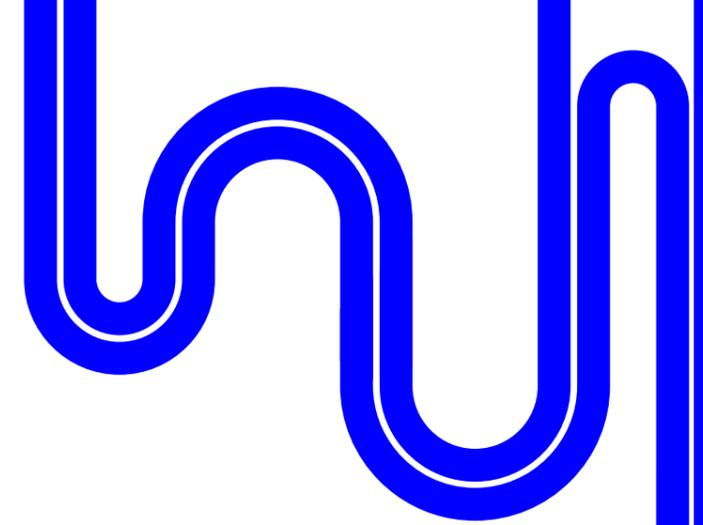
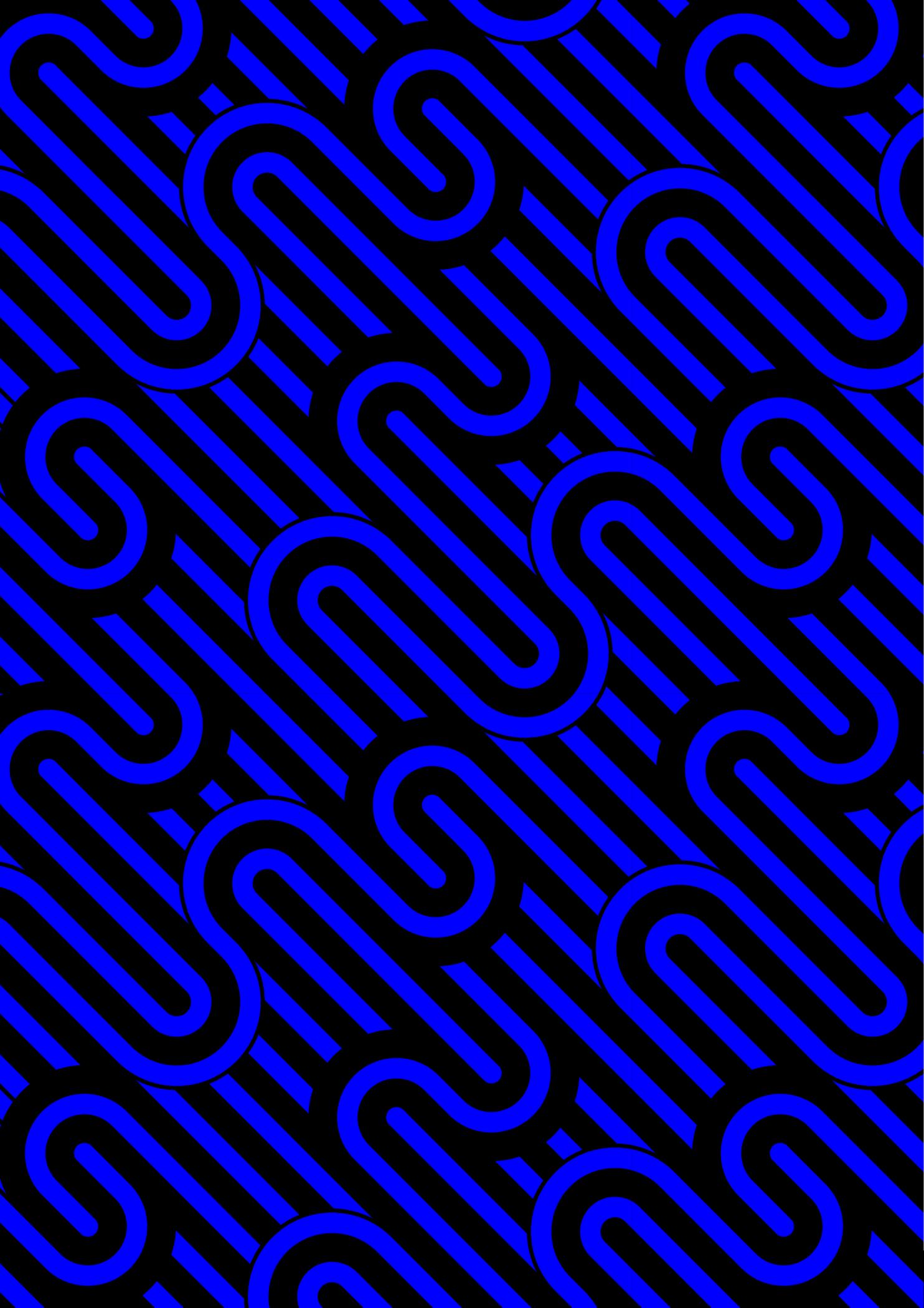


