

### Bullhead

#### Illegal Hormones for the Mass Market

Right from the start *Bullhead*, the debut film by the Flemish director Michaël R. Roskam, received the equivalent of a standing ovation in the press. It began in February 2010 when the film was selected for the Berlin Film Festival; by the end of 2011 more than 450,000 Flemings had paid to see it. Virtually all the reviews, both in Belgium and abroad, began by referring to the powerful acting of Matthias Schoenaerts, who fattened himself up so as to play the role of hormone farmer Jacky Vanmarsenille with the necessary precision. This recognition gave Schoenaerts' career an immediate boost on the international stage. The film has since won awards at Beaune, Motovun, Austin, Montreal and Moscow, and *Bullhead* was selected as the Belgian entry for a Foreign Language Oscar. Good news for the Flemish film industry and for Michaël Roskam, but what kind of film is *Bullhead* actually, and is all the hype really justified?

*Bullhead* has often been described as a tragedy, with touches of Shakespeare and Martin Scorsese. This is an accurate description: the main character is a thoroughly tragic hero. He is predestined to go under in a cloud of dark fatality. His problem is the flesh, even more so than Hamlet, who in his day expressed the wish "O that this too, too solid flesh would melt". Jacky Vanmarsenille's spirit literally disappears under a gigantic pile of flesh. Jacky swallows huge quantities of testosterone, with the result that his flesh keeps growing and like a pernicious weed threatens to choke the plant. We only discover why he is taking testosterone later, in the course of two beautifully integrated flashbacks. We see how, as a child, Jacky was the victim of a dramatic act of violence that scarred him for the rest of his life. No matter how hard the adult Jacky tries to follow his finer instincts, the mass of flesh and the overdose of male hormones prevent him. For example, he's completely clueless as to how to go about winning the girl of his dreams.

The flash of brilliance that made *Bullhead* into such an extraordinary film is that Michaël R. Roskam set the subject of 'too-much-flesh' in the world of cattle farmers, cattle fatteners and hormone traders. The metaphor of the flesh works on more than one level, and usually in a very dramatic way. *Bullhead* is the story of a male culture of red meat, machismo, honour and violence. In the course of his career, Martin Scorsese made a lot of films on this theme. The resulting movies were often hard, just like *Bullhead*. However, *Bullhead* is not a testosterone film, but a film about testosterone. Most of the Flemish crime films that have been so popular with the public in recent years have been injected with far higher doses.

The story within which the central plot is played out has all the seeming hallmarks of a genre film, except that it isn't one. It could have been a crime film about the hormone mafia, or even a mafia film about rival clans fighting over territory. The reference to real-life criminal events, for example the murder of the veterinary inspector Karel Van Noppen in 1995, is equally misleading. We take note of it, and it connects the film to Flemish society, but it is not an essential part of the film.

In its less inspired moments, *Bullhead* slips up on the genre theme. For instance, the intrigue involving the police commissioner is clearly one of the film's less successful episodes. It seems to me that Roskam has made the film more complex in structure than it needed to be. As a viewer you don't need the tiny little pieces of the puzzle, since they merely divert your attention from the overall picture to the way it is put together.

There are also a few moments of comedy, to which a few critics took offence, more specifically the scenes involving the two Walloon garage mechanics working on the car used to commit the murder in question. There's a lot of blood and guts on screen here, but it also provides a cheerful if marginal commentary on Belgian society with its warring French- and Dutch-speaking communities.

Matthias Schoenaerts,

Photo by Nicolas Karakatsanis.



Strangely enough, these grotesque intermez-zos don't really detract from the tragic tenor of the work, any more than they do in Shakespeare's tragedies. He too was not averse to this sort of comic contrast. Moreover, alongside the pitch-black fatalist tone there is a subtle element of expressionist distortion running through the narrative. In the way Schoenaerts' fattened-up body is portrayed, in the desolate Flemish exteriors, the sombre landscapes, the aesthetics of the provincial highways, the roadside brothels, and the Flemish *faux chic*. Seldom has the countryside with its small farms and untidy farmsteads felt so cold and damp as in this film.

