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interest

# Proof of democracy on stage. No directors, thanks. Just the actors

Belgian company tg STAN: "The way we work is a political choice"

**W**ho needs a director? Tg STAN works on democratic principles: "Everyone participates in the creative process, from choosing the text to assigning roles, from the drama to the lighting, the costumes and the posters," explains Jolente De Keersmaeker, who with Sara De Roo, Damiaan De Schrijver and Frank Vercruyssen makes up the group founded in 1989 in Antwerp, Belgium. On the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of September the company will be the guests of Short Theatre in Rome, a multidisciplinary festival under the artistic direction of Fabrizio Arcuri, in which they will present the Italian premiere of *Betrayal* by Harold Pinter.

How do rehearsals work? "We spend most of our time sitting around a table," says De Keersmaeker. "We choose the text, and rewrite it until we have a new script to which everyone has contributed in terms of studying the characters and the context."

We only start rehearsing on stage a few days before opening night, but the final result is what we put on stage when the audience is in the room." Going on stage doesn't mean reproducing something you've memorised, it means breathing life into a creation which changes every night: "A tg STAN performance is not a dogma: if anything, it's an invitation to dialogue."

Working as a group can't always be easy – it must require mediation ... "In reality, when we can't find a common understanding, we don't look for a compromise. We keep talking until a powerful idea emerges that we can all agree on. We're always very critical both of the performance on stage and of ourselves. Sometimes delicate or complex situations arise, but we resolve them through mutual trust."

Although every actor is part of the collective, "We're not always together," says De Keersmaeker. "Over the years we've banded together with many different collaborators, united by shared affinities."

For *Betrayal*, we called on Robby Cleiren from *De Roovers*, another theatre collective from Antwerp. In *The Cherry Orchard*, which we presented last year at the KunstenFestivalDesArts in Brussels, we worked with eight guest actors, five of whom were recent graduates from the Academy." On the subject of *Betrayal*: apart from the love triangle, under the surface of the play runs the theme of the elusiveness of feelings and of their truth – in the end we discover that all of the characters have betrayed each other.

There is nothing new under the sun ... "Pinter's characters are consumed by passion, struggling with the inevitable mediocrity of their lives. As if wielding a scalpel he lays bare desires and pride, lies and weaknesses; glorifying and at the same time making a mockery of love. In our view, *Betrayal* is a timeless text, which puts the internal conflicts of every human being under the microscope."

Exploring themes such as loyalty, hypocrisy and self-deception elevates the prosaicness of human relationships to a universal level."

What are your upcoming projects? "In the spring of 2017 we're putting on a new play written by Tiago Rodrigues, playwright and artistic director at the Teatro Nacional in Lisbon; in the autumn we're working with a big ensemble on several Molière comedies (*The Bourgeois Gentleman*, *The Miser*)." Working without a director – is that a form of protest? "No," smiles De Keersmaeker, "We're not 'against' anything. Our choice was born out of the conviction that 'the group' is the way of working we believe society should aim for. With no directions from anyone, but trying to achieve individual dreams and aspirations in a shared way. In that sense, the way we work is a political choice."

Laura Zangarini  
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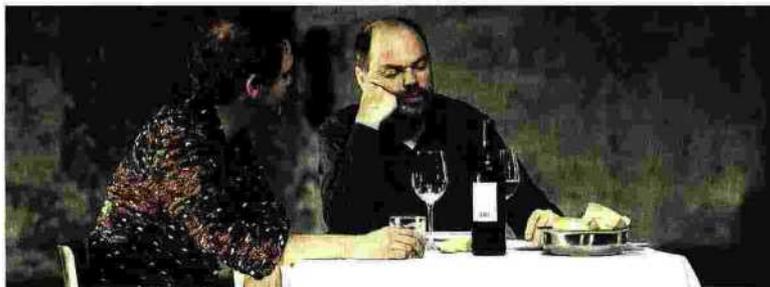
If we can't find a common understanding, we don't look for a compromise. We keep talking until an idea emerges that we can all agree on. We resolve every delicate situation through mutual trust

#### The group

- The Flemish theatre collective tg STAN was established in Antwerp in 1989

- The name is an acronym for "Toneelspelersgezelschap" (which is Dutch for "company of actors") and Stop Thinking About Names, to emphasise the importance of the group over the individual and the absence of any hierarchy or roles

- Recent works include: "Scenes from a marriage" (2013) from the Bergman film; "Betrayal" (2014) by Harold Pinter; "The Cherry Orchard" (2015) by Chekhov



#### "Betrayal"

Robby Cleiren (aged 45) and Frank Vercruyssen (50) in a scene from Pinter's *Betrayal*, which the Belgian group tg STAN will stage on 9 and 10 September in Rome as part of the Short Theatre festival (7-18 September)

