

tg Stan: STOP THINKING ABOUT NAMES!

Ein Gespräch mit:

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**SW/CP** Could you please tell us the story of tg Stan from the very beginning?

**FRANK** We met each other at the Theatre School of Antwerp where we all started in 1985. We also finished the school together in the same year. In 1989 we started our company in Belgium. One of the actors is not with us anymore. She left tg Stan seven or eight years ago, because she wanted to start her own company. There were four of us when we finished school. The let's call them examination projects had been "Achter de canape/ Yvonne op" based on Yvonne Prinzess of Burgunleaves by Gombrovicz and "Jan, scenes uit het leven op het land" based on Uncle Vanya by Chekov. After school was finished there were a couple of organisers from Belgium, namely De Beursschouwburg in Brussels, Monty in Antwerp, Stuck in Leuven and Toneelschuur Haarlem in Holland, who invited us to perform those projects away from school for a few times. That was in 1989, and for this purpose we had to legally form some sort of company. How else can you present yourself? So during summer we came together and invented the name and set up a small structure merely as a vehicle to be able to perform these two productions. Which we did. And after that ...

**DAMIAAN** ... we split.

**FRANK** Yes, we thought about splitting and we examined the fact whether we were just forced together by school or whether it was more than that. And after a while we decided to do another production together.

**JOLENTE** After a year.

**FRANK** It was "---van geen belang", after "A Woman of no Importance" by Oscar Wilde.

**SW/CP** Are you saying that the process of thinking took you a whole year ?

**DAMIAAN** No, no, Frank was working with somebody else ...

**FRANK** ... and I was doing my civil service and stuff like that. And, if I

remember this correctly, the four of us did another production right after "Jan, scenes uit het leven op het land" and "Achter de canape/Yvonne op" which was produced by Toneelschuur in Haarlem. That was "Rosalinde" based on "As you like it". It was only after that we kind of split to examine whether we had formed the company purely because of external circumstances or whether it was something more than that. Everybody went his own way for a while. Jolente went to Germany. Damiaan made productions. I did my civil service. And then after a year in 1991 we came together again in Brussels. There was a Festival, Bruzzle, organized namely by the Beursschouwburg. For that Festival we made a performance based on the first act and the first scene of the second act of A Woman of no Importance: "...van geen belang".

**SW/CP** Did you already use the label STAN back then?

**JOLENTE** Yes, we used it right from the beginning.

**SW/CP** What does STAN mean? Does it mean something or did you just make it up?

**FRANK** It means "Stop thinking about names". We could not agree on a name. We already almost split over that issue before we had even started. So we decided to 'stop thinking about names'.

**SW/CP** I think everybody including ourselves wondered if it is programmatic to say: stop thinking about big names. Is this a way to be democratic? Are 'names' of no importance at all?

**DAMIAAN** (Big smile) Well, Stanislawski is in it ---  
Stan Laurel ...

**JOLENTE** Stan Ockers, who is a very famous Flemish bicycle driver.

**SW/CP** In this way many famous names are hidden in this abbreviation.

**FRANK** The name was loaded with more meaning afterwards, but that's not how it started.

And anyway since 1989 (the year we graduated) we never felt obliged to stay together. Even today we always examine the fact whether or not we still have something to say to each other or to talk about and - we are ten years and thirty six productions further today. We still do ask ourselves if we still belong together and if we still have something to add to the knowledge of each other or to the theatre. That's the only way we can survive. We never pretended to agree, for instance, or to be of completely the same opinion on anything. That's our backbone, actually. If we talk

about how we got together contentwise, or how we got to where we are, we are children of both Stanislavski and Brecht. We started heavily with Stanislavski with Peter Gorissen and Luk Perceval.

**DAMIAAN** In school we learned methods, acting, interpreting...

**SW/CP** ... and that's what you did ...

**JOLENTE** Yes, building characters. Peter Gorissen, who was really a kind of Stanislavski teacher, and Luk Perceval were also the ones who taught us building a character. But he also gave us a sense of freedom, the freedom to build the character and to stimulate your fantasy and your creativity. Because you came from a school ...

**FRANK** ... from a performance school. You know showing, showing, showing - and he told us to be aware of the fact that the floor of the stage is exactly the same floor where the audience is on and that you are not some sort of floating character, but that you start from yourself. And of course that's our basis.

**DAMIAAN** And he is also doing his own evolution. So he is one of the most bizarre players. Peter Gorissen is an extremely good actor. He went crazy all the time because he cannot work the way theatre expects you to, so he does not fit in.