What makes *Bullhead* an important Flemish film is that the director has developed a universe of his own, a world with its own smell, in terms both of style and content. In Flanders a lot of work has been done in recent years in existing genres, formats and models. *Bullhead* bucks that trend. There are obviously film directors and films that have defined his vision, but the film is

not simply a carbon copy of an existing original.

Roskam has also deliberately opted for a restrained directing style. With the testosterone theme as starting point that is not an obvious choice, but it is this decision that makes Schoenaerts' role so powerful. His fellow hormone farmers are also portrayed in a calm, somewhat sedate fashion. There are no cold killers. Instead they are the prototype of the fun-loving, unthinking Fleming who likes to earn a bit on the side. They too belong to a clearly patriarchal culture, where the women might wear the pearls but definitely not the trousers. Both the men and the women speak a language that is completely turned in on itself: a dialect (both from the far east and the far west of the country) that is only understood in their own hamlet.

A second notable directing choice is the slow, contemplative pace which utterly precludes any vestige of an 'adrenaline film' approach. Roskam frequently has recourse to very slow-motion shots, which suggest that the characters' consciousness too is only working at half speed. The dark, wide-screen photography by Nicolas Karakatsanis, with its stark contrasts, fits nicely with the director's vision; Raf Keunen's score looms large and underlines the omnipresent feeling of deadly menace.

This decision to go slowly rather than opt for the classic fast-paced performance makes it all the more surprising that *Bullhead* has achieved audience figures that far more mass-market pictures could only dream of.

Since the *New Wave*, outstanding directors who are also outstanding scriptwriters have been referred to as auteurs. *Bullhead* shows that just such a one has been born in Flanders.

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*Bullhead* has been nominated for the 2012 Oscar Academy Awards in the Best Foreign Language Film category.

## Eccentric, Venomous, Topical

### Wunderbaum Theatre

On Sunday 21 November 2010 a small group of actors from Holland and Belgium performed *Looking for Paul* in the Redcat Theater in Los Angeles. The perspective in this production is set in the first instance by a female character from Rotterdam who finds herself confronted, against her will, by a work of art. To be precise, the woman's house stands right opposite the metre high Santa Claus, ["Gnome Buttplug", as it has been dubbed], by the American artist Paul McCarthy. She is of the opinion that this offensive work of art has seriously damaged her outlook and she travels to Los Angeles to meet McCarthy in person and wreak revenge.

Fiction and reality are beautifully intertwined here. The purchase of Santa Claus ten years ago by the municipality of Rotterdam did indeed cause quite a commotion and the work of art is still a topic of discussion today. Those for and against argue with each other about art in general and about the merit of this work in particular. At the very time that financial backing for art is a hot item and local and state subsidies are running into increasing difficulties, *Looking for Paul* meets the demand for engaged theatre that provides a commentary on the spirit of the age.

Their stay in Los Angeles also gave the actors from Wunderbaum the opportunity to do some research into the subsidy system in the United States. The discovery that the state of California hands out two million dollars a year to culture came as a shock to them. Wunderbaum alone receives that much in four years in the Netherlands. Up to now, that is, one should add, because in times of crisis the present government is certainly not inclined to subsidize art in general and theatre in particular as generously as before.