FC Bergman The Desire to Break Out

EVELYNE COUSSENS



FC Bergman was founded by the actors Stef Aerts, Bart Hollanders, Matteo Simoni, and Marie Vinck together with the artist Thomas Verstraeten, who all happen to have been born between 1982 and 1987. The group knew each other from their theatre studies at Artesis Hogeschool, which was previously known as the Herman Teirlinck Institute in Antwerp (Belgium). The first production they created as a company outside the institution walls was called *The Rock-Breaker* (*De Rotsebreker*, 2007). This play was an unusual fusion of scenes originating from Hugo Claus' work *The Life and Works of Leopold II* (*Het leven en de werken van Leopold II*) as well as scenes from Tom Lanoye's *Fort Europa*. Claus' text was grotesquely embellished with tacky scenes from musicals, an inflated elephant, and extras lathered in black makeup. This resulted in chaotic bursts of pleasure that were then countered with soberly recited excerpts from the *Fort Europa* text. After this first production, FC Bergman decided that they wanted to step away from their current reputation and manifest themselves as a legitimate theatre company. One year later, technical stage manager Joé Agemans joined 'Football Club' Bergman.

In 2008 a part of the group created *The Homecoming (De thuiskomst)*, a hard-hitting, anarchist adaptation of Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*. On top of a huge pile of rubbish, dirt, and scraps of food, Pinter's cold family drama unfolds. In this rendition, the decor is ravaged, cars are driven onto the stage, and a dirty, dialectical use of language is unabashedly employed. Not only have FC Bergman succeed at blowing away their audiences with this adaptation, *The Homecoming* also managed to win the Jong Theaterprijs prize at the Theater Aan Zee festival in 2009. In that same year, the entire company was offered residence by Monty, a theatre in Antwerp. During 2009 FC Bergman put on several smaller performances. However, the production that would become of most importance for their future artistic direction would be *A preview on fragments of a new world (Voorproef op fragmenten van een nieuwe wereld)*, which stylistically resembles *The Rock-Breaker*. *Preview* is an installation consisting of a series of theatrical machines. FC Bergman put together the construction in one week, followed by a solemn inauguration of the performance by setting it into motion in the presence of an audience on the seventh day. With sheep flying through the sky and stars falling from the heavens, this wondrous creation initially promises an ideal world, until the machines fail... The surrealistic route of this performance created possibilities for further exploration.