**FRANK** The school always worked against us and we always worked against the school, so we were not exactly what you call happy or good students. We were really not accepted by the school and vice versa.

**SW/CP** But you never got kicked out?

**ALL** No.

**FRANK** But they were very glad to get rid of us after four years.

**JOLENTE** Normally you have three years, but the three of us had to double the second year.

**FRANK** The guys who decided wanted to see another sort of acting. So when we had to do that year again, the three of us were very angry - and then Josse De Pauw, another Belgium Actor, came along and he brought us back to the ground saying that acting was not really as important as we thought it would be. So from then on everything went smoothly. We started to really do what we wanted to do. And then in the last year...

**JOLENTE** For the first time he said something like "make it on your own". Damiaan and I then did something and Frank did something with some other people. It was a kind of collage -performance, where the text that I brought and the one he brought were put together. He just looked at it and made little comments, but didn't force us into anything anymore. So in fact it was really like our first own work.

**DAMIAAN** This was the start for a new performance afterwards that's also important.

**JOLENTE** And it was also the first step to develop our own thoughts. These were the seeds for what was to come later. We decided what we wanted to wear. We decided everything. This "click" was something very personal and really important. There is a whole world beyond what you can ever do as an actor playing a role. That you can decide for yourself as an actor, take over responsibility for yourself, searching for your own, what those areas of freedom are and which limits you touch upon ...

**DAMIAAN** ... and to be independent - not to depend on a director anymore.

**SW/CP** How important was Luk Perceval ?

**FRANK** Well, lets say Peter Gorissen started with some sort of approach to playing and Luk Perceval took that a step further. Luk was a completely different person at that time, his approach to acting has changed a lot since then.

**DAMIAAN** Peter was very intimate and introvert and Luk projected. He was extrovert.

**FRANK** Peter was absolutely not behaving like a director. He was lot more anarchic and a lot more democratic. We were not allowed to show the production we made together. The Jury did not allow us to show it.

**DAMIAAN** In fact Ivo Van Hove and Dora van der Groen were a little bit against our way of putting things together. They were curious, at the most, but they did not have enough trust in us.

**SW/CP** Pretending seems to be some kind of key word. Is pretending something you hate?

**FRANK** Yes, well, I mean it is a part of acting. You just have to put it in the right perspective.  
But then we went to the fourth year and in the rules it says, that in the

"last year" everybody can ask their own teachers. We asked Josse De Pauw and Matthias de Koning from Maatschappij Discordia to work with us and they said yes and then we made those two productions. So Matthias de Koning came in our lives and he was the, let's say, the second really important ball to balance off Brecht and Stanislavski.

**DAMIAAN** He was very analytic.

**FRANK** He was the big illusion breaker, because we were always trying honesty and not lies on stage. Even though we were so conscious and so conscientious about being real, through him we realised that we were actually still lying in some ways. So he was the illusion breaker, and his method, his approach to creating a performance was so fantastic and so interesting for us, that we actually are still working with his approach as a basis for our productions.

**SW/CP** Tell us about this what you call analytical method.

**DAMIAAN** It is not only analytic, it is about what you are doing as a player. It is about theatre and that it's also something you can show. And that's about reality.

**FRANK** Yes. The thing is that Matthias de Koning really is one of the first-generation of Brecht's children.

**DAMIAAN** Together with Jan Decorte.

**FRANK** Yes. So we are second or even third generation of followers. We listened to what Brecht had to offer. But there was always more than Brecht in us. It was not only 'Verfremdung'. We also had this sensitivity of being the actor on stage Stanislavski is talking about - and then we added the Brecht's cold analytical thinking to that. We are descendants of both these very important figures. Afterwards we worked a lot with Matthias. He was then, as we would like to define it, ...

**DAMIAAN** ... a privileged watcher ...

**FRANK** ... who is working on a production, but who is not on stage and who is not going to say you are going to do that, but who gives us his questions and his thoughts, but leaves hands over the responsibility of decisions to us. We did five or six productions with him. And we keep working with him actually. He was and he is extremely important for us. He more than anyone else is artistically the father of our company. Damiaan was on stage with him last year. So that was roughly the story of our company.

**SW/CP** That's the start of the story.

**FRANK** Yes, but afterwards we kind of evolved in all different ways. So we always looked at the company as a sort of sponge.