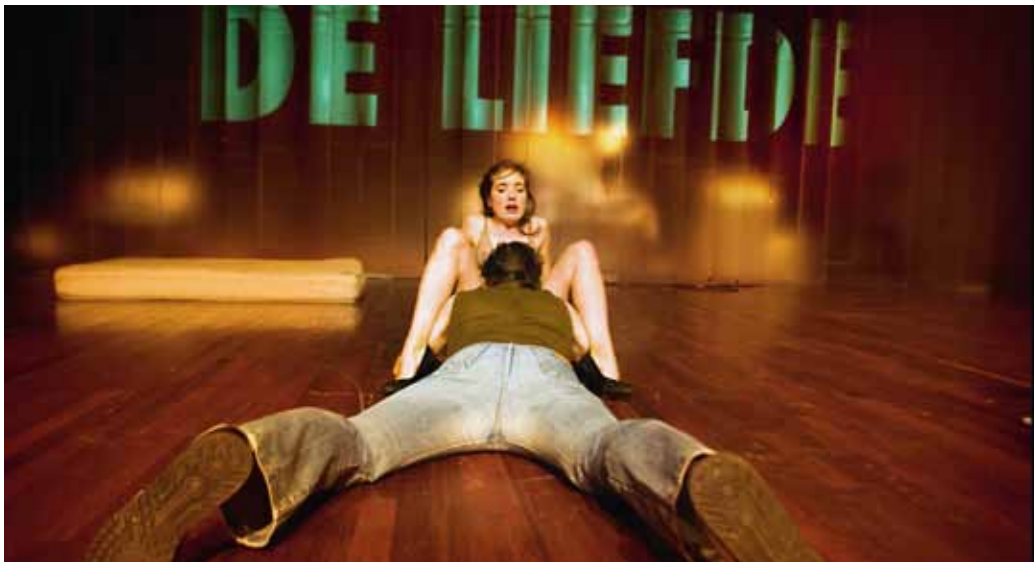
Discoveries like these were given a place in the production that ended with a twenty minute long tumultuous performance in the style of McCarthy, whom Wunderbaum greatly admires – in-

deed, McCarthy himself and his wife and daughter came to see the show. Documentary theatre that runs wild into chaotic slapstick and leaves the audience thunderstruck that is typical of Wunderbaum's work. Back in the Netherlands the group organized two theme-evenings on the topic of Paul McCarthy, with the showing of his video work, the performance of *Looking for Paul* and discussions afterwards on art and politics with different people involved in the field.

The name Wunderbaum is borrowed from a pine tree shaped air-freshener from Germany. Maybe it was the slogan, "Wunderbaum erfrischt die Luft in jeden Raum" [Wunderbaum freshens the air in every room], that gave the actors the idea of taking their name from the tree, because freshening the air and giving a new impulse to the theatre establishment is what the collective aims to do. Moreover, the Dutch word 'wonderboom' is the name for the castor oil plant (ricinus communis), an extremely poisonous plant, and Wunderbaum's productions are characterized by a certain degree of venom.

The exceptional talents of these actors who graduated from the theatre academy in Maastricht in 2001 were spotted by Johan Simons, probably the most important Dutch producer of the last decade. He took the group under the wing of his company ZT Hollandia, in Eindhoven, and when he moved to Belgium he took the actors with him as a sub-group of the prestigious NTGent where he was artistic director. Since 2009 Wunderbaum has been an independent company that produces shows under the supervision of the Rotterdam Schouwburg production house.

Apart from being extremely unusual and venomous – as *Looking for Paul* also demonstrates – Wunderbaum is highly engaged with what is going on in the world. The actors frequently research a sub-culture in modern society, they play reformed shopaholics (*Magna Plaza*, 2007), pseudo religious drifters (*Camp Jesus*, 2008), British football fans on a boozing trip (*Beer Tourist*, 2008) or the harassed inhabitants of a demolition area



Wunderbaum, *Our Pope*, 2011 © Fred Debrock.

[*Natives*, 2010]. In order to get as close as possible to the realities of life, the group prefer to act on location. So Magna Plaza could be seen not only in various shopping centres in Europe, but also, in a censored version, on a city square in Teheran.

For the 2011-2012 season the group is staying close to base with two productions for small auditoriums: *Our Pope* and *Flow my tears*. No production shows what a powerful collective Wunderbaum is better than *Our Pope*, based on a dramatic text by author and journalist Arnon Grunberg. Grunberg wrote the text at the request of the Teatr Współczesny from Wrocław in Poland. After reading it, the artistic director decided to abandon the planned cooperation. In a rejection letter that left no room for misunderstanding – published in the programme for the Wunderbaum performance – she mercilessly exposed the shortcomings of this undramatic text. Subsequently Grunberg handed the text over to the Wunderbaum actors, who are wholehearted fans of his contrary work.

