

Together we STAN

Antwerp's Leading theatre collective specialises in independent, multilingual performances

Tom Peeters

Next year the Antwerp-based *toneelspelersgezelschap* STAN (for obvious reasons, better known as tg STAN) will celebrate 25 years of creating and performing without an artistic director. In the early 1990s, their choice to work as a real collective was a breath of fresh air on the Flemish theatre scene. "We still don't want to work for someone who tells us what to do," says founding member Jolente De Keersmaecker.

Over the years, cross-pollination with guest actors and companies both national and international have kept the inspiration flowing at tg STAN, which has become one of Flanders' leading contemporary theatre groups, giving old repertoire a new life in modern times.

Flexible in switching between Dutch, French and English, they still grace stages across Europe. Next week sees the local premiere of *Nora*, their striking deconstruction of a happy marriage, based on Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen iconic *A Doll's House*.

Toneelspelersgezelschap means theatre players' company, while STAN stands for Stop Thinking About Names, meaning it functions as a group, not as a bunch of individuals. In 1989, forming a collective was the shared ambition of four graduates of the Royal Conservatory of Antwerp. Today, it is still their main goal.

"We didn't want to work for someone who would tell us what to do," says Jolente De Keersmaecker, one of the four founding members. "Being a collective was our basic principle, our fundamental, and it has been our biggest achievement ever since."

Addicted to independence

Working without a director was not simple, De Keersmaecker admits, "but we couldn't do it otherwise. Our teachers at the conservatory taught us to think for ourselves: Josse De Pauw and Matthias de Koning helped us out with our graduation projects, but they made sure we were the ones creating them."

For the actors, it has been a self-emancipatory road. Not only did they have to create their own structure "by trial and error", but with every new production they also had to ask themselves the same questions: "Who am I, as an actor, but also as a human being? What do I want to see? What do I find interesting?"

"But once we tasted this candy, we were addicted to it," smiles De Keersmaecker. "We still don't want to work for someone who tells us what to do."

Taking decisions collectively means giving and taking, not only in a scene, but also on a personal level. "You can only succeed if you grant



The backbone of STAN, from left: Sara De Roo, Frank Verduyssen, Jolente De Keersmaecker and Damiaan De Schrijver

every member of the collective his or her freedom," explains De Keersmaecker. "At the same time you have to accept that your personal freedom is not primordial."

Throughout their common career, STAN actors have also worked outside of theatre. De Keersmaecker, for instance, has collaborated with her sister, Brussels choreographer Anne Teresa, and her dance company Rosas. STAN colleagues Frank Verduyssen, Sara De Roo and Damiaan De Schrijver are also TV and movie actors, and you can see the latter two now in the new Flemish series *Met man en macht*.

At the kitchen table

"We don't have to work together all the time," says De Keersmaecker, sitting at the big kitchen table in the group's Antwerp headquarters, on the top floor of an old warehouse. It's the same table at which they discuss their work. "We may not be known for rehearsing the scene, but the long discussions we have around this table about the text, carefully comparing the original material and translations, are to us almost as important as the performance itself."

They had just finished a meeting. Coming back from Lisbon, where they staged Maxim Gorky's *Summerfolk* in French with Portuguese surtitles, it was the right moment – in between plays – to see how a group with no fixed structure works. De Keersmaecker could use some rest, she says. Meaning she needs to empty her head before starting to work on other productions. "In January we performed a different

children. "Did that make her strong, or maybe she was too spoiled?" muses De Keersmaecker. "We've chosen this play because it's a nice combination of intriguing personal relationships embedded in a society of consumerism, which makes it a very current play. In the beginning Nora yells: 'We have plenty of money! Aren't we fantastic?' But at the same time it's this capitalistic system that's blinding her and, in general, makes people forget about the basics of human relationships."

Strength in numbers

STAN's 25th birthday next year will include a revival of *JDX: A Public Enemy*, a reworking of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. "In 1993, it was our reaction to the rise of the ultra-right-wing political party Vlaams Blok [now *Vlaams Belang*]," explains De Keersmaecker. "Basically, the play raises the question: 'Who's right: The masses or the lone wolf?' And how should we feel about the fact that a lot of people are starting to vote for this party? We're curious how the text, also written by Ibsen, measures our current political climate."

They not trying to moralise, she assures me. "Rather, we're trying to expose motives. Isn't that what all great repertory theatre does?"

JDX ends with the words: The world's strongest man is he who most often stands alone. "Again, you can interpret this on different levels. But being strong, standing up for your own opinion: Isn't that the start of everything?"

It surely was for STAN, whose consistency – perhaps call it stubbornness – has led to a long-term artistic vision, which eventually became a life's work.

IN THE WINGS AT STAN

Nora (in English)

Leuven, Stadsschouwburg, 20-21 February
Antwerp, Broula, 22-23 February
Ghent, Minard, 28 February-2 March
Brussels, Kaaithheater, 7-8 June

Bernhard 3 (working title, in Dutch)

Brussels, Kaaistudio's, 23-30 April
Antwerp, Monty, 2-4 May
Leuven, Schouwburg, 14-16 May

► www.stan.be



STAN's English-language production of *Nora*, based on Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, premieres in Leuven next week

WEEK IN ARTS

The Flemish cinema industry has earmarked €38,000 this year to support efforts to promote the distribution of Flemish films abroad. The fund will be administered through the Flanders Audiovisual Fund. A programme dedicated to promoting the release of films in cinemas will further spark interest in foreign markets, where Flemish films are already doing well at festivals.

► www.flandersimage.com

Boek.be, which promotes reading and supports booksellers across Flanders, awarded its annual **Gulden Boek (Golden Book)** to Peter Van den Eede, who programmes literature events at the Vooruit culture centre in Ghent. The award goes to someone who works outside the books industry yet has made an outstanding contribution to the promotion of literature. Van den Eede launched Vooruit's *Uitgelezen (Read)* 10 years ago. The event, at which two panellists and three guests discuss three books they've all read, has become one of the centre's most popular events.

► www.boek.be

The Flemish Television Academy has announced the **nominations for the best in TV** of 2012. The series *Clan* and *Quiz me quick* each pulled down the same three nominations: Best Actor (Dirk Roofthoof for *Clan* and Ben Segers for *Quiz*), Best Actress (Inge Paulussen for *Clan* and Tine Embrechts for *Quiz*) and Best Drama Series. Other nominations include *Astrid in Wonderland* and *Dr Livingstone* for Best Reality Programme and *Loslopen wild* and *Tegen de sterren op* for Best Comedy. The awards are handed out on 2 March.

► www.vlaamsetelevisiesterren.be

The iconic Groene Waterman bookshop in Antwerp has awarded its annual **prize to Australian author Matthew Condon's *Trout Opera***, a novel about the Sydney Olympic Committee's attempt to keep alive a 100-year-old man who they have appointed as a sort of Olympic mascot. "In rhythmic and sparkling prose, the author paints a picture of great landscapes ... and enchanting histories," the jury said of the book. The shop awards the prize to a new Dutch translation every year that it feels has been overlooked by critics and the public.

► www.groenewaterman.be

The renovations of the buildings of the **Red Star Line Museum** will be completed by next week and then the interior work can begin. The museum is set to open in September, with a new exhibition that will simulate the experience of taking a passenger ship from the port of Antwerp to the US, a trip the ships of the Red Star Line made hundreds of times in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

► www.redstarline.org