That exploration magnificently results in the 2009 production with the unruly name *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 (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)*. The performance, which was inspired by Dante's *Divina Commedia*, premiered in the neo-Gothic Oude Handelsbeurs located on the Meir in Antwerp and stunned the Flemish stage with its untamed passion, raw physical directness, baroque poetry, and bold range. Five characters exercise and train their immortality as they

wander on the enormous stage as puny people, each having their own strategy to exorcise death. Different mediums are employed in this associative sequence of tableaux: play, pyrotechnics, performance, and choreography are used alongside each other. The performance itself is also 'grand' in a literal sense as the viewers gaze is often lured skyward by the tall crane gracing the stage, the towering larger-than-life sized puppet and even by the occasional segments performed on the side balconies. However, it is the passion that lingers the longest: FC Bergman have a story to tell, with compelling urgency, even though their experience is limited and they are still in the early days of mastering their craft.

Enter Toneelhuis

Everything changed when the group was included in the pool of theatre artists active at Toneelhuis, the municipal theatre based in Antwerp, which also happens to be the largest production company in all of Flanders. Keeping in mind that the young collective has barely been active for five years, this seemingly overnight success is cause for slight concern. There is some apprehension that their temperament will be tamed by the large production company and that FC Bergman may be recuperated by the large Toneelhuis and become more 'salonfähig' (socially acceptable). At the same time however, there is a somewhat false-romantic desire to keep the group 'pure' and retain an element of 'punk', thereby also keeping them small and powerless, as if the authenticity of an artist were measured by the scope of their suffering. Toneelhuis promises the six artists an artistic support, but most importantly offers them the technical and logistic framework and support that they need in order to realise the grandest of their ideas, dreams, and visions. The 2010 production *300 el x 50 el x 30 el* turned out to be a test case for both parties. FC Bergman built an entire village on stage, complete

with a square and a pine forest in the backdrop. The village is consumed by the fear of an approaching deluge — the inhabitants start behaving more erratically, nearing a state of psychosis. What happens inside their houses is shown to the audience on a large screen as captured by a moving camera that pans along the entire village as well as the pine forest behind it. The camera peeks into the private spaces of the interior. FC Bergman proved with *300 el x 50 el x 30 el* that the large theatre structure does not tame them but serves them. Not so much because an entire village emerges onto the stage of the Bourla Theatre,¹ including the pine forest, but mainly because these six young artists are able to get the entire technical team and the theatre's set department to realise this nearly impossible task. Apparently, the urgency of their cause is contagious.

FC Bergman's message is inseparable from the way that they convey that message. Both the content and the form aim for 'greatness'. The company prefers to work in large locations (in a minority of cases in the theatre itself) with large groups (of extras) and large gestures (such as pyrotechnics and special effects). This is not solely because they are keen on sensationalism but because what they wish to convey requires this approach and demands it. FC Bergman's recurring message does not tolerate an intimate setting since the artists never concern themselves with individual dramas or petty human emotions. There is always more at stake. In the universe of FC Bergman, human existence consists of a series of tragic attempts to comprehend the incomprehensible. Human beings try to shape their lives with the courage of desperation. Despite their struggles, they are always confronted with the forces that transcend them. FC Bergman consider this struggle, which they showcase, with love, as the essence of life.

1. Bourla Theatre is the main venue of Toneelhuis, a neoclassical building designed for the city of Antwerp by the city architect Pierre Bourla in 1827.

The naïve belief that the world is changeable is doomed to fail, yet this failure is not the end point. It is, however, the starting point for new ventures and is beautiful to witness. Beauty is a necessary counterpoint of this seemingly pessimistic existentialist worldview concerning the struggles of humankind. The beauty of each powerless attempt to resist this fate in itself generates a sense of existence that pushes FC Bergman beyond an easily deterministic nihilism: this meaninglessness of existence is filled with belief in humankind's struggle to find meaning. By giving shape to this beauty, the company still manages to tenderly reach out and address the insignificance of humankind. This consequently has a cleansing effect. However, it does not need to go further than that: there is no way to appeal against the human condition and as such FC Bergman do not make any combative propositions to render this condition more bearable. FC Bergman chooses not to use any political statements as they do not want to slap their audience in the face but rather gently beat them to death with a story that can be understood around the world, in all countries and by every kind of audience. They present stories that can offer comfort without being moralistic. FC Bergman continuously explore this existential story in different forms that are permeated by their central premise: the realisation of the impossible and the beauty of the attempt. A choreography with dozens of extras in *Walking down the Champs-Élysées*, acting on top of a pile of dirt in *The Homecoming*, or the entire pine forest in the backdrop of the stage in *300 el* are all examples of the impossible constructions stubbornly set up by FC Bergman. By doing this, they constantly flirt with the boundaries of what is imaginable as well as feasible. It is essential that the performances are dangerous and that they keep their audience on the edge of their seat, not necessarily through the employment of physical stunts but rather by installing risky elements or by employing a considerable margin of unpredictability. Why, you might ask? The answer may be that the audience is understood as entitled to an event that is utterly unique and not repeatable. This idea of theatre as an event