*Our Pope* is both a kaleidoscopic farce and an evening's worth of provocation, not so much on account of the scornful treatment of the Catholic clergy, but because the text – certainly not a well made play – places a huge burden on the players' talent and the public's leniency. The energy and verve with which the actors handle the

coarse clichés and silly associative jokes command deep respect. It is definitely the bewitching power of the actors rather than the dramatic force of the original text that earns applause.

*Flow my Tears*, which had its première in January 2012, is a co-production with De Veenfabriek, a company from Leiden that specializes in musical theatre. Only a single actress from Wunderbaum plays alongside the famous actor Jeroen Willems in the production. This performance is based on the music of the seventeenth-century composer John Dowland, and in it two actors imagine they are Indians who have got lost in a world where music is the only thing that can still provide comfort.

Both *Our Pope* and *Flow my Tears* are a deviation from the successful path Wunderbaum has trodden so far – 'location' theatre, eccentric, sharp and never far removed from commentary on subcultures. It is good that the group is exploring new ways and trying to attract a new public, but at the same time there is already a gnawing nostalgia for the earlier productions that gave Wunderbaum an ineradicable place in the landscape of Dutch and Flemish theatre.

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[www.wunderbaum.nl](http://www.wunderbaum.nl)

## How *Ontroerend Goed* Widened Its International Circuit.

In the last few years the performance theatre company *Ontroerend Goed*, from Ghent, have built up a remarkable circuit abroad, with exotic repertoires and ecstatic reviews. What's their secret?

Let's take a step back in time. At the end of the nineties the company consists of a pupils' club (Alexander Devriendt, David Bauwens, Sophie de Somere, Joeri Smet) giving poetry performances in cafés in Ghent. The live aspect is crucial from the beginning. The presence of an audience determines the form and, with it, the content, the search for the relationship between performer and public, in the here and now. In 2001 it is time to make professional choices. Poetry recedes into the background in favour of performance, and the *PORROR* trilogy (an absurd review of porn, poetry and horror) is a first step in the direction of "seriousness". When *PORROR* receives an important award, *Ontroerend Goed* enters the (new to them) landscape of Flemish theatre, and has to adapt to it. The company is picked up by the arts centres and granted their first project subsidy for *Exsimplicity* (2004), and the crazy club suddenly has to produce "real theatre". The fact of having to face these expectations leads to productions such as *Exsimplicity* and a sequel *Killusion* (2005) which fail to make much of a stir. As if the lack of self-confidence is also reflected in what they produce, *Ontroerend Goed* continues to examine the medium itself and the extent of its own imagination – "what is theatre, actually?" Typically the "fringe project" *The Smile Off Your Face* (2004), a performance given on the margins of a festival, is more successful. Members of the audience are put in a wheelchair and taken on an intimate sensory tour – a mad idea that could only occur because of the total lack of expectations. It's gradually dawning on them, *Ontroerend Goed* seems to function best under the motto of "nothing obligatory, anything possible". But how do you keep that freedom when, as a young com-

pany, following two project subsidies, you are given a state grant (2006-2008)? The government money puts considerable pressure on the theatre group in addition to the artistic pressure.

The result is *Soap* (2006), a series of five shows that have to be produced within the space of three months. The spectacular, but unachievable, idea is a huge flop, and *Ontroerend Goed* collapses in a crisis that in two respects will lead to an impressive restart on the international circuit. First of all the failure leads to a somewhat paradoxical decision to go to the Edinburgh Festival with *The Smile Off Your Face*, because "in times of crisis you need to invest". Maybe it's also a psychological flight from Flanders, where the four untrained dramatists had been received with some reserve and *Soap* had proved the critics right. The Edinburgh Festival proves to be a good bet. The fringe project wins the Total Theatre Award there in 2007 and in 2008 the Adelaide Fringe in Australia too. A chain reaction is set in motion, the Sydney Festival and the New Zealand Festival can't follow fast enough. Unlike Flanders foreign countries seem to take *Ontroerend Goed* to their hearts straightaway.