**DAMIAAN** A breathing thing.

**FRANK** We always expanded and then we went very small again. There were two actors and then there were ten actors as guests from other companies. And then we went to work with somebody else. So we always worked on this sort of freedom-basis.

**SW/CP** Is this an existing network of exchange between artists from one group to another group, actors going to work with different artists somewhere else and then coming back?

**JOLENTE** Yes, it is something we created.

**FRANK** It existed because we found out that there were kindred spirits out there looking for the same thing. So we worked with Discordia because we liked their work and they liked us.

**DAMIAAN** We worked with Dito'Dito because Jolente knew Willy Thomas and Mieke Verdin.

**FRANK** Creating performances means offering an audience something that is really of us. Then people are responding to that and some actors are reacting, too, and you feel you have a future with them on stage. And then you create your own little network. There are all in all maybe five or six or seven groups in Belgium and Holland at this moment who are working on the same sort of basis of the "emancipated actor" or how ever you want to call it. There is Discordia, of course, there is Jan Decorte there is Dito'Dito, there is Dood Paard in Holland -they all are children of Decorte and Discordia - that makes it simple.

**DAMIAAN** Maybe the Dadaists in Germany tried to do the same thing.

**FRANK** It's about chaos turning into order and vice versa. Since we are a company that has its own logistics, we are able to communicate on and off stage with other people, and are free to go away for three months to make a production with another company that gives us the opportunity actually to work with those people. For instance, I did a production with Luk Perceval five years ago "True West" based on Sam Sheppard.

**DAMIAAN** It was a rather strange experience for me to work with him on "Ödipus".

**SW/CP** Is this part of your programme to say: Let's discuss theatre while doing it and not in cafes or while attending parties? "Platonav", your last production, seems to be discussed theatre and discussion of the self by means of the text and the stage.

**FRANK** Yes, we like to see that as a consequence of our philosophy. It is not an aim or a decided goal or anything. It is just a part of the decision that you don't let reality escape from stage. So if you decide to involve your own thinking and life while you are playing, then all those aspects of your life will sneak onto stage. That means your political view or your personal view on things or your relationship with theatre and acting or other actors will be there, if you allow them to be there. Dramaturges will call your theatre politically engaged, but actually we are just people who don't shut up about what they think, not even on a stage. We don't have a philosophy about "should theatre be political". We are political people, so when we are doing productions you will get to know that. And we are people who are involved in the art of making a performance and in the method of making a performance and we will discuss that. We will put ourselves naked on stage and show what we feel or what we think about how to make a production.

**SW/CP** But isn't there an argument put on stage by the way you work?

**JOLENTE** It is a way of being.

**DAMIAAN** It is the structure of the company. It is the way of thinking about life. It is the way of showing yourself as a thinking person. That is also important. It is not a moralistic company.

**SW/CP** Is there a difference between you on stage and you right here?

**JOLENTE** Of course, there is, because on stage we do have a text.

**FRANK** Yes! There is an aspect of, let's say, realness and truth and political awareness. And life is political and by being awake on stage you are giving a political statement and there is also the clown aspect of acting - I mean acting as being a fool on stage and making people laugh or cry or what ever and being very vain about yourself, that's an equally important part of being on stage. So of course, there is a difference, but in both cases we start from ourselves.

**SW/CP** In "Platonov", could there have been something like a free space that allows for things happening on the outside to enter the world on stage and you would invent a comment on it?

**FRANK** Not literally. That's the only adagio we have, that we stick to the text.

**DAMIAAN** Not always. There are exceptions.

**FRANK** Yes but that's a decision we take beforehand. It is actually Damiaan who introduced that aspect to our work during the last two years. When we did "My Dinner with André" which was based 95% on a text, there was also room for text-improvisation. And also with "DeSchrijver DeKoning", based on Karl Valentin. But me for instance I have never done that. I have never said any text on stage that I did not know I would be going to say.

**SW/CP** How are you working with texts when you develop your productions?

**DAMIAAN** It is a guide.

**FRANK** It is everything. It has always been everything.

**DAMIAAN** We work a long time sitting around the table.

**SW/CP** Doing what?

**DAMIAAN** Doing translation work.

**FRANK** We have a very strange relationship to written language. You know Belgium and Holland are two different countries. They share the same language, but the vocabulary and the pronunciation is fundamentally different. It is like English and American. Ninety percent of the translations we have of plays are Dutch.