is reminiscent of the performances that arose in the 1970s in which the body and its direct presence were central themes. However, FC Bergman does not consider these dangerous moments as a sole resource but incorporates them as small disruptive explosions within a well-defined aesthetic universe that references the seventies and eighties in their desire for beauty. These ‘moments of performance’ are the outbursts of life, the instinctive attempts to break free from the predetermined framework. The alienating *flou artistique* gets torn to shreds by direct authenticity, not in the sense of realism, but in the sense of truthfulness: whatever happens takes place in the present, with bodies present and it comes very close. In combination with and contrasted by the sublime world that was carefully constructed, these ‘breakthroughs’ hit hard, leaving the audience speechless.

What do these moments of true danger consist of then? What immediately catches the eye is FC Bergman’s bold style of acting. Although, dramaturgically speaking, *The Homecoming* might impose a seemingly tight and strict framework, within this structure there is an abundance of smoking and drinking, which does not only result in a looser manner of acting but even renders it sloppy or *edgy*. The laconic stage direction prescribed for the fights between the characters in *Walking down the Champs-Élysées* — ‘beat the hell out of each other’ — resulted in the yielding of several bruises and wounded limbs. In addition to this raw, physical approach to acting, the innate desire to break free is revealed in the other stylistic choices made, such as working with animals, children, and amateurs. The bestial scenes in *Walking down the Champs-Élysées* caused outrage amongst the audience but the unpredictability of the animal ‘actors’ did bring forth the desired factor of risk. The mass choreography from this same production shows dozens of extras attempting to collectively complete a dance phrase, with seven-year-old children dancing alongside seventy-year-old men. Although synchrony is hard to find, what is of importance here is the attempt

itself. This desire to seek out danger is perhaps most clear in the fact that FC Bergman consistently opt for theatre on location. The location selected for the performance then proves to function not only as a co-actor but also as a co-creator. For example, a production that takes place on a deserted beach in Terschelling tells a different story than the exact same performance located in an industrial zone in Amsterdam. No matter how thorough the concept of the performance has been worked out in advance, until FC Bergman arrive on location nothing is set in stone and everything can and must be re-examined. In their case this is usually only four weeks or so before the actual premiere. Therefore, touring with the company is synonymous recreating their productions. At the end of a tour, the result of this approach is a broad range of variations on the same performance. However, the classic theatre building could perhaps be considered as the ultimate location for their performances as it inherently possesses an abundance of conventions that possess the potential to be broken. Therefore, FC Bergman also use the theatre as a location and employ it in a fashion that might provoke the audience to change the way they think.

From pornography to the Bible

Although the seventies and eighties have served as inspirational decades for this collective group of young artists, they are undoubtedly influenced by contemporary culture as well. This is reflected not only in the collage-like structure of their performances but also in the eclectic array of their sources of inspiration from Albert Camus to Walt Disney, from Lars von Trier to Pina Bausch, from pornography to the Bible and everything in between. FC Bergman display the excessive flow characteristic

of generation Y who appear to have it all with their ‘anything goes’ mentality. It is no surprise that a world map decorates the wall of their studio. The composition of the group gives this away as well: a diverse range of six different artists with different personalities who come together to create one collective performance each year. Aside from the work they do as a group, they all have their own personal ongoing projects ranging from film and visual arts to theatre and television. At first glance, this multitude of impulses can only be considered as a fruitful contribution to their work. However, this combination of different personalities and careers can at times be explosive. FC Bergman snatch up every opportunity that presents itself to them, not in a deliberate or careful way, but rather an eager and insatiable one.

