

The gang of four of Tg STAN
an interview with the four actors of Tg STAN

This gang of four Belgian actors uses drama texts without a director standing between them and the audience. But their iconoclastic and vibrant work doesn't exclude it – on the contrary, it gives it back its autonomy.

There are four of them, two men and two women, and they don't really care if they're trendy or not. Still they managed to invent a new way of making theatre, while bringing to this art a sense of urgency and necessity, a thoroughly contemporary kind of energy, tuned to the rhythms and concerns of our time.

Jolente De Keersmaecker, Sara De Roo, Damiaan De Schrijver, and Frank Vercruyssen make up the original core of Tg STAN - Tg stands for 'toneelspelersgezelschap', an unpronounceable word for French-speakers meaning 'company of theatre performers', and STAN for 'stop thinking about names'. 'Not because we wanted to ignore the history of the theatre or to dispense with it', says Frank Vercruyssen, 'but when we set up the company in 1989, we just couldn't agree on a name. So we toyed with that impossibility.'

A visit to STAN at their Antwerp headquarters involves a climb to the fourth floor of a 1900 brick building in the old harbour district that used to be a warehouse, the 'Magasins et Entrepôts Réunis'. Upon our arrival the members of the collective are at work around the long wooden table that seems to be the hub of the huge loft occupied by the company.

And the discussion is lively. 'Functioning as a collective is fundamental to our project and our work', they declare right off the bat. Adding with a smile: 'That's why our meetings are frequent, long-winded, spirited, sometimes even heated and filled with tension...'

The four actors, who were all born around 1970, met at the Antwerp conservatoire at the end of the Eighties. The fourth original member, Waas Gramser, left after a few years, while Sara De Roo joined the company two years after its creation. 'What threw us together', explains Jolente De Keersmaecker (the choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker's sister), 'was the wish to work without a director. As actors we didn't want to be mere tools in the hands of an all-powerful, god-like creature whose vision and dreams we would have to serve, every night all over again. We wanted complete responsibility for our own choices of texts, sets, costumes...'

At the conservatoire the four young actors requested as their mentors Matthias de Koning, one of the founders of Dutch company Discordia, and the Flemish actor Josse De Pauw. These two artists opened the way for a new approach in the theatre. 'What we had in common was a loss of faith in illusion on stage and in the embodiment of the character by the actor', explains Frank Vercruyssen.

With the help of their older colleagues, the young Flemings staged two graduation performances that were immediately snapped up by all programmers in Flanders and

the Netherlands: *Achter de canapé/ Yvonne op*, after *Yvonne, Princess of Burgundy* by Witold Gombrowicz, and *Jan, scènes uit het leven op het land*, after Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. And so STAN was born, a company of actors who collectively direct each of their performances.

‘We spend about two months on a text, sitting around the table. We always translate it ourselves, be it Molière, Chekhov, Ibsen or Bernhard’, they tell us. ‘This lengthy task, carried out together, produces a dramaturgy. It takes up the best part of our production work. We never have rehearsals in the traditional sense before the première, we don't set up our performances. We don't act as if we were presenting a beautiful and fully finished little gem to the audience. Every night failure, hope, love and danger have to be present, as vividly as possible.’

‘We don't care for virtuosity, we'd rather encourage the audience to participate actively through a performance's simplicity or fragility. And that's not easy. It's one of the paradoxes of the theatre: the most straightforward and vivid result is the hardest to achieve.’

‘Yes, we wanted to demystify all conventions’, add Sara De Roo and Damiaan De Schrijver, ‘to expose the mechanisms – of lying, of illusion – in order to turn the members of the audience into accomplices of the actors, to make them think as much for themselves as possible. That's why we don't recognize ourselves in the ‘aloof acting style’ label we often see applied to us. Although we don't play characters in the psychological sense, we perform the text such as it resonates for us, in the hope that it will also resonate for every other individual.’

The paradox of the theatre, of the actor – on which the troupe even built a performance, *du serment de l'écrivain du roi et de Diderot*, performed in Paris in 2003 – truly seems Tg STAN's linchpin. Perhaps because, as in Thomas Bernhard's work, it allows them to come closest to life's complexity, to speak about serious matters with devastating and vital humour, to demystify theatrical conventions the better to return to the theatre's fundamental function. Sara De Roo sums it up: ‘Ever since Shakespeare and Molière, this has always been true: only when a fool tells the truth about the world can the audience accept it.’

Le Monde, Fabienne Darge, September 14th, 2005