

LUK VAN DEN DRIES

I met the Flemish theatre company STAN on the road, more specifically in Lyon, where they were performing the play *Tout est calme* (All is Quiet – Alles is rustig) by their favourite writer Thomas Bernhard. This was more than the hundredth time they had done so. It has been in their repertoire for five years and they have toured the Netherlands, Germany, France, Portugal, Switzerland, Austria and Italy with its French and Dutch versions. Five years is a long life for a production. At least it is in Flanders, where most of them are dropped after a few weeks. STAN has opted for a repertory system. Their plays remain available to anyone who asks for them. That evening showed how productive this can be. The actors know Bernhard's play better than the contents of their pockets. Over time they have developed an easy familiarity with the words. The script is at their fingertips, often cherished, much used. You can sense and hear this intimacy. STAN creates theatre that's close up. Close to the scripts. Close to the authors. That evening in Lyon they won over the audience entirely. Bernhard can sometimes sound so monotonous, almost nagging. STAN makes music of him. The actors let fly at each other bombastically, making a great textual song and dance. The pockets are turned inside out. In STAN's hands, the whining Bernhard becomes a razor-sharp piece about history and how it still affects the present day.

The performance is followed by a discussion with the audience. The French still see Belgium as a land of oddballs. The STAN actors are perfect examples of this. By French standards they produce extremely eccentric plays. French theatre is built on acting codes; it is a vocal theatre that wallows in tremolo, effect and rhetoric. But the rhetorical theatre STAN performs is of a completely different class. The rhetoric of these Flemings has far more layers. It is based on contrariness. The emotions in the script are not reiterated on stage. STAN is practised in counter-readings. Rubbing a script up the wrong way. Looking for the development of an argument in a seemingly neutral fragment of material. French audiences are astounded to hear that an actor can act independently in this respect. That while on stage he himself can choose how he will perform the script. Evening after evening. That theatre is not repetition, but action. That a script is an open score that allows a great many interpretations. That no strict arrangements are needed before the acting can start. That the theatre's vitality gains from a reduction in the number of prior arrangements.

That it is necessary to continue amazing and surprising each other and that one can take this a very long way. As long as you are free.

And of course there is that obligatory question. How come they can do it just as easily in French? After all, surely they speak some other language up there in 'La Flandre'? STAN's answer is very sweet and kind.

Foreign body

STAN's European breakthrough, including a positive presence at the Festival d'Automne and the Théâtre de la Bastille in Paris and the Théâtre Garonne in Toulouse, as well as repeated invitations to Mausonturm in Frankfurt, the BIT in Bergen, the Green Room in Manchester, the Centro Cultural in Lisbon, the Almada festival and so on, leads us to suspect that this company is providing the model for a new type of stage practice. Wherever the company turns up there is an infectious enthusiasm for the way they make theatre. But it is much harder to say what they are a model for. STAN has not made a positive decision to develop its own style. It has no aesthetic programme. Artistic labels and genre definitions (intercultural, visual and suchlike) fail entirely in the face of their principle of diversity.

In fact you could call STAN a foreign body. Their practices clash with the customs of the repertory genre. This genre is burdened with a great many premises. There is the problem of remaining faithful to the script – a problem that has been dragging on for decades and has given rise to fierce debate. There is the question of topicality: how can you make a repertoire topical again in the present day, without constantly having to put on new plays? There is the matter of direction: more than any other genre in the performing arts repertory theatre appears to have thrown in its lot with directors. Directors who have a clear view of a play and put forward a new interpretation that is intended to make short work of all previous versions.

STAN does not carry on such discussions. Faithfulness to the script is not a problem. They are able to stay very close to the script. If you love a particular play very much, why would you start cutting it up? No, they prefer to stay very close to the original and so the discussions are all about words, details, nuances. But they may just as easily take a knife to it. As in *Poquelin*, which is sewn together with big, rough stitches. And *Questionism* (Vraagzucht), an anthology of several short stories. Their affinity for plays also means they are constantly in search of material. The actors love reading and so accumulate masses of

paper. Out of which certain plays thrust themselves to the fore. It's all a matter of appetite. Wanting to get their teeth into something. Being attracted by a certain way of telling a story. Tempted by the fascination with an image. This appetite determines the topicality of a production. And no director on earth is going to tell them how to do it. In fact they rather detest people with big ideas about a play.

But actually that is not where STAN's true individuality lies. That is at a much deeper level. The essence of STAN is to be found in a definition of acting. They see acting as being present. It is a sort of dogged immediacy. It is precisely by refusing to work to a programme, and, on the contrary, by again and again starting from a situation in the here and now, that they create an unrepeatable stage practice. This is essential. Night after night their principle is that it has to happen *now*. In essence every theatre-maker does this, but the STAN actors take it to its consequential extreme. They do not make any strict arrangements about blocking, what they are going to do and how they are going to say things. This is all decided at the moment itself. This gives a tremendous openness and directness to the quality of the acting.