With their *Terminator Trilogy* (*Terminator Trilogie*, 2012), FC Bergman take their audience on a journey with a dynamic and unique event that boasts a scale of nearly unrealistic magnitude. This is caused by their choice to work with non-professionals as well as their decision to repeatedly perform on location. Buses transport the spectators to a vast and desolate grey field that stretches as far as the eye can see, deep in the port of Antwerp. Once they have arrived, the audience witnesses container ships towering as high as skyscrapers seemingly walking by and majestically gliding hundreds of metres away from the dock. Futuristic-looking cranes rise up against the evening twilight, resembling the set of James Cameron’s *Terminator* film series after which this performance was named. In several respects, this performance concerns itself with the notion of the future. It is against this backdrop of industry and world trade, of capitalism and commerce, unstoppable growth and progress, that FC Bergman choose to place the hedonistic culture that is derived from it. Reaching out across this asphalt desert, the viewer finds an artificial bourgeois salon that stages about fifty extras of all ages dressed up in evening wear.

After twenty minutes or so, they make their way on to the stage for an apocalypse; a crumbling and destruction of civilian life that has become sterilised. The enormous billboard, from which iconic hero Arnold Schwarzenegger had been looking down upon the salon, falls down, signifying the end of an era. The new world is as empty as the previous world was crowded. It is left bare and washed clean by the industrial machine that now forms a protective circle made of soap bubbles around the new order of things. Humankind must start anew. There is one remaining survivor (Stef Aerts) who in his now seemingly ridiculous costume has seen all the achievements that he believed in disappear. What now? Is humankind free to determine their own future? Or does the past force them to repeat themselves? These are the questions that form the common thread throughout FC Bergman’s oeuvre.

In 2013 FC Bergman collaborated with Liesa van der Aa from Muziektheater Transparant and Solistenensemble Kaleidsokop (DE) to produce the impressive music-theatre project named *About Reynard the Fox* (*Van den Vos*).² This production is a magnificent allegory about the evil that is inherent within every human being and the sneaky fox that lives within each well-behaved civilian. It is no surprise that the symbolic gathering place of the bourgeois must therefore be changed: the company had the parterre of the theatre transformed completely and turned it into a marble swimming pool, around which the actors performed. The audience were seated in the balconies looking down at this spectacle of self-revelation. *About Reynard the Fox* is ‘total theatre’ in which text, performing arts, video art, and music seamlessly blend.

² *Van den Vos* is based on the well know Dutch Middle Age epic *Van den Vos Reynaerde* (*About Reynard the Fox*).

Christ between the two malefactors

For their 2015 production *The Land of Nod* (*Het land Nod*), FC Bergman replicated the Rubens room of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp: an exact copy, true to scale. The prestigious museum has been closed for restoration since 2011 and *The Land of Nod* begins its story when the throne room is almost completely stripped of its impressive works of art. The technicians dressed in blue overalls carry the second to last remaining painting out of the room as the audience walks in. The only painting left now is Rubens' *Christ between the two malefactors*, a painting that is of such a Herculean nature and has such a monumental symbolic radiance, it is a copy. Opposed to this masterpiece in an enormous space, human beings can only appear to be meaningless and humble creatures. Furthermore, it is noticeable that over time that the six artists continuously obliterate themselves from their own work. In *Terminator Trilogy*, a naked man lies on a vast concrete surface (during the premiere of the show this occurred under terrible weather conditions) whilst the indifferent container ships continue their course in the background of the scenery. In the same way, the six performers in *The Land of Nod* walk by and disappear in front of the giant painting as if they were merely accidental passers-by. They do not embody any 'characters' but simply emphasise the grandeur of their surroundings via the presence of their fragile bodies. It is in itself a paradox of pride and humility: what group of (young) artists would dare ask such high productional demands from their theatre production company, only to allow themselves to disappear in front of their self-absorbed set?

