

## Shaking the Audience Awake

### Johan Simons's Personal Style and Mission

'I could wallpaper my whole house twice over, once with positive reviews and once with negative ones', said the Dutch theatre director Johan Simons (born in 1946) in 2014 in a passionate plea for subsidised arts. He had just been inducted as a member of the Dutch Academy of Arts. 'National excellence? International renown? It takes years of trying and having the chance to fail.' Simons should know. He was offered and seized his chances. And in the meantime he has become an internationally acclaimed theatre director who has won many awards, including the prestigious Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds Prize (2014) for his whole oeuvre.

Yet Simons was a late bloomer, he was thirty-eight when he directed his first piece of theatre. He had a long way to go, after all. He likes to mention his simple background as a baker and farmer's son in Heerjansdam, a village just under Rotterdam where, in his own words, 'in the worst case you became a farm labourer and in the best an accountant'. As a boy he wanted to be a missionary and delivered entire sermons on the school playground, using wonderful imagery even then. But he lost his faith and went off to the Rotterdam Dance Academy. He danced in musicals like *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Hair*, but wasn't good enough for ballet and ended up in the theatre.

In 1985 Simons set up the Hollandia theatre company with Paul Kloek. Hollandia produced theatre projects on location: Greek tragedies and farming dramas in a breaker's yard, pigsty or greenhouse. His ambition was to make musical theatre for people who would never set foot inside the theatre otherwise. Simons was only sporadically successful in this. Hollandia mainly attracted a highly-educated audience from Amsterdam, people who had to drive an hour to attend a performance. The company made raw, exciting, poetic theatre. Theatre in the shit. It was different, new. Its place in the Dutch theatre establishment was assured.

At Hollandia Simons built a tight-knit group of actors with whom he would continue to work, including his wife Elsie de Brauw. He developed his own style, a 'sculpted theatre' focussing heavily on rhythm, voice and movement. His background as a dancer and his dyslexia influenced his expressive and spatial way of working. In 2000 Simons made the switch to a larger public, when Hollandia merged with Zuidelijk Toneel to form ZT Hollandia, with Eindhoven as its home base. He made no secret of the fact that he wanted to become one of the most important theatre makers in Europe. His international rise began in 2001, during the Salzburg Festival, when ZT Hollandia was the first Dutch company ever to perform there. Simons was also the first Dutch director at the Avignon Festival, in 2004. He was invited to stage pieces in major German theatres and directed operas in Paris, and in 2005 he became the artistic director of NTGent.

In 2010 he was appointed artistic director of the Müncher Kammerspiele. Suddenly he had a good thirty million euros in subsidies at his disposal. He took some Dutch and Flemish actors with him to Germany and gave them major roles, whether or not their German was perfect. In Munich his 'Dutch levity' was much appreciated. Where a German director would not dare interfere with the texts of Goethe, Schiller or Brecht, Simons did not hesitate to adapt them. Simons felt at home there, 'In Germany, and certainly in Munich and in the city theatre system that I work in, art and artistic autonomy are fiercely protected. That means I can work in a rather luxurious but at the same time very radical way.' In his opinion, it was hard to find politicians in the Netherlands who would automatically defend the arts. When Dutch cultural subsidies were cut by up to 40%, in 2011, Simons was incensed. 'Actually', he said at the time, 'the Queen should abdicate now. She should say, "I don't want to reign in a country like this"'. He pleaded for a layered society, in which there is room for entertainment but also for elite art. 'It's important to oppose the



Johan Simons

discourse of art-haters who say that art is a leftist hobby, that art is elitist and should therefore be written off. A society needs its elite.'

Simon's social and political engagement is obvious from his work. In 2015 he returned to NTGent, where he put the world on the stage with unemployment, illegal employment and the influx of refugees. He wants to shock his audience and shake them awake, to force them to engage in debate and to ask questions. As a consummate multitasker, Simons continues to achieve these ambitions in Germany, as well, as the artistic director of the Ruhrtriennale (till 2017) and of the Schauspielhaus Bochum (from 2018). As of 2017, he will do so again in the Netherlands, where he will be associated with Theater Rotterdam, a new theatre to be modelled along German lines. It is the perfect job for him. Because Simons is a man with a mission: to give art the place it deserves in society.

MARLEEN BROCK

*Translated by Lindsay Edwards*

## Falling Down, Getting Up and Carrying On

### Ann Van den Broek's Choreography

Confrontational, intriguing, daring and temperamental; these are just a few of the adjectives used to describe Ann Van den Broek's dance oeuvre. This choreographer (born 1970) finds the inspiration for her language of movement very close to herself. She unravels her emotions and then tests them against other people and the spirit of the age. The result of the impressions she acquires is a merciless analysis of universal themes such as compulsive behaviour, lust, solitude and vanity. Van den Broek looks for answers to such questions as: What sort of rhythmicality goes with fear? What are the different variations of restlessness? How do you translate sexual urges into movements?

The dance language that emerges from this is a compelling portrait of recognisable behaviour patterns. Don't expect a strict interpretation of the subject, but rather freedom of interpretation for the audience and the choreographer. And this is precisely the intention, because Van den Broek wants to communicate continuously with the audience so that they confront their own desires and impulses. The fact that the audience is important is also reflected in the name of her company - WArD/waRD - which is based in Antwerp. The word 'ward' is mirrored in an attempt to symbolise the mutual relationship between the dancers themselves and between them and the audience.

Van den Broek set up the company in 2000 to carry on her work under a single name. In the Netherlands she initially worked through the Korzo production company in The Hague, but in 2008 she decided to set up a WArD/waRD organisation in The Hague too. Working from bases in two countries has its advantages: she can develop a unique dance language without the restrictions of a single country. And WArD/waRD not only produces Van den Broek's work, but also engages in co-productions. Yet her unmistakable DNA always runs through all the productions.