Mouth to mouth

STAN has been around for fifteen years. During that time the company has made history. First of all in terms of attitude. STAN advocates a form of theatre in which the members' individual responsibility defines the structure of the group. Everyone who works for STAN (from actors to technicians) helps determine the direction it takes. In other words there is no set course, neither in the form of a management office that provides continuity nor of a hierarchy that chooses and maps out a course. STAN is thus not an institution. It is a collective name for people with theatrical plans and the appetite to develop them collectively. Steps are taken and a direction chosen depending on the degree to which each one stands up for their own plans. They are consistent in not using a director. STAN outsources nothing, but does everything itself, from choice of play to sales, not because they think they can do everything better, but from the conviction that by applying themselves to every level of theatre activity this will also reflect on the theatrical product itself. So what the audience gets to see has passed through STAN's hands and has been given a life of its own, and since this occurs at every level of production it possesses that characteristic STAN vigour. For this company theatre is not mass production, not

specialised work, but the quest for a common affinity and the painstaking attempt to give it shape. It is a matter of a product passing by hand from a maker (the performer) to a consumer (the audience). It is the conveyance of this breath of life 'mouth to mouth' that gives the theatrical event its added value.

One of the constants in the life of STAN is talking about acting. No one can define it, no one has any nameable method up their sleeve, but it's always about the same thing: how ought one to act?

The production entitled *Of the oath of the writer of the king and Diderot* (Vandeneede vandeschrijver vandekoning en Diderot) is perhaps the one result of this actors' conversation that makes the most lasting impression. It is a hilarious piece which at the same time goes to the heart of the complexity of acting. Rarely has so flawless a manifesto of what acting today may signify been expressed in a performance. An actors' comment on Diderot's well-known propositions. A demonstration of 'lessons in acting'. Illusion and reality, emotion and rationality, the two poles of Diderot's paradox are played off against one another. The performance can be seen as a synthesis of a view in which theatre is seen in terms simultaneously of real and unreal. Diderot suddenly becomes a comedy. A play like *Questionism* shows the other side of the actors' discussion. Not about how to act, but why. This discussion is about relevance, topicality and politics. About social contexts in urgent need of an answer. About the ongoing neo-liberalisation of the world. About the necessity of doing productions which in terms of temperament go completely against this.

Questionism fits into the series of pieces by STAN made under the pressure of current events: *It's new moon and it's getting considerably chillier* (Het is nieuwe maan en het wordt aanzienlijk frisser, 1992) and *One 2 Life* (1997) are its immediate predecessors. It is a new sort of documentary theatre based on a highly personal view. This is because one is allowed into the theatre-makers' minds so that they can show what motivates them, which issues they are wrestling with and which plays have stuck in their minds. You find yourself right in the middle of an extremely intimate and equally personal mental and physical world. And through this thunders the current political situation in the form of preparations for the war against Iraq. The documentary element lies not so much in the critical analysis of a particular point in time or political event, but in letting a specific moment loose on you. You are awash with questions. You are battered by propaganda. You stumble from the small and fragile to the oversized and unimaginable. In this loss of direction, in this excess, the actors' fury becomes palpable. All the images and ideas that come together in one mind in a single day now explode. It's documentary overload, but

unaccompanied by any political instruction book. Because in this case the spectator has to figure it out for himself.

Clear air

In reviews of their plays, STAN's acting is often regarded as an extension of Brecht's views on the subject. And this is partly justified. The extreme openness and the clear air Brecht sought with his actors also applies to the STAN actors. All the magic has vanished from this profession. They have nothing up their sleeve, nothing in their pockets. They behave like labourers on a stage demonstrating how they have to operate a machine. In this case, a language machine.

In STAN's hands language is always a form of refined warfare. It may sometimes be about relationships. In plays such as *Lucia Melts* (Lucia smelt, 2003) and *See and See* (Zien en zien, 2004) love stories are laid on the dissecting table. In plays like these language is a wasteland full of painful memories. Conversations are extremely laborious; every word hurts a little. Talking becomes a minefield where something might explode at any moment. So people are constantly restraining themselves. This is STAN at its quietest: highly-refined chamber music. In their productions language is always linked to ideology. They are concerned with a demonstration of rhetoric, and with showing that all speech is essentially determined by power. This is made very clear in *The Monkey Trial* (2003), a courtroom drama on a leading ideological topic: does man originate from God or is he an ennobled primate? The actual trial in Tennessee in 1925 was taken as the basis for a reconstruction with prosecutors, lawyers, witnesses and accused. This well-trying format proved to have lost none of its appeal.

The scraping in each one of us

STAN takes the immediacy of theatre very seriously. The repertoire is tested for its powers of contemporary expression. Molière, for example. In *Poquelin* (an adulterated collage taken from several plays by Molière) this classical French author is reduced to his hysterical obsessions with sex and adultery. This is immediately and abundantly clear from the very beginning of the performance. While the audience is coming in the actors are

already standing waiting with their parts exposed. Trousers are stripped off and blouses lifted up. The argument is thereby already put forward and is developed hilariously in the rest of the play. Not a trace of classicism left. The hard core. Molière with his buttocks bare.

In this repertoire, what is most conspicuous is the attention paid to bourgeois society. STAN's favourite authors, Chekhov and Bernhard but also Ibsen, Wilde and Shaw, show up the fat on the bourgeois mentality. There is an edge of greed and intolerance on the propriety, languor and fussy boredom found there, and this is painstakingly brought out in STAN's interpretation. No one escapes the lucid sharpening of their knives. Even the kindly likeable ones appear not to be entirely blameless. Yet this is clearly not a social analysis (though there is no other, better classification), but a scraping taken from each one of us. STAN's theatre makes you very much aware of your own layer of fat. They hone your awareness of your own attitude till it's razor-sharp. That which only a minute ago tickled – since STAN's theatre verges on the hilarious – now suddenly stabs beneath your calloused skin.

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