In *The Land of Nod* art transforms, in both a literal and metaphorical sense, into a safe haven for humankind and its inherent frailness. Once again, just like in *About Reynard the Fox*, it is remarkable how meticulously the content and style concur, how the grand existential struggle for survival is embodied in even grander gestures and dimensions. The impact of spatiality in this performance cannot be underestimated and demands to be discussed. The dominant thirty-year reign of the small theatre hall has not only caused theatre artists but the audience as well to forget what it can actually mean to be led into a grand space that is able to embody another universe before even a single dramatic gesture is performed. The contrast between the smallness of the actor (or that of the spectator themselves) and the dimensions of such a lofty location speaks volumes: it measures humankind against the world, not the other way around.

Humankind's struggle with the forces surrounding them is embodied by the somewhat unlucky restorer (Stef Aerts) who in *The Land of Nod* assesses that the painting by Rubens is simply too big: the work of art will not be able to fit through the gateway of the room. He undertakes a series of tragicomic attempts to get the canvas through the doors — such as sawing off the frame or widening the passageway. These attempts form a layer of slapstick on the surface of the production. What lies beneath is an investigation that aims to understand the significance of this space, what possible meanings this museum hall encompasses — whether that be in the past or in the future. The actual star of the play *The Land of Nod* is the Rubens hall itself, which transforms before the eyes of the spectator from a real space (where people gather to find shelter from the rain) into a metaphoric place. FC Bergman defines this place as a shelter from war, as a refugee camp, as a place for individual reflection, but most importantly as a space that lives and breathes. The museum is not museum-like at all: life storms in and out, and through the walls, as it should, just as it does in a beautifully choreographed variation of the famous scene in the Louvre from Godard's

Bande à part. In a nutshell, *The Land of Nod* contains everything FC Bergman stands for: the illustration of a tragic world view expressed in monumental style and spirited by the energy of the six young artists who, now grown up, have not yet lost an ounce of their refreshing radicality.

The building

After a series of wordless productions and three years of a creative break, FC Bergman bring forth the kaleidoscopic textually based performance *JR*. This production came to life through the collaboration of the three largest theatre production companies in Flanders: Toneelhuis, KVS, and NTGent. The cast showcases some of Flanders' best actors like Jan Bijvoet, Stijn Van Opstal, Oscar van Rompay, Frank Focketeyn, and Geert Van Rampelberg. *JR* is an adaptation of the eponymous and complex cult novel by William Gaddis. In the novel, U.S. society of the mid-seventies is laid bare, showing how capitalism facilitates the greed, helplessness, lust, and resentment of the floundering characters in it. In this world of stock magnates and stock traders, an eleven-year-old boy appears onto the stage, only to play the stock exchange game more consistently and more radically than anyone else, consequently destabilising the entire system. *JR* is a phantom, an allegorical character. He is the elusive engine that fuels the downfall of the real people that surround him.

Gaddis' novel is a kind of intersection for the corporate, familial, relational, political, and imperialistic subplots that all receive their own space in *the building* — an enormous construction that is four storeys tall, around which the audience is seated on the four sides. Moving within this tower are fifteen actors, twenty-one extras, two camerapersons, four technicians, and two costume designers. About twenty-five rooms have been installed in the tower including a lift, a metro station,