There's another consequence of the failure of *Soap*, it obliges *Ontroerend Goed* to redefine themselves artistically. *Soap* had brought a latent feeling of doubt into focus: were the attempts at "real theatre", with a written script and professional actors really authentic? Alexander Devriendt decides to change tactics and does his next production with thirteen teenagers from the youth theatre company KOPERGIETERY. Once again it's the freedom of free verse that leads to success: *Pubers Bestaan Niet* (2007) – English title *Once And For All We're Gonna Tell You Who We Are So Shut Up And Listen* - is a rough ride during which the youngsters examine clichés about themselves. Thanks to their earlier production *The Smile, Once And For All* had it made on the international scene, and in 2008 this performance also carries off the Total Theatre Award in Edinburgh. Two triumphs in a row, and with two very different performances *Ontroerend Goed*



Ontroerend Goed, *Once And For All We're Gonna Tell You*  
*Who We Are So Shut Up And Listen*, 2004 © Phile Deprez.

couldn't wish for a better visiting-card. The merry-go-round has taken off and, after the English-speaking countries, Morocco, Japan, Jerusalem, Singapore, Italy, Germany, The Netherlands and France succumb.

What's to explain the brilliant success of *Ontroerend Goed* abroad while the reactions in Flanders are much less hysterical? Let's put things in perspective, the big festivals in the English-speaking world set the tone abroad. Performances such as *The Smile* and *Once And For All* were acclaimed enthusiastically at these festivals, and more recent performances such as *Teenage Riot* (2010) and *Audience* (2011) even cause a stir, with incensed reviews and people leaving the auditorium shocked. To understand how these performances "push the boundaries" we need to go back to the beginning, *Ontroerend Goed's* research into its relationship with

the audience. In the context of the theatre in the English-speaking countries this relationship has the value of a contract, the spectator is safe. The spectators of a comedy show know that they're not safe, the participants in reality TV know they'll be put under scrutiny – but they've opted for this. However, don't do to the unsuspecting public what you do to the comedy audience, remove it from its safe and comfortable seat.

And that's precisely what *Ontroerend Goed* does. In *Intern* (2009) the audience's trust is won and then abused; in *Audience* the public is caught on camera. In *Teenage Riot*, in which teenagers jeer at the audience, yet another power relationship is overturned, that between youngster and adult. Even Lyn Gardner, a leading critic on *The Guardian* and an *Ontroerend Goed* fan from the very first moment, found it unheard of for youngsters to be telling adults what they ought

to do. In a vertical society like in Britain such a thing's apparently *not done*.

*Ontroerend Goed* has found its track. But doesn't that carry a risk too? In the past *Soap* forced them to stop and think. Will they stop and think again now *Ontroerend Goed* is on an international high? Business leader David Bauwens: "It's part of theatre that you fail from time to time. I think there'll always be crises that mean we have to redefine ourselves." Another risk is the organizational structure. In the coming round of subsidies (2013-2016) Alexander Devriendt bears sole responsibility for all the projects. Devriendt is surrounded by a network of almost lifelong friends, sympathizers, fans, fathers and girlfriends – even the board is a friends' club. Something that's developed historically and that's understandable, but isn't that in-crowd in need of a bit of critical opposition? Isn't an organization with such a narrow base extremely vulnerable? According to Bauwens the company is working on broadening its base via "*Ontroerend Goed Supports*", a new track which will give young authors an opportunity. The first project under this banner was a show by two very young women who also took part in *Once And For All*. They've grown up in the *Ontroerend Goed* school. Are they likely to come up with an alternative form of artistic expression?

Maybe these objections are premature. *Ontroerend Goed* has been able to rediscover itself in the past. The secret of their international success? The courage to change track, a stubborn instinct for doing their own thing mainly, a mad passion for work and a certain amount of luck in timing. If *Ontroerend Goed* can keep their feet on the ground in the years to come, the sky may well be the limit.

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[www.ontroerendgoed.be](http://www.ontroerendgoed.be)