about acting? When does your own role in a performance become clear? How and when are roles distributed?

For us, acting is totally unimportant. Although performing is part of the performance, how the roles are distributed is of little importance. We're not that interested in performing personally anymore. In *The Sheep Song* we perform again, but we actually want to perform less and less ourselves. We perform personally because we need people in the images we create.

In thinking about our acting, we have found out that it requires a more specific profile than we initially thought. Because of our common training and our common frame of reference that we have developed over the years, we expect an actor to behave in a certain way in our scenographies. We know what our images should look like, so it's easy to place ourselves in there as well. We don't need much direction, as we know how to relate to the scenography.

However, we notice with guest actors that the acting and 'standing' in our sets that we aim for is not that obvious. Outsiders often have to get used to what we expect of them. On the one hand, we want a sensitivity for the scene you're performing in and, on the other, soberness. This last one is very important but quite difficult for most actors, as they are often used to carrying and pulling the performance, both emotionally and dramaturgically. That is rarely the case in our performances. Our performances are not carried by an actor all the time, which can cause misunderstanding. Either you have to be in function of the set or you need to pull the performance yourself. Our performances are on the borderline. For the most part, it is letting yourself be carried along by the form. There is always a moment in every performance when an actor has to lose against the form, followed by a kind of dramatic catharsis that then has to be performed.

Someone who can be beautiful in the image is not enough. Someone who wants to be too much of a leading character is also problematic. Whenever we work with good actors, we come across a moment of confusion where

they don't know whether they should act or not. Our answer always depends on the scene and often sounds like 'not now, but later'. The actors have to know when it's up to them and when it's not. They have to trust that most of the emotional trajectory will be played out by the scenery and not by themselves. And then suddenly they need to go all the way in their acting.

For too long we assumed that this was an obvious thing to do because for a long time we played our performances ourselves. It was an interesting discovery for us that this is actually not that easy for most actors. We lost two of our core members to this (*founding members Bart Hollanders and Matteo Simoni, eds.*). Matteo and Bart are true players who want to meet each other on stage. They visit us as guest-actors in our performances, which is always very nice. You notice that we speak the same language, that we don't have to discuss anything anymore because they know what our intention is.

Your acting style is characterised by (psychological) realism, by emotional and physical nuances. Earlier work is generally more grotesquely performed, although in recent work there are some flamboyant characters that clash with the subtle intimacy of other characters. How would you describe your acting style? How has it evolved over time?

We don't have a thoughtful vision on acting. Most often we intuitively use psychological, more cinematic acting, especially when we use a camera.

This nuanced acting is often interspersed with a more extreme kind of physical slapstick. Sometimes there are different characters that take on both styles. For example, 'Den Beestenneuker' (*The Animal Fucker*, eds.) or the art conservator in *The Land of Nod*. For us, these characters aren't acting but rather become part of a choreography, of a painting or an image in a formal, functional way. These two acting styles — the cinematic and the slapstick — are in all our performances. In *JR*, for example, we

made Belgian actor Geert Van Rampelberg perform quite extravagantly. He wondered whether his acting wasn't too big, especially for the camera, but we wanted it even bigger so he would become a cartoon character.

Is collaborating on a set, co-creating the scenography, necessary for moving as an actor on that set?

We have asked ourselves that question many times before. We used to hammer every nail into our sets ourselves, so to speak. At some point, our performances became too big and we couldn't do everything ourselves anymore. Up to and including *300 el x 50 el x 30 el*, we built the sets ourselves. After that, we came under the wings of Toneelhuis, who logically took over a large part of the set building. At first, it felt like a relief to be rid of it but then we started to miss the building. We wondered if perhaps this was an essential part of the process after all. Building and furnishing a set down to the last detail has something intimate about it. We spread out a bed for the actors. When we walk through the decor with a camera, we know every corner. Everything passes through our own hands. When the technicians took over, it was a kind of farewell. But we are not missed by them. (*laugh*) And, with time, the melancholy surrounding it has left us as well.

For *The Sheep Song*, we took two weeks of studio time — as a kind of nostalgic rebound, a romantic reunion. However, except for Joé, we all felt lost and useless. For Joé, combining acting and working on the set you're in is what theatre is all about. Joé's position in that sense remains exceptional. He remains the conduit between the artistic and the purely technical. Even when the sets are being made for us, Joé is still the one who makes the sets work. He knows how to breathe life into the mechanics. When they are made for us, there are limits. Joé, however, succeeds time and again in stretching those limits. He follows the construction of the sets and that is indispensable for us. Joé is the



Behind the scenes, *Walking down the Champs-Élysées with a tortoise to get a better view of the world, but it is hard to drink tea on an ice floe when everyone is drunk*, 2009

Performers: Marie Vinck, Thomas Verstraeten

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intermediary between the material and the content. He speaks our language, the language of FC Bergman. He knows what is expected. He knows that we don't necessarily need something 'high-tec' or perfectly made, but that it needs to do what we want it to do.

The form becomes imperative to determine the content. Have you ever encountered limitations of the form, ideas impossible to implement?

Never! *(laughter)* *(silence)*

At some point, you always have to adjust your dreams a little bit. Usually this has purely to do with scale. For example, the tower in *JR* actually had to be twice as big: twenty rather than twelve meters high, yet that wasn't possible. The room in *The Land of Nod* was going to have a whole ceiling but this would have required an extra van to transport the scenery.

There are scenes that don't make it but we have never had to give up on a basic idea. We do always have to go through a kind of wall of resistance. This wall of resistance might have diminished over time, as we have become more mature and reasonable ourselves. We are not fantasists. We want the impossible, sure, but we are still theatre makers and not fools who want to carry out their idea at any cost. We want to play for an audience and ensure that a performance sells and can be performed several times.