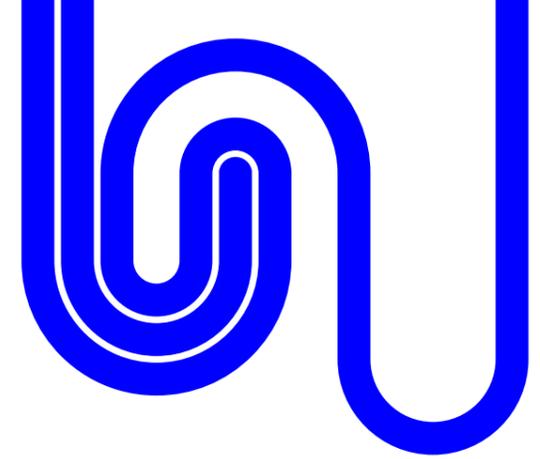
a cinema, and a convenience store. Throughout the performance, the audience witnesses the continuous transformation of the tower at the hands of the technicians. In the meantime, the two camerapersons are focused on capturing the main storyline. They move around the actors with their mobile cameras and the footage is assembled live from the control booth. The audience is divided into groups across the four seating sections that surround *the building*, causing some information to be hidden from the spectator depending on where they are seated. Different storylines develop simultaneously on each floor: the spectator is able to follow some of these stories directly from their seat, whilst others are taking place on the other side of *the building*, out of their eyesight. These narratives are then streamed onto the closed blinds of that particular floor. This implies that the audience must work to follow the story and keep up since both content and style are constantly in development. Whoever follows the 'film' however, will be able to grasp the main storylines of the plot.

JR is another example in which content and style complement each other perfectly. This causes the text to receive another status than it would within classic repertoire theatre. The language, the jargon, and the content of the text are truly like a maze. It is not of importance that the audience understands each word. In contrary, it is the content and the way in which the text is delivered that, together with the stylistic format of the performance, allows the audience to truly grasp and feel this rogue capitalism. In this way, the dialogues about life in the stock market pass by rapidly. At certain moments, the text, just like the main character, is an elusive machine. This allows the text to take on a complementary role and place the spectator in front of closed doors in the same way that the decor does. By breaking free from an overly narrated tale and by choosing to evoke this associative and atmospheric space through images, FC Bergman is able to break with the traditional conventions that mark the boundary between film and theatre.

Les pêcheurs de perles

In the same year as creating *JR*, FC Bergman directed their first opera: *Les pêcheurs de perles* by Georges Bizet in collaboration with Opera Ballet Vlaanderen. The operatic genre is a perfect fit for FC Bergman. The text in opera is artificial and finds itself enclosed in the atmospheric music, in the score. The score is sacred, only allowing the director creative liberty in the visual composition of the play. Just as in *JR*, the text is part of the stylistic format of the production. FC Bergman do not allow the audience to sit back and relax but rather they expect the audience to complete the performance with their own associations based on the images that they are presented with. Unlike Bizet, FC Bergman do not transport their audiences to the exotic beaches of Ceylon but rather take them to a retirement home where the residents spend their time looking back at the past and recalling memories. The past is hidden here behind the blinds of this retirement home. Continuously traveling between past and present it becomes difficult to make the distinction between the two. With their monumental, unique theatrical style and their trademarked spectacular decor, FC Bergman create a world that is located on the border between realism and a dream-like atmosphere. *Les pêcheurs* is a FC Bergman production by its poetics: it possesses the cinematic strengths of *300 el x 50 el x 30 el*, the alienating absurdism of *The Land of Nod*, and the existentialist tragedy of humankind and their struggles that penetrates the entire oeuvre of FC Bergman.

Throughout the years, FC Bergman have developed a theatrical language of their own that distinguishes itself via its memorable decors, the grandeur and monumentality of its images, and its visual poetry with an underlying relativist, humoristic tone and untamed radicality. In this megalomaniacal, baroque spectacle, humankind fights a lonely tragic battle. In their productions, FC Bergman invite their audiences to form part of the event, the experience, the universal total work of art. •



This text is based on two articles written by Flemish theatre critic Evelyne Coussens, “Het verlangen om uit te breken” (The desire to break out), published in *Toneel(ge)ruis* (2012), “De ongetemde radicaliteit van FC Bergman” (The untamed radicality of FC Bergman) published in *Mest* #10 (2015). Marthe De Ruyscher has edited both texts, and Carolina Van Thillo did the translation from Dutch into English.