**DAMIAAN** All the Chekovs are translated by Dutchmen.

**FRANK** That means, that there is an initial distance between us and the text. We always thought that we have to respect the text and speak the text as it is, but we cannot deny the fact that we do have a language. So we fit the text to our mouth and that forces us to translate everything. What we do is, we sit around a table and we have all those translations from all the languages that we are capable of understanding - that means

French, German and English and Dutch of course lying in front of us.

**DAMIAAN** And German is good for Chekov.

**FRANK** Yes, we compare every sentence with all the different possibilities. Then we make our own decision about what the sentence should be. And by doing that, we have very interesting and very deep conversations about the content of the sentence, because if I want to defend a certain translation of a certain word and Damiaan has got a completely different idea of the contents of the sentence ...

**DAMIAAN** ... a formal or informal ... for example ...

**FRANK** ... then we have to talk about the content... that's almost parasitical like having a mushroom on your shoulder and extremely technical work. And after that, actually, the only thing you still need to do is to learn it by heart and then do it.

**SW/CP** The first time you put everything together is the day of the opening?

**FRANK** Yes.

**SW/CP** You never go on stage before that?

**FRANK** We don't do text rehearsals.

**SW/CP** No spacing - no physical decisions?

**DAMIAAN** Spacing yes - we create the roles a little bit like traffic.

**JOLENTE** Traffic-roles, we call it.

**FRANK** It is not that we prohibit ourselves from doing anything. We talk about everything, but when we do text rehearsals, we never escape from the reality that we are in. So we are doing text rehearsals sitting here around the table. One week before the performance, we go to the place where the premiere will be. We start to buy things, we talk everything through again and we also go through the text on stage. We do this, because there is one stage left in the order of things, that you still have to do and that's going away from the table, being able to look into each other's eyes and speak the text.

**DAMIAAN** And it is very simple. Is it interesting to stand or to not stand? Is it interesting to be in a group? Is it interesting to be alone? Will

everybody be on stage? If there is no open off, what's the meaning? Are we going to hide away somebody or will everybody be on the scene? That's what you talk about in fact, that's everything you need.

**FRANK** And you make functional decisions for a first performance, so that you have a starting point. For instance in "Platonov", we decided very clearly, what the first act should be. How people should behave on stage, what the second, the third and the fourth act should be. And then you start and you feel the ups and downs and the pros and cons of that decisions, and then you start developing and changing things. We don't deny the fact that we are in a line on stage. No, you don't deny the fact that there is a physical aspect to acting. The physical aspect, the mathematics of stage, the dialogues of bodies on stage ...

**SW/CP** Is there a certain erotic to the fact that you postpone the physical aspect as far as possible and then a week before the opening you just go there?

**DAMIAAN** Yes, sure. And there is also the fear of repeating yourself too quickly. So you try - and that's erotic - not to do the same love-work every night.

**FRANK** We don't judge or condemn actors who want to reproduce a director's dream. That's just not what we do.

**SW/CP** Why did you decide to not have anybody looking on your rehearsals from the outside?

**DAMIAAN** That is not completely so.

**JOLENTE** It is something that grew.

**DAMIAAN** Not everybody is on the scene all the time so we shift roles being the outside eyes between ourselves.

**JOLENTE** In the first years Matthias was always there. He was the one to stand outside, the one who was looking and was sitting around the table and listening. And then afterwards when we were rehearsing on stage he was saying some very strange words in the beginning -strange explanations. He was a master in bringing the tension up till the premiere. I remember very well when we prepared "The Importance of Being Earnest". It was a night before the premiere and he said "Are we gonna do it or not ?" He was the pusher who forced us to go further all the time. He was also the guy who taught us to have a conversation around the table. That's an important thing. That's how you push yourself to the edge and

then you let it go. We have been doing that in all kinds of forms and different combinations for ten years now. For example in "Point Blank" (Platonov) when the Portuguese people, who were working with us came in, it was completely new to them to work like that. We had problems with them, because they were really blocked.

**FRANK** Blocked by the freedom.

**JOLENTE** But it is not like a system. There is no "Stan-System". It is not like "the Stan-People" are the ones who don't rehearse. That rumour has been spreading for a couple of years now.

**SW/CP** The collaboration with this Portuguese group of people, what was that about?

**JOLENTE** We met them two years ago. We went to Portugal to Centro Cultural de Belem and worked there for three weeks. In the end, we performed five different productions. We played "Public Enemy" "The Last Ones" "Yesterday We Will" "Pick up / Cancer" "One 2 Life". They asked us to give workshops with thirty people and those people were chosen by Jorge Silva Melo, the theatre programmer of Centro Cultural de Belem. These people came from everywhere. There were theatre students, people, who were already working as artists ...