Nevertheless, people know who we are and what we do. They know that, eventually, it will work out. We know we can demand certain things — up to a certain limit. We felt that limit with the production of *JR*. It was too much, not only for our collaborators but also for ourselves. The press always reflects how big our new production will be next time, how we could go even bigger. Now we can say that it won't get any bigger than *JR*. *JR* was on the edge, was over the edge. We won't do that anymore.

But you continue to look for the edge in each production. In a lot of performances, water is brought to the stage in many different ways. This ranges from swimming pools, to rain showers, to ponds. Yet, water and theatre collide — the use of both water and fire is forbidden on stage. Do you consciously use this to test the boundaries of theatre?

The use of water is not a conscious *leitmotif*. All the same, we do like to include real elements on stage: elements that grind against the boundaries of truth and theatre such as water or fire. We used to include a child and an animal in every performance. We look for unpredictable things, dangerous things, performative things. We're looking for sensations that you can't fake; something that goes beyond the theatrical. An actor who gets soaking wet due to an artificial rain, has still a reality, a viscerality, that you can't avoid. We always aim for the limits of the forms that we use. How can we go beyond the form and enter the realm of the real? It is a performativity that we search.

In a meticulously designed installation where all the radars have to run smoothly, it does add a subversive and almost destructive component.

Absolutely, that's why we have a dog on stage in our newest performance. It's always exciting whether the dog will stay or run away, whether he will do what he has to do or less or suddenly more. As makers, we consciously build in this tension that — in the best-case scenario — will add something to the performance. The big towers we build are shaky.

In each project, there are uncalculated factors that can go wrong. It always comes back to the taming of the indomitable beast: a beast that you have created yourself and which you need to keep in check to make sure that it is contained. But that can fail badly and even become dangerous. We all bear the physical marks of that too, especially from our early years.

We hope to preserve that performativity. In our early years, that performativity was very physical but over the years it has faded. The last time was with *The Land of Nod*, which contained a dance piece that we started making together. After two weeks, everyone had shin splints or something similar. *(laughter)* We all just passed the age of thirty and came to the realisation that we weren't as invincible as we thought after all.

Is music part of your mood board? Sometimes the music is so overwhelming that it also directs the spectator's gaze, as for example in some scenes of *Walking down the Champs-Élysées...*, *300el*, and *The Land of Nod*.

Although we describe our performances as compositions, as they always have a musical element, we actually use music mostly functionally. It is much less directive in the creation of a performance. Music first and foremost needs to be supportive. For example, there is a piece of music that we have wanted to use for quite some time but have not yet used, as it is not dominant enough. On the other hand, we have already created an opera, where music truly is the starting point.

Towards the end, we do need music as reinforcement. When we work with live music, as with *Van den vos* and *The Sheep Song*, it is never an obvious course. We don't speak the language, we're laymen. At the same time, we have a very well-defined idea of what we despise and that doesn't make it easy... Between us we know exactly what it should be but we cannot put it into words, which makes it difficult to discuss this with musicians or composers.

You mentioned before how you, as founding members of the same collective, speak the same language but that the translation of your intentions to others is often more difficult. Nonetheless, you work together with a wide range of others: guest actors, technicians, composers, etc. How do you deal with this?

We look for words, we try to learn to speak each other's language. Often it is a matter of backtracking, of retracing our steps — we know what we mean but someone else does not necessarily. It is also a matter of including people in our collective, which we find more difficult to do. We do the preparation and ultimately decide. Still, during the period of time that we work together with others, we try to extend our inner group as much as possible to everyone who participates.

When working with large groups, we organise information meetings at regular intervals. We try very hard to communicate as openly as possible about what we are working on. Even with groups of extras, we always provide a presentation on the story, the references, and the underlying dramaturgy of the performance. Thomas always takes his time for this and that pays off. People — be they actors, technicians, or extras — become fully involved when they know what they are getting into and what we are doing. Because our performances are very technical and complex, we expect a lot from actors, the technical crew, the set, and costume designers.

You need to make everyone part of your dream. It remains difficult, as there are always difficult moments when everyone, including ourselves, suddenly don't see it anymore. Therefore, you need to make your dream big enough so that people want to follow you to the end. Sometimes we are shocked that people keep following us. We wonder if our ship is heading in the right direction. But you have to have the courage to draw that card from the beginning. To tell everyone that it will be fantastic, that we'll do it together, and that we'll eventually get there.

Your performances are regularly interpreted as reflections on social trends or concerns or as political statements. How do your performances relate to current events? Do they have a political function?



Our performances are never political statements. We try to avoid to explicitly refer to current affairs. The performances are political by definition because they are about *human* concerns. We always show a person in a world: a big world that is also governed by that person as well as by others. It is always a larger story that is told through an individual narrative, never a political statement or a metaphor.

The dramaturgical idea that underlies all your performances is the fragile, fearful, floundering human being in an overpowering environment. Little people who try to get home. Is there hope for that struggling human being?

At least there are moments, there is a silver lining.

But our characters often do come crashing down, completely. Optimistic performances do not necessarily make great art. Performances that are moving, touching, as well as hopeful, are rare. It takes great wisdom and sensitivity to make such performances — qualities we may not yet possess. This might be something that we wish for ourselves: that we are able to slowly evolve towards this. Maybe then our performances will become a little less heavy. Although we were initially on a milder course, *The Sheep Song* is again a quite heavy performance.

Tragedy has existed for so long and has had and continues to have such an important function in society. Coming out of the theatre together, hearing the church bells ring: that's something we all need. You have to go through hell together to be able to see the light again. It might not be very hopeful, but we do hope that it will be comforting in the end.

That is the one thing, after all, that we hope to accomplish with our performances. To offer recognition, to bring comfort and catharsis. To know that you are not alone. •