**FRANK** Afterwards we were asked to do a production with a couple of those guys. We then chose four people we felt we had a future with.

**JOLENTE** And that's a very very short time. Met the people for three weeks and then we decided to work with those four because we had a connection with them during the workshop. So that's how we met. And then the year after, we made a production. It was a year ago now. We did "One 2 Life" -based on George Jackson with Willi Thomas, Frank, Malumba and me. Malumba is a black American actor. We started working and he was a guy coming from a totally different background of acting. It took us months and months to make ourselves understood. For example, metaphorically speaking, I don't get together with people who don't look into my eyes when I' m on stage.

**SW/CP** How long does it take to build a production?

**FRANK** Eight weeks.

**DAMIAAN** Sometimes it is even shorter.

**FRANK** "Platonov" was five weeks.

**JOLENTE** Yes, but in fact we wrote the text. We made a combination of Michael Frayns' "Wild Honey" and the original version of "Platonav": And Sarah and I did a kind of reduction -

**DAMIAAN** Blueprint ...

**JOLENTE** Yes, a blueprint of a text. We knew beforehand that the work would be very different, because there was a lot of work to do. There were all new people together - thirteen people not knowing each other. We did not have to translate it because the English text was there in a translation we agreed on.

**SW/CP** How come you know that you would use this English version? As you said for Chekov German would be the language?

**FRANK** It is the only vehicle, that we have in our confrontation with the Portuguese actors ...

**SW/CP** What will your next production be like?

**JOLENTE** We are preparing "Tussenstand" which is a lot of work, of course and Frank and I are making Tomeo's "La carta".

**DAMIAAN** A monologue.

**JOLENTE** It is about a guy, who wrote a letter to somebody and he is giving his servant the instructions how to pass the letter on. It is hundred pages. Frank is going to play it and we are now working on the text. Damiaan is also going to be on stage as the one who is listening to Frank.

**DAMIAAN** It is also my speciality eating and listening --- being a lawyer. A lawyer of the text, of the writer and then the character.

**SW/CP** Would you like to become a lawyer of yourself?

**DAMIAAN** I think that's very close - yes.

**JOLENTE** No. I do not think so. A text does something with you and to you at a certain point.

**FRANK** You are limited about your own capacities so you try to go further with what you do. Some people may look at it as a quality, but most of the time you look at this as a limitation.

**SW/CP** It seems that theatre is always about limits - about hurting limits - about extending limits. Since each of you is at the same time an actor, dramaturge and director, this means you widen limits anyway. What is your obsession or your urge behind making theatre like this?

**FRANK** Being alive is the goal.

**DAMIAAN** When you play theatre in a way that you do not want to do it - than you die. I have died already by doing a performance exactly the same way forty times in a row. That's dying for me.

**JOLENTE** For me, when I really get that kind of kick - and that happens maybe three or four times a year -I can do something. I had it for example a few times with "Point Blank" where a sentence in fact can be completely different and new and necessary. Of course, it depends on how open and how direct you are to each other. In combination with the text that is something that gives me a lot of joy. I think, I feel what a good performance is, and Frank feels it and Damiaan feels it. When all things are like coming together in the right place ...

**DAMIAAN** That's rare.

**JOLENTE** That's really very rare. But that's what you are doing the whole time: searching for such a moment where everything fits together perfectly.

**SW/CP** Are you thinking about the next years?

**FRANK** Yes, we now have to ask the government for money for the next four years and apparently we will be doing that.

**DAMIAAN** But we cannot look into the future. We can say what the ambitions are, what dream we share, but to say exactly which projects we are going to do - no.

**FRANK** But apparently we keep having plans or ideas for productions.

**JOLENTE** And again it all starts from the text.

**FRANK** And it always starts all over again. With every production you have to start from the beginning. You have to learn all over again. When we started Tomeo we didn't know anything about anything.

**JOLENTE** You are based in this kind of realness and you do not want to loose yourself. You want to start a dialogue between yourself and the text.

**DAMIAAN** In the end the audience is a player too. That is what we always say: we can never play without the audience as a player.

**JOLENTE** They make the play with us. We never say our audience has to be educated. It has to be like this or that.

**DAMIAAN** Our kind of theatre is not only avantgarde, it is not only experimental. In fact it is very old fashioned, a very classical common theatre. It is not new and it is not difficult at all.

**FRANK** Yes, in fact we really make